CHAPTER 1

Early Medieval Arabic Bible Translations

Introductory Remarks

The spread of Islam from the 7th century onward, north and west from Arabia, rapidly changed the languages used by the population in the conquered areas of the Middle East. A variety of Aramaic dialects, as well as Greek and Coptic, used by Christian communities, Rabbanite and Karaite Jewish communities, and Samaritan communities were gradually replaced by Arabic, which itself split over time into geographical and communal vernaculars.1 This change created a need for Arabic translations of religious and other works and consequently spawned a vast enterprise of Bible translations into Arabic. This probably began by the 8th century, though scholars debate this. Tobi suggests that the first Jewish Arabic Bible translations should be dated earlier and attributed to the Arabic-speaking Jewish tribes in pre-Islamic Arabia.2 Other scholars posit the existence of a Christian translation into Arabic of parts of the Bible, in particular the Gospels.3 Griffith, whose recent study of the Bible in Arabic4 examined the earliest attestations of written Arabic Bible translations, shows that dating them to the pre-Islamic era presents substantial difficulties. First and foremost, no decisive evidence points to the existence of a written Arabic Bible, complete or incomplete, at this time.5 Second, the references in Islamic sources to biblical and related texts are in Hebrew and Aramaic, principally Syriac, not in Arabic. Third, the references to biblical stories in the Qurʾān are by and large paraphrases, not quotations, and the sources of the biblical stories in the Qurʾān are the Christian Syriac Aramaic versions, not the Arabic.6 He

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1 Besides Aramaic, Greek was also adopted to a certain extent by those communities. Farther to the southwest and in a later stage, Arabic replaced Coptic in the Coptic community in Egypt. On the linguistic background of these communities on the eve of their adoption of Arabic and on the diversity among them in this gradual process, see Vollandt 2011:8–18. On the Copts’ later reluctant adoption of Arabic, see Vollandt 2011:40.
3 See a discussion of these views in Griffith 2013:41–51.
4 Griffith 2013.
5 Griffith 2013:41–53.
concludes that while oral translations of the Bible into Arabic may have been used \textit{ad hoc} by Christian and Jewish Arab communities, a written form of the Arabic Bible did not antedate the birth of Islam but evolved as a result of its spread and impact. Griffith suggests that the Arabic Bible translation enterprise began in the second half of the 7th century and burgeoned under the influence of the Qurʾān.\footnote{Griffith 2013:52–53. Vollandt (2011:25, 40) cites evidence that would assign Christian Bible translations based on the Septuagint and the Peshitta to the 8th and the 9th century, respectively.} The early Arabic translations were of individual verses embedded in other compositions, as part of essays, and even as independent writings. They continued to develop in coexisting Arabic-speaking Christian and Jewish Rabbanite and Karaite communities, and later in Samaritan communities also.

References to Arabic Bible translations that existed in the 8th century and quotations of the above-mentioned Arabic translations of biblical passages are found in Islamic literature, which used Bible translations for its own purposes—polemic-apologetic, historical, etc.\footnote{Vollandt 2011:21–24, 62–79, 2013b:30; Griffith 2013:106–108, 179–182.} In general, the Arabic translations and commentaries were not created \textit{ex nihilo} but rested on earlier traditions of Bible translation into Greek (chiefly the Septuagint), Syriac (chiefly the Peshitta), and other Aramaic dialects (e.g., Onkelos, for the Pentateuch) for their translation technique, vocabulary choices, exegetical approaches, etc.; later they were greatly influenced by Qurʾānic and other Islamic methods, mainly Muʿtazilite approaches.\footnote{Cohen 2009; Griffith 2013:97–106, 125–126. Note also Drory 2000:126–146, on the contribution of Islamic writing conventions to the development of Judeo-Arabic writing in general and Saadya Gaon’s Bible translation in particular. On Muʿtazilite influence on Saadya Gaon and other scholars of that age, see chapter 2 below.} The Christian Arabic translations mainly followed Greek and Syriac Bible translations, while the Rabbanite and Karaite translations were produced from the Hebrew original, albeit under the influence of Jewish Aramaic translations, primarily Onkelos for the Pentateuch, but also possibly with connection to earlier and contemporaneous Christian and Islamic exegetical approaches and translation techniques.\footnote{Butbul 2012. Also note the influence of Onkelos on the Samaritan Aramaic Pentateuch (Tal 1989:445–446).} The goal of the present study is to examine the origins of the Samaritan Arabic translations of the Pentateuch, which emerged in a later stage. The exact date is unknown, but it may be as early as the 11th century, by which time the early Christian and Jewish Rabbanite and Karaite translations had already been created, accepted,