CHAPTER 6

Reception of the Translation

One of the stated goals of both the British CMS and the ABCFM missions in the Ottoman Empire was to provide the “Orientals” with the Christian Scriptures in the indigenous languages: Greek, Armenian, Turkish, and Arabic. During the early years of both mission agencies, the printing press located in Malta churned out various translations of the Bible in these local languages. For nearly forty years, the Arabic Bible used by the Protestant missionaries in their work was an edited version of the 1671 Roman edition, which was published without the Apocrypha. Copies of the 1671 Roman edition of the New Testament had been published by the BFBS in 1820, 1821, 1822, 1831, 1848, and 1850. They used this quite reluctantly, however, for doctrinal as well as linguistic reasons. Eli Smith noted

the meaning is often not clear, and the argument of continuous passages is not unfrequently lost. In fact, the more abstruse and doctrinal parts of Paul’s Epistles lose in it almost all their force. Of the prophetical and poetical portions of the Old Testament much is either without force, in bad taste, or absolutely unintelligible. The whole version is not in a classical style. The structure of the sentences is awkward, the choice of words is not select, and the rules of grammar are often transgressed. We have been ashamed to put the sacred books of our religion, in such a dress, into the hands of a respectable Muhammedan or Druze.¹

Yet, before 1860, this was their only realistic option for an Arabic New Testament. Three other translations were available at this time but their circulation was quite limited. The 1727 edition by Solomon Negri, as well as the 1811 edition undertaken by Joseph Carlyle, Professor of Arabic, and Henry Ford, Reader in Arabic at Oxford, both had a very limited number of printings, more than likely due their expense and large size. In 1816, a colleague of Henry Martyn, Nathaniel Sabat, published his Arabic translation in Calcutta. It was released in several editions in 1816, 1825, 1826, and 1829. Once again, the circulation was limited and it saw little usage in the Middle East.

¹ “Report of Rev. Eli Smith, D.D., in March 16th, 1844, on the existing Arabic Versions of the Scriptures,” in Smith and Van Dyck, 1.
The only other alternative for the missionary societies became available in 1851 when Fāris al-Shidyāq completed the New Testament under the auspices of the SPCK. Several editions were tinkered with in 1857, 1858, and 1859. However, it has been argued that this version was of lesser quality than the so-called Van Dyck version and lost out to its massive printing runs completed by both the BFBS and the ABS. No clear conclusions can be stated about the quality and appeal of the al-Shidyāq translation until a full critical study is undertaken. Several recent studies by Issa and Khalaf have begun to compare these translations, but a thorough monograph is warranted.

Henry Jessup, however, claimed that “No literary work of the century exceeds” the so-called Van Dyck translation in the nineteenth century Arabic literary revival. While the so-called Van Dyck translation of the Bible was a major achievement in Western Protestant missions, as well as an important catalyst for the development of Protestant Arab Christian identity, Jessup’s claims should be read with great care and scrutiny to sift out hyperbole from more accurate accounts. Smith had hoped that this translation was the first time the Arabs had received the Word of God in “purity.” Undoubtedly, the so-called Van Dyck was not the first translation of the Bible into Arabic. The reference to the “purity” of the text had an evangelical Protestant bias. But, just how “pure” was this translation? How was it received? This chapter will investigate the reception of the so-called Van Dyck translation.

At a special meeting of the Mission in August 1864, the complete Bible translation was received. The Mission association forwarded a letter on to the American Bible Society to undermine any potential criticism of the translation. (We have reproduced the letter again here to highlight the mission association’s concerns.)

As touching ‘the fidelity, excellence, and unsectarian character of the translation’ it is important to notice that this has been a work of the Mission not of an individual or individuals. It is not of yesterday, but has occupied 16 years of almost consecutive labor in preparation and execution.

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4 Jessup, Fifty-Three Years, vol. 1, 77.
5 Smith and Van Dyck, Documentary History, 9.