CHAPTER 6

# Summary

The historiography of biblical translation into Arabic, unlike the translation movement in ʿAbbāsid Baghdad, is in its infancy. Medieval scholarship about Arabic translations of the Scriptures—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—continued in the Early Modern era in the printed editions and was eventually absorbed by biblical textual criticism, as part of the larger field of the history of biblical versions. Modern scholarship, as has been shown, doubted that the study of Arabic translations could provide insights into the Bible itself. After the early and influential attempts by Ignazio Guidi and Georg Graf to reconstitute the genre, scholarship stagnated in the twentieth century, and only recent years have seen something of a revival.

The previous chapters have shown that there is scant documentary evidence of the emergence of the biblical translation genre in Arabic in the first Islamic centuries. There is nothing in the writings of Christian scholars, such as the letter by Timothy I, Catholicos of the Church of the East between 780 and 823, or the rhymed canon of East-Syriac authors produced by Abdīshōʿ (d. 1318). The later inventory of Christian-Arabic writers, composed by the Coptic scholar Abū al-Barakāt Ibn Kabar (d. 1324), contains only a few sketchy references. By contrast, Muslim authors of the ʿAbbāsid period refer to the Arabic Bible repeatedly. Even though translations are cited primarily in polemic contexts, some authors do provide limited but valuable context. The aforementioned Mālik ibn Dīnār, al-Jāḥiẓ, and Ibn Qutayba demonstrate that Muslims became increasingly aware of Christian and Jewish activity in translating the Bible into Arabic. Roughly at the same time, manuscripts with sections of the Bible in Arabic started being produced by various denominations. This awareness peaked in al-Masūʿdī and Ibn al-Nadīm, who provided detailed bibliographical details about Jewish and Christian translators.

From the early decades of Islam, as we have seen, biblical narratives were passed down in an islamicized form by Muslims such as Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh, Wahb ibn Munabbih, and Kaʿb al-Aḥbār. This genre became known as *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ/Isrāʾīliyāt* (Legends of the pre-Islamic Prophets and Notices of the Hebrews), and retold the lives of the Old Testament prophets and the Gospel account of Jesus. A few Muslim scholars had access to written Arabic versions of the Pentateuch as early as in the second half of the ninth century. This has some importance for the present study. It bears, for example, on the date of **Arab$^{\text{Syr}}$1**, which is analysed in depth in Part Two of this study. Although the

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earliest dated manuscript of this version, Sinai, MS Ar. 2, was copied in 940, Ibn Qutayba's and al-Ṭabarī's citations prove that it was in existence during their lifetimes and available to them in Iraq. Equally, Ibn Ḥazm's use of Saadiah's *Tafsīr* in a recension strikingly similar to that employed by the Coptic Church suggests that copies in Arabic script must have been around at the beginning of the eleventh century. ʿAlī ibn Rabban's biblical quotations are not evidence of the date of **Arab$^{Syr}$2**, but rather of its translational context. As demonstrated above, the similarity between the two traditions hints at a shared provenance. Although they are not always identical, his quotations and the text of **Arab$^{Syr}$2** exhibit similar translation techniques that may be considered characteristic of East-Syriac biblical translations.

Although we cannot rule out the possibility that Jewish and Christian communities in the Arabian Peninsula expounded parts of the Bible in Arabic orally, manuscripts with biblical passages in Arabic are found on a large scale only beginning with the ninth century. The commission to writing of biblical translation into Arabic was surely fostered by the general tendency, from the rise of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate onwards, to write down oral traditions. In addition, it appears that the social changes that resulted from the ʿAbbāsid revolution (750) encouraged the composition and textualization of Arabic versions of the Bible.[1] There is no evidence of complete translations into Arabic in the Umayyad period. The account of ʿUmayr ibn Ṣaʿd al-Anṣārī's disputation with the West-Syriac Patriarch John Sedra indicates that only selected verses were translated, with the specific apologetic purpose of expounding Christian doctrine. Collections of proof-texts, which survived in a number of treatises, seem to have circulated separately and to have served as the raw material for similar disputations.

Under the Umayyads, the number of Muslims remained small—a ruling elite joined by comparatively few local converts. But there was a growing incentive to convert when the ʿAbbāsids eliminated the inferior status of the *mawālī* clients and promoted social equality for all Muslims, both Arabs and non-Arab converts. It may not be a coincidence that Bulliet's graph of conversions reaches the fifty-percent mark precisely in this period.[2] Although the practice emerged of extending state protection (Arab. *al-dhimma*) to the *ahl al-kitāb*, in return for payment of a poll tax (Arab. *al-jizya*), it is also true that regulations were introduced to restrict everyday interfaith intercourse.[3] These prescriptions regarding non-Muslim subjects in the first ʿAbbāsid century had obvious implications for the Christian communities and their literature. The increased number of apologetic tracts, on the one hand, and the concerted effort to translate biblical books, on the other, reflect these communities' collective endeavors to produce texts in Arabic to be used for the external and internal defense of their own faith against the growing Muslim majority.

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[1] As pointed out by Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic."

[2] See Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam*.

[3] See Arthur Stanley Tritton, *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of ʿUmar* (London: Frank Cass, 1970); Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des*

There is no corroboration of the existence of written translations before the rise of Islam or during its formative centuries. In the first stage, the communities that produced Arabic translations concentrated on the books that were central or significant for their internal affairs. Thus books used in a liturgical context (the Psalms and Pentateuch in Jewish communities, the Gospels among Christians), as well as those with popular appeal (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus), are among the earliest attested in Arabic versions.

Given their arabicization from the eighth century onwards, the Melkite and East-Syriac communities were the first to produce translations. Although the Melkite translations focused on the Septuagint, there are also versions from a Syriac *Vorlage*, a result of this community's multilingual nature. Textual reliance on Syriac (or Christian Palestinian Aramaic) and Greek *Vorlagen* occurs side by side. The translations exhibit strong indications of their use in the liturgy, seen, for example, in the Violet fragment or the Palestinian Gospels in Arabic. In like manner, the Church of the East created a corpus of Arabic translations of key biblical books before the end of the ninth century. A comparison with early Melkite translations, however, demonstrates that the Church of the East had its own translation technique. First, the proximity between Syriac and Arabic allowed the selection of cognate roots and homophonic translation equivalents in the target language. In addition, the use of alternative renderings and interpretative textual expansions is a distinctive feature of East-Syriac translation technique.

Among their West-Syriac coreligionists, the effort to translate the Scriptures into Arabic was less concerted. In regard to the Pentateuch, at least, West-Syriac communities borrowed versions of different origins and adapted the several books according to their needs. A common type of manuscripts provided a complete Pentateuch by taking Genesis from Jewish (**Arab**$^{\text{Heb}}$**1a**) and Exodus and Numbers from East-Syriac (**Arab**$^{\text{Syr}}$**2**) sources. Leviticus and Deuteronomy were taken from a popular recension of al-Ḥārith's translation of the *Syro-Hexapla* (**Arab**$^{\text{Syr\_Hex}}$**1b**). This approach is strikingly similar to that of the

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*non-Musulmans en pays d'islam* (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1958); and Albrecht Noth, "Die 'Bedingungen 'Umars (aš-Šurūṭ al-'umariyya)' unter einem anderen Aspekt gelesen," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 290–315.

Coptic Church. The proclivity to integrate foreign traditions and adapt them to their own requirements is characteristic of both communities. Due to the comparatively late adoption of Arabic by the time the West-Syriac and Coptic communities, by the time they needed Arabic Bibles the Melkite Church and the Church of the East could already look back on long-established traditions. West-Syriac and Coptic scholars seemed to have preferred to employ existing translations. Similarly, there is no indication that Mozarabic communities produced their own Arabic version of the Pentateuch.

It is clear that communities employed multiple and complementary versions side by side, with no rivalry among them. The great variety, obvious to modern scholars from the sheer abundance of manuscripts and versions contained, was already noted by medieval authors (see Chapter 1). Thus there does not to have ever been a binding canon of translations. Nevertheless, some versions survive in many more exemplars than others, suggesting that each Church had its preferred and quasi-canonical version. For the Pentateuch, **Arab$^{\mathrm{Syr}}$2** enjoyed such a status in the Church of the East. Because there was no direct translation of the Pentateuch from the Septuagint, Melkites resorted to al-Ḥārith's translation of the *Syro-Hexapla*, as the many copies by Melkite scribes attest. No translation was granted a comparable status among the Syriac-Orthodox, Coptic, and Mozarabic communities. For the Copts, at least, Saadiah's *Tafsīr* in Arabic script enjoyed great popularity.

Nor did Arabic-speaking Christian communities have a closed canon of translated books. Some books, such as Judith and most of the historical books, remained untranslated until the fifteenth century.[4] Although it is not uncommon to find Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, and Latin manuscript traditions that contain or originally contained a full set of the biblical books, this is not the case with Arabic versions. Although scribes frequently joined related books in a single volume—e.g. the Pentateuch, the historical books, the Prophets, or the Wisdom books—codices with the entire Bible in Arabic or significant portions thereof are not very numerous. On closer inspection, the already meager number decreases even further, because the majority of such codices prove to be copied from early printings, such as the Arabic portions of the Paris (1629–1645) and London (1652–1657) Polyglots or the Biblia Sacra Arabica (1671–1673). As for the other complete manuscript Bibles in Arabic with this origin, the overwhelming majority appears to have a common source—a highly professional Coptic workshop in early Ottoman Cairo, active between the years 1583 and 1590.[5] This did not escape Graf's attention.[6] The scribal habit of creating such "Vollbibeln" appears to have emerged only *after* the appearance of complete printed Arabic Bibles among the Eastern Churches and clearly relies on them. Arabic versions, too, were soon in print, and this had an irrevocable impact on the previous multiplicity of translations. After the *Biblia Sacra Arabica* rolled off the presses in 1671–73, most communities abandoned their medieval versions in favor of this new translation, whether in print or in hand-copied exemplars.

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[4] Cf. Vollandt, "Arabic, Judith, secondary."

Fortunately, we possess more evidence about Judaeo-Arabic versions. The early period is chiefly marked by a transition from Aramaic *targumim* to Judaeo-Arabic, similar to the process observed with the southern Palestinian Aramaic version of the Gospels and its Arabic successor in Melkite communities. The earliest traditions were predominantly oral, as indicated by a variety of documentary evidence, including Geonic responsa and Judah ben Quraysh's *Risāla*. Early Judaeo-Arabic versions were used in the schools, intended to promote comprehension and memorization of the Hebrew, which as a rule was transmitted orally alongside its translation. The structural equivalence to the Hebrew source, based largely on the syntactic analogy and homophonic similarity of the biblical verse in Hebrew and Arabic, played a major role in instruction. The classic period of Judaeo-Arabic translations began with Saadiah's short *Tafsīr* (ca. 930). This was Saadiah's masterpiece and became authoritative for succeeding centuries. His translation attempted to capture the intended meaning along with the exegetical and halakhic implications; as such it marks a departure from previous translation traditions. In contrast, Qaraite translators—disregarding Saadiah's *Tafsīr*—followed an approach similar to the early non-Saadianic translations, which they refined according to their needs. The first running translation was by Salmon ben Yerūḥīm, a contemporary of Saadiah's. The Qaraite translation enterprise came to a pinnacle in the works of Yefet ben ʿElī (tenth century) and Yeshuʿah ben Judah (middle of the eleventh century).

Arabic Pentateuchs of Samaritan provenance have survived in a number of distinct manuscript groups. The first group consists of trilingual or bilingual codices in Samaritan script, made before the second half of the thirteenth century. Although this early version was initially attributed to Isḥāq ibn Faraj ibn Mārūth al-Ṣūrī—known as Abū al-Ḥasan (Aram. Ab-Ḥisdā) and active in the late eleventh century—recent scholarship has demurred and now holds that the origin and date are unknown. The second group represents the version by Abū Saʿīd, active in thirteenth-century Egypt. He does not seem to have retranslated the Samaritan Pentateuch into Arabic, but rather to have revised the earlier version identified in the first group of manuscripts, to which he attached various *scholia*. The third group, which may be termed a proper Saadianic adaptation, consists of a single manuscript, London, BL, MS Or. 7562, written in Samaritan script.

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[5] See Vollandt, "Making Quires Speak."

[6] "Noch in der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrh. ging man bei den Kopten daran, eine Art Vollbibel zu schaffen, indem man zerstreute biblische Texte verschiedener Herkunft zu voluminösen Kodizes zusammenfasste" (In the second half of the sixteenth century, the Copts created a kind of complete Bible [in Arabic], by assembling books of multiple origins in voluminous codices)" (*GCAL* 1: 92–93).