

History of Bible Translation

HISTORY OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

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NIDA INSTITUTE FOR BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

A RESTLESS SEARCH

A History of Persian Translations of the Bible

by KENNETH J. THOMAS

with a contribution by
ALI-ASGHAR AGHBAR

First Edition 2015

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ISBN paperback: 978-1-94409-200-9

ISBN hardcover: 978-1-94409-202-3

Distributed by SBL Press, Atlanta, Georgia

Online: <http://www.sbl-site.org/>

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*Then King Darius made a decree,
and they searched the archives
where the documents were stored in Babylon.*
Ezra 6:1 NRSV

*...if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek [wisdom] like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.*
Proverbs 2:3–5 NRSV

*You search the Scriptures because you think
in them you have eternal life.*
John 5:39 NRSV

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ABBREVIATIONS

BIBLES, VERSIONS, AND ANCIENT SOURCES

ESV	English Standard Version
HT	Hebrew text
KJV	King James Version
JB	Jerusalem Bible
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NLT	New Living Translation
NM	New Millennium Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TEV	Today's English Version (also GNB, GNT)
Tg	Targum
TPV	Today's Persian Version (also انجيل شريف Injil Sharif)
TT	Tafsiri Translation

GENERAL

ABCFM	American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
ABS	American Bible Society
ar.	Arabic (MS)

ASL	average sentence length
b.	born
BA	Bachelor of Arts degree
B.C.E.	Before the Common Era (=B.C.)
Bd.	<i>Band</i> , volume
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
bp.	Bishop
BSc	Bachelor of Science degree
BTh	Bachelor of Theology degree
c.	century
ca.	circa
CD	compact disc
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
C.E.	Common Era (=A.D.)
chap(s).	chapter(s)
CMS	Church Missionary Society
d.	died
diss.	dissertation
DMin	Doctor of Ministry degree
ECI	Evangelical Church of Iran
ed(s).	editor(s), edition, edited by
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and the rest, and so forth
f(f).	and the following one(s)
fem.	feminine
fn.	footnote
Fr.	Father
Ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
IBS	International Bible Society
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
MA	Master of Arts degree
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
MTh	Master of Theology degree
n.	note
no.	number
NT	New Testament
N.Y.	New York
orig. publ.	originally published
OT	Old Testament

p(p).	page(s)
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy degree
pr.	printing
repr.	reprint
ret.	retired
Rev.	Reverend
rev. ed.	revised edition
S.J.	Society of Jesus
SOV	subject, object, verb
S.P.G.	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts
St(s).	Saint(s)
SVO	subject, verb, object
ThD	Doctor of Theology degree
TR	Textus Receptus
trans.	translator, translated by
UBS	United Bible Societies
UK	United Kingdom
viz.	<i>videlicet</i> , namely
vol(s).	volume(s)
vs.	versus
VSO	verb, subject, object
WBT	Wycliffe Bible Translators

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FOREWORD

In the classic sense of translation, that is, the expression of a “message” in a language other than the language of its first expression, the translation of the Bible is unsurpassed by any other translation tradition. As written text, the Holy Scriptures have been translated into more than two thousand five hundred languages representing all language families in all parts of the world during the past two and a half millennia.

Throughout the past two centuries, the Bible Society movement has been actively engaged in this translation enterprise. Not only has it supported the process of translation and distribution of the translated product, but it also has developed tools, including theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies, as well as the best critical source texts. The results of this Bible Society activity are a matter of statistical record, but the stories of those who have carried out this complex activity, described by one of the translators quoted in this volume as a task “that is not fun most of the time” (9.3.9a), have seldom been heard. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, many translators have remained anonymous.

The Eugene A. Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship of the American Bible Society has therefore launched a project called The History of Bible Translation, which seeks to tell the story of Bible translation. A first volume entitled *A History of Bible Translation* has been published (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007), offering a preliminary overview of the history, theory, methods, and current state of Bible translation. The inaugural publication is followed by a monograph series through which authors provide a historical perspective on selected translation experience, and discuss translation issues that, if not universal, are met in nearly every cultural milieu.

The first volume in the monograph series, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)* by Professor John David Ekem, provides an account of the earliest translators and translations of the Bible into the four main

languages of Ghana—Gã, Ewe, Twi, and Mfantse—during the eighteenth to nineteenth century missionary era.

The present volume, *A Restless Search: A History of the Persian Translations of the Bible*, is the second monograph. The restlessness in the author's title refers to the translators' unending search, from translation to translation, from century to century, for the best way to express the message of their source texts. Dr. Kenneth Thomas as historian traces the lines of history and reveals the contours that provide the context within which the translators have labored. As a theologian and translation specialist who lived for seventeen years in Iran, Dr. Thomas describes the translation process and the finished products, and looks beyond the translated text to its function. For whom was it produced, why, and what were its results? The act of translating always has a purpose, he would agree, but why, in times of trouble, is there an apparent abundance of translation?

Dr. Thomas takes his readers into a world with which many will be unfamiliar. It was the land where the Jews were taken in captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century B.C.E., a land where many Jews were still living during the time in which the author begins his account. It was a world of Judaism and the Karaites, of Zoroastrianism, of Christianity and the Jacobites, Monophysites, and the Assyrian Church of the East, often called Nestorians, as well as a world of Buddhism and Islam. Persia was located to the east of Palestine along the Silk Road that extended from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea across central Asia into China. The expression, "the Silk Road," refers to a network of trade routes connecting East and West. It provided overland avenues for commercial exchanges in all directions between Asia and the Mediterranean world from the end of the first millennium B.C.E. into the eighth and ninth centuries C.E.

In the early twentieth century, along one of the Silk Road routes in the ruins of an ancient Christian monastery in western China, two manuscript fragments were discovered. The fragments contained words from the Psalms written in Persian. Dating to the fifth and tenth centuries, these manuscripts are the earliest evidence of Scripture translation in Persian, and they were located far from the land of the speakers of the Persian language.

From this distant location in the East, Dr. Thomas brings his account back to Persia to search for answers to questions about these manuscripts, and within that setting, to engage in a search for their successors, and thus to tell the story of Bible translation in Persian. While acknowl-

edging the eras of Bible translation as identified by other scholars, our author places his account within the eras of Persian history, from the Parthian epoch to the Sassanian era, followed by the early Islamic and Mongol periods, through the Safavid, Afshar, Qajar, and Pahlavi dynasties, up to the present Islamic Republic of the modern state of Iran. It is within the constraints and opportunities afforded by Persian history, society, and culture that the Bible was translated into Persian, and it is into this world that the author brings his readers.

Individuals are the focus of the story, even though many are lost in the mists of time. Like a detective, the author seeks clues that may offer hints to the identity of the translators and users of the first manuscripts of the Persian Psalms. He tells of the fourteenth century translator of the Gospel Harmony who translated into Persian because, as he wrote, "Everyone [else] had the Gospel and books in their own language, and they were able to read in their own language, which they had learned from their fathers and grandfathers, since they were united to the truth" (4.3.1.). This translator identified himself only by a puzzle of geometric form and letters that must be deciphered. There is the account of the Mongol ruler who requested a copy of the Gospels in Persian, but after many delays, he died one month before it arrived. Nader Shah in the eighteenth century ordered that word-for-word translations be made into Persian of the Scriptures of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims, namely, the Pentateuch, Psalms, Gospels, and the Qur'an. It is not known how the shah used the translations. The cultural turn has always been present in the translators' context. What is expected of Bible translators when they are taken to visit the shah's family quarters?

Our author brings us through the time of the Qajar dynasty, the period that is often called the missionary era. Among many other names, we encounter those of Henry Martyn, and Mirza Seyyed Ali Khan with whom Martyn worked, Leopoldo Sebastiani, a Catholic priest translator who was expelled from the country because he became involved in court intrigues, and Robert Bruce, whose Bible revision of 1895 became the standard Persian Bible for nearly a century. Bruce was assisted by a "monshi" who was "a very good Arabic and Persian scholar, and a most industrious man" (7.6.1), but whose name was never made known.

This period also marks the beginning of the Bible Society movement beginning with British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, and other national Bible Societies, including the Iranian Bible Society, for a time. Their goal was to make the Bible available everywhere in every language, and their influence in Persian Bible translation from the Pahlavi era up to the pres-

ent time has been significant. No woman was identified with Persian Bible translation until we meet Farideh Ershadi who was a member of the Living Bibles International team that produced the Tafsiri (“Interpretation”) version of the New Testament in 1979 and the Bible in 1995.

Throughout the historical account in Part One, the author provides descriptions of the translations, showing the need or context of each translation, its primary characteristics, and its reception or results. In Part Two, he provides samples of in-depth analysis. First, he draws attention to the communities that come together in the translation effort. Then he provides an overview of the particular problem of lexical choices that must be faced by every translator. A special contribution by the Iranian linguist, Professor Ali-Asghar Aghbar, is a stylistic comparison of three major Persian translations dating to the early nineteenth century, the late nineteenth century, and a contemporary translation published in 2007. Although the author introduces these as technical studies of special interest to persons knowledgeable in the Persian language, the explanations and analyses offered by Dr. Aghbar make fascinating and enlightening reading for anyone interested in the serious questions of translation, and how another language treats them. This is followed by the author’s own comparison of a Johannine text in three contemporary translations. He concludes with a summary of trends over sixteen centuries of Persian Bible translation.

How can one adequately treat two thousand years of history? As history relentlessly moves forward from day to day, the age-old search into which our author has brought us is unfulfilled. Translation never ends; a translation is never finished. Translators are by nature restless, seeking continuity between past and present, searching for the right words and forms, attempting to fix meaning through dictionaries at the same time as they oblige a language to do what it has not done before. To complete a history of translation is to offer only a portion of that unfinished process. Even though author Kenneth Thomas’ search with his readers necessarily ceases with the last page of his book, the result of his exploration is a very worthy contribution in memory of those translators, named and unnamed, who have gone before, and to those who continue in the present era to create the ongoing story of the translation of the Bible in Persian.

Philip A. Noss
Series Editor
History of Bible Translation Series

PREFACE

History tells the story of those who have left behind journals, diaries, and letters, for whom biographies may even have been written. It should also tell the story, as it is able, of those about whom there is an apparent void. Yet the amount of data I have been able to access for the narrative account of Persian biblical translations, most especially about their translators, has varied considerably. For some there is ample material available while for others only a name, if even this much, is known. This is particularly true of mother-tongue Persian speakers who worked with non-Iranians as their “assistants.” I assume that in many cases they were actually major translators. I dedicate this book to those unsung Persian translators of the past about whom little or nothing is known.

This history has been written for a broad spectrum of readers. Accordingly, some parts of the book are general and require little prior knowledge; others are more technical analyses for specialists; and, finally, particular parts will be useful mainly to those who know the Persian language. It is hoped that all readers will find aspects that will meet their interests.

A number of conventions are followed in this book with an aim of making its contents generally accessible:

- References to lexical items in the biblical texts are primarily identified by their common English glosses or equivalents rather than by their Hebrew or Greek forms.
- Iranian names are rendered in English according to the form used by the individual or, in the case of historical figures or geographic locations, in a form already in use in English-language publications.
- The transliteration of Persian is in a simplified phonetic form. The pronunciation of vowels follows sounds in English words: *a* as in dam, *aa* as in mama, *e* as in hey, *i* as in liter, *ow* as in mow, and *u* as in rude. The *zb* has the sound of *s* in pleasure and *kb* the sound of the *ch* in the

Scottish pronunciation of loch. The *q* is close to the initial sound in the word “gulp” as said while gulping. In keeping with the conventions of the Persian language, initial capital letters are generally not used in the transliteration.

- References in the form A.#.#, beginning with the letter A, (such as A.3.4) refer to entries in Appendix A.
- Footnotes send the reader to other parts of the book by referring to chapter and section, written as 5.2.1 (that is, chapter 5, section 2, subsection 1).

A project of this magnitude requires the use of resources in many languages. Access to manuscripts and writings ancient and modern would not have been possible without the willing help of many people. Almost everyone I have contacted about this project has enthusiastically provided whatever was requested. It is impossible to name all those who have been involved in various ways, but I want to acknowledge the following for their interest and input to the material presented in this book:

I owe an enormous debt of thanks to three Iranian friends, Ali-Asghar Aghbar, Mansour Khajehpour, and Ninus Moghadas-nia.¹ They have generously obtained publications, translated Persian material, checked information, and done proofreading. Dr. Aghbar graciously responded to my invitation to write a substantial chapter of the book. Where no credit is given, the translations into English are my own.

Since so much of this book is about Persian translators, it would not have been complete without the help and cooperation of persons who have been translators or members of teams for contemporary Persian versions. They gave their time for interviews and written responses to my inquiries. Many accepted my invitation to respond in English so that they could be quoted directly in their own words without being translated. My warm appreciation goes to Mehdi Abhari, Aziz Amri, Bahman Armiti, Sargiz Benjamin, Fereidoun Es-Haq, Nader Fard, Mehrdad Fatehi, Mojdeh Maghen Fatehi, Ron George, Mojdeh Shirvanian Hawksley, Edwin Jaeger, Lewis Johnson, Saro Khachikian, Masumali Khosravi, Nahid Sepehri Khajehpour, Pooyan Mehrshahi, Feridoon Mokhof, Khalil Razmara, Arman Roshdi, Nelly Safari, Sadegh Sepehri, Hendrik Shanazarian, Farideh Ershadi Wilson, Sam Yeghnazar, Shahram Zaboli, and more who remain unnamed.

In addition many others around the world have responded personally to my requests to help track down the identity of translators, translate

¹ See 9.3.9a.

resources written in languages I do not know, loan me copies of translations not in print and unavailable in libraries, share their knowledge of and experiences with translators and translation projects, and provide many other kinds of information. It is with gratitude that I acknowledge the help of Arash Abaie, Rodolfo Antoniazzi, Durwood Busse, Richard Corley, Anca Elena Giurescu, Giti Afrouz Hakimpour, Allyn Huntsinger, Victor Makari, Nicola Masedu, Iraj Mottahedeh, Sasan Tavassoli, Mich Tosan, and Maria Wirsen.

Much of the research for this project has been done within libraries; other research required obtaining copies of Persian manuscripts and other materials from various libraries, museums, and collections. Many librarians have graciously given their time and effort to help me find and obtain the resources needed. My warm appreciation goes to Liana Lupas, Kristin Miller, and Jacquelyn Sapiie of the American Bible Society; Sara Lind of the United Bible Societies; Paul Hudson at the Cambridge University Library; Rosemary Mathew at the BFBS Archives in Cambridge University; Eun Ja Kim Lee at Union Theological Seminary Library in New York; Friedrich Simader and Rene Rainer at the Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna; and Marilyn Palmeri at the Morgan Library and Museum. I am grateful, too, for the services of unnamed others at the Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, British Museum Library, Columbia University Library, Jewish Theological Seminary Library, New York Public Library, and the Vatican Library.

The sponsor of this project has been the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship of the American Bible Society. It has provided endless support and encouragement. My thanks go to Charles Houser, Eric Yost, Philip Towner, Robert Hodgson, Dulce Alvarado, and especially the editor of this book series, Philip Noss, who has patiently and carefully guided me and improved every aspect of the work.

I myself am indebted in many ways to the United Bible Societies for years of experience working within its fellowship. The perspectives of these years and my own involvement in some of the history described in this book undoubtedly color what I have seen, but I have diligently sought to present fairly and clearly what I have read and heard. I take responsibility for what is here.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation for the help of my son Stewart Thomas who prepared the maps and charts in this book as well as the artwork for the cover. I offer my gratitude for the support, inspiration, and dedication of my wife Margaret Orr Thomas who went through every word of the text.

There are limits to any general survey. Putting together the history of the translations has involved me in original research; additionally, I have amply selected data from others' past research and currently emerging studies. I express the hope that this work may provide a basis for others to delve more deeply into some of the many areas that await expansion through further study. I especially hope that this collection of historical information will be an inspiration to those who will read this centuries-long history as their own.

Kenneth J. Thomas
New York, New York
No Ruz 1389 / 2010

INTRODUCTION