

Conference Report: "The Bible and Arab Christianity: Translation, Interpretation, and Context" (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 28-29 April 2023)

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by *Bishara Ebeid*

1.

From 28 to 29 April 2023, a group of scholars in the field of Arabic Bible and Arab Christian studies gathered at Ca' Foscari University of Venice to participate in a conference organized by myself in partnership with Syriaca, the Italian association of Syriac studies. This was not the first conference ever to deal with the Arabic Bible, but it followed a distinct approach, in the sense that the aim was to study the Arabic Bible and its context from different points of view; to hear scholars in different fields related, in some way, to Christian Arabic studies.

2. As of September 2022, the long history of Biblical translation had seen its appearance in 724 languages, and an ongoing debate among modern scholars questions whether Arab Christians had Arabic translations of the Bible, or some books of it, before the advent of Islam. The conference was not held to answer such a question, its focus being on the Arabic Bible and its context during the Islamic Caliphate, mainly between the tenth and thirteenth centuries CE, especially its translation(s) from ancient languages into Arabic, the new "lingua franca" of the premodern Near and Middle East. From the ninth century CE onwards, Arabic was gradually adopted by all Christians living under the Islamic Caliphate, a fact that underlay the creation of the so-called "Arabic Christian Heritage", where Christian theologians and scholars started to produce Arabic translations of various works from a multitude of scientific fields, and, in a second step, to compose new works directly in Arabic. One of the first works to be translated from ancient languages, namely Greek, Syriac and later Coptic, was indeed the Bible. The conference was not dedicated only to Arabic translations of the Bible: some papers dealt with the use of the Bible in controversial Christian literature as well as Biblical allusions in historical writings, others tackled the Biblical exegetical works composed in this period while a final group of papers concentrated on the development of the Apocrypha in Arabic as a key reading for the understanding of Muslim-Christian relationships.



Figure 1. The participants of the conference. Photo credits: Bishara Ebeid.

3. On 28 April, I had the pleasure of opening the conference and welcoming the scholars to Ca' Foscari. I also chaired the first part of the first panel entitled "The Bible in Arabic: Encounter between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam". The first paper "The Bible in Arabic: manuscripts, transmission, and translation types", was given by Ronny Vollandt (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), who offered a general presentation of the various Arabic medieval translations of the Bible, trying to offer a taxonomy of the different translation types attested in the manuscript corpus that transmits them. Observing that the total number of manuscripts containing Arabic versions of the Bible is

estimated, for lack of a comprehensive clavis, at about ten thousand, Vollandt went on to present reasons why this corpus is quite diverse: it encompasses books of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), those of the New Testament, as well as a considerable number of deuterocanonical books. Of these manuscripts, part survived as intact codices, while a not insignificant part now existed only in a fragmentary state or as objects of reuse in public or ecclesiastic collections all over the world.

4. Vollandt's presentation also dealt with the issue of when these manuscripts were produced, at times ranging from the 9th to the 20th centuries. If these translations were categorized according to the communities that produced them one would find that some Arabic versions are of Jewish, others of Christian (various denominations) and still others of Samaritan provenance, with each macro-group creating and maintaining a clearly distinctive corpus of biblical translations into Arabic, based on the various source texts, that is, the Masoretic Text, as well as Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Latin versions. The corpus can also be divided into two main groups: versions by translators whose name is and is not known. This type of taxonomy would lead, according to Vollandt, to another division: didactic translations, used mostly in a public teaching context, and academic translations, used as self-study instruments. Unlike the second group, the first usually has no authorial voice. If the text stability of the first group is often fluid that of the second is usually stable. Vollandt concluded with comments on the techniques of these two biblical translation groups, highlighting that although both groups divide the biblical text into small units, the didactic translations are usually imitative of the source language and have semantic transparency while those of the academic translations are usually oriented towards the target language.

5. The second paper of this panel "Translation Techniques in Christian Arabic Psalm Renditions" was given by Miriam Hjälms (Sankt Ignatius College, Uppsala University), who focused on one of the most widely used and produced biblical books, the Psalms, which is also the most understudied Arabic rendition. According to Hjälms, it is impossible to communicate between languages without losing and gaining meaning. Therefore, when translated, a text moves, like a chameleon, through time and space in an endeavour to blend with its surroundings. And as it touches unexplored grounds, it continuously shows new sides of itself. So, to understand the translation techniques Christian Arabic Bible translators applied in premodern times, one must take into consideration the fact that they experimented with various ways of how best to transfer the ancient text into the new target language: some aimed to stay as close as possible to the source text, whereas others added explanations and alternative meanings, and still others occasionally even omitted or changed text units. To illustrate her point, Hjälms compared a few Arabic renditions of some psalms and evaluated in what way translation techniques in these texts relate to what we find in other Arabic Bible translations. She presented Syriac-based and Greek-based Psalm translations, including examples from her ongoing research, such as Ps. 1:2 according to MSS Mingana 137, Sinai Gr. 34, Sinai Gr. 36, Barb. Or. 2, the Melkite translation by Ibn al-Faḍl and the East Syrian translation by Ibn al-Ṭayyib in BL, Add 15442 and concluded that most of the Greek-based translations are more literal, used mainly in typically liturgical Bible texts and used, besides for liturgical purposes, also for studying languages. By contrast, the Syriac-based translations may be either literal, similar in characteristics to the Greek-based translations, or non-literal, which are peculiar in that they seem to be semi-commentary texts and were probably made for missionary purposes.



Figure 2. Dr Vevian Zaki giving her presentation on "Arabic Translations of the Philippians and Colossians Hymns in MSS Vatican Ar. 13 and London, BL, Or. 8612". Photo credits: Bishara Ebeid.

6. The second part of the first panel, which started with Vevian F. Zaki (Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University), was chaired by Paolo Lucca (Ca' Foscari University of Venice). Zaki's paper, entitled "Between Greek and Syriac: Arabic Translations of the Philippians and Colossians Hymns in MSS Vatican Ar. 13 and London, BL, Or. 8612", focused on comparing different Arabic versions of the same biblical passages, trying to understand the similarities and differences in wording and/or grammatical constructions. In fact, even if the relationship between different families or versions of Arabic translations of the Bible has been vague or confusing, the scholar believes that the process that produced the similarities or differences between them should be studied to better understand this relationship. For this reason, the main questions with which Zaki's paper dealt were the following: (a) when translators/redactors/collators begin a translation process, how do they compare already existing translations of the same book? (b) how do they evaluate these translations? (c) where do they refrain from using/resorting to them in the process? Zaki investigated a possible relationship between the two aforementioned manuscripts of the Pauline Epistles in Arabic, mainly the Christological hymns contained in the letters to the Philippians and Colossians. Zaki's analysis demonstrated that although some previous studies showed a clear influence of both Syriac and Greek source texts on the Vatican manuscript and that the text of the London manuscript shows significant literal characteristics under the influence of its Greek *Vorlage*, some interesting overlaps between some passages of the two manuscripts can be detected. In fact, through the examples she gave during her presentation, Zaki showed how, when, and why these texts converge and diverge, and that among the sources of the London manuscript was a Syriac translation of the Bible.

7. The last speaker in this first panel, Elie Dannaoui (University of Balamnd), gave an online presentation of his paper entitled "Arabic Manuscripts of the Lectionary Gospels: An Interplay between Cultures, Languages, Textual Traditions and Ecclesiastical Rites". According to Dannaoui, while the Arabic manuscripts of the Gospels have recently received a considerable amount of attention from scholars, those connected to the Lectionary Gospels have prompted less research and have not yet been fully uncovered. The Lectionary Gospels, in fact, are a special category of Arabic Biblical manuscripts that contain the texts of the four Gospels in a liturgical format for use in Eastern Christian worship. These manuscripts, moreover, stand out from other kinds of Biblical manuscripts thanks to several unique characteristics. In his paper, Dannaoui drew attention to the distinctive features of the Arabic Lectionary Gospels corpus in order to highlight its importance, diversity and richness. His presentation, based on manuscripts accessible on [PAVONe, the Platform of the Arabic Versions of the New Testament](#), showed the wide variety of *Vorlagen*, theological richness and diversity, as well as intercultural components of different versions of the Lectionary Gospels. The paper concluded by drawing particular attention to the interreligious nature of the Lectionary Gospels in the context of its use in Christian-Muslim relations.

8. The afternoon session opened with greetings from Syriaca given by its secretary Emiliano Fiori (Ca' Foscari University of Venice), who also chaired the second panel "Bible and Polemical Literature". The first speaker of this panel was Bert Jacobs (Catholic University-Louvain-la-Neuve) who gave a paper entitled "The Testimonia Tradition in the Late 'Abbāsīd Period: The Vantage Point of the Twelfth-Century East Syrian *Commentary on the Nicene Creed*". In his paper, Jacobs examined the development and circulation of testimony collections during the Abbasid period from the perspective of the *Commentary on the Nicene Creed* (*Šarḥ al-amāna*), a work composed around 1165 by an anonymous East Syrian author from Baghdad. According to Jacobs' presentation, the *Commentary* offers an ideal vantage point from which to address the topic of the testimony tradition in Arabic because of its preservation of a wealth of earlier sources and its strong reliance on scriptural testimonies (*šahādāt*) in support of Christian teachings. In fact, Jacobs' research shows that while a considerable number of these testimonies can be traced to known Christian Arabic works, such as the *Book of the Tower* (*Kitāb al-maǧdal*) and the writings of Elias of Nisibis, the evidence from the *Commentary* suggests that many more now unknown testimony collections were in circulation among Christians by the end of the Abbasid period. Jacobs also showed that one of the most salient features of these later collections is the influence of the Qur'an, the Holy Scripture of Islam, and other authoritative Islamic sources like the words and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, i.e., the *Ḥadīth*.

9. The next speaker was Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (University of Córdoba) who, with his paper "Confirm your Scriptures with Torah in Hebrew and the Gospel in Latin: On the biblical quotations contained in *Taḥḥīl al-waḥdāniyyah*", moved the audience from Baghdad to Andalusia. The paper focused on the Andalusian work *Taḥḥīl al-waḥdāniyyah* (*The Trinity of the Oneness*), which was composed in the middle of the twelfth century CE, and which contains twenty-two biblical quotations. Monferrer-Sala grouped these quotations into three different types: (a) eleven Old Testament Hebrew quotations in Arabic transcription with their corresponding Arabic translations; (b) five Old Testament quotations in Arabic translation made from a Hebrew text; and (c) six New Testament citations in Arabic renditions from a Latin original. According to the scholar's analysis, the Old Testament quotations do not coincide with the quotations contained in Ibn Ḥazm's *Fīṣal* nor with quotations collected by other Muslim, Jewish (Sa'adyah Ga'on included) or Andalusian Christian authors. On the other hand, the quotations from the New Testament, translated from a Hispanic codex of the Latin Vulgate, were taken from one of the revisions of the so-called translation attributed to Iṣḥāq bin Balašq al-Qurṭubī. In addition, the parallels and differences exhibited by the *Taḥḥīl* with respect to the Andalusian versions of the Gospels attributed to the Cordoba translator, and to the versions transmitted by Muslim authors reinforce Monferrer-Sala's hypothesis that an original text, the earliest known version of which is Ms. Qarawiyyīn 730, underwent at least three successive revisions of the original translation.

10. The last speaker of this panel and of the first day of the conference was Mark Swanson (Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago) who gave an online presentation of his paper "Beyond polemics: allusive use of the Bible in *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*". The aim of Swanson's presentation was to draw attention to the way in which some premodern Christian Arabic texts deploy the Bible in ways other than by direct quotation, mainly by allusion and echo, in order to provide commentary on their texts. Some of this commentary may have a polemical edge, but, as Swanson highlighted, only for those who have ears to hear it. The paper gave examples of some passages from *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, an Arabic work, redacted over time by more than one author, which presents the medieval history of the Coptic Orthodox Church through biographies of its patriarchs. The main group of passages comes from the biographer and Archdeacon Jirjah or George, who, for example, when telling the story of Patriarch John III (the 40th patriarch, 680-689 CE) and his relationship with the Muslim governor 'Abd al-'Azīz, narrates the episode when the governor arrested the patriarch and ordered that he be tortured. According to this narrative, the jailer's cruel designs were stayed by a message from the governor's wife in which she mentions that she had endured great trials on account of the patriarch. Swanson pointed out that the reader would easily recognize the biblical echo in the narration which alludes to the dream of Pilate's wife about Christ and the message she sent to her husband, the governor of Judea.



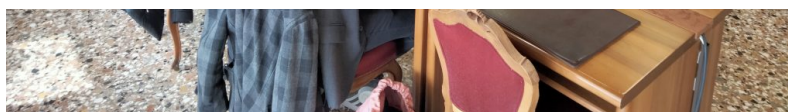


Figure 3. The conference raised many new important questions concerning different aspects of the Bible in Arabic. Photo credits: Bishara Ebeid.

11. The second day of the conference, 29 April, was opened by the third panel, which dealt with “Apocryphal Literature during the Abbasid Caliphate”. Chaired by Joseph Sanzo (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice), it included two papers; the first, entitled “Christian Arabic Apocrypha and Homilies on the Dormition of the Theotokos”, was given by Adrian Pirtea (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science-Berlin) who focused on the Arabic reception of the various apocryphal traditions related to the Dormition of the Virgin Mary which, compared to Byzantine and Syriac Christian literature, is still very little studied. After a brief overview of the major literary texts on the Dormition in Eastern Christianity, namely, Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Sogdian etc., Pirtea provided an updated inventory of Arabic manuscripts which contain relevant Dormition narratives or homilies, ranging from the late ninth to the nineteenth centuries. Then he presented a rough periodization of the Arabic material and reconstructed the contexts in which this type of literature was translated into Arabic and, in many cases, reworked. In particular, he focused on the earliest, still unedited Arabic translation of the Syriac apocryphon known as the *Six Books on the Dormition*, which is extant in an early tenth-century manuscript from Sinai (Bryn Mawr College, BV 69 + *membra disjecta*). Finally, Pirtea discussed how the Byzantine reconquest of Antioch and northern Syria in the late tenth century influenced the literary traditions, the cult, and the liturgical commemoration of the Virgin Mary among Arab Christians in the Eastern Mediterranean.

12. The second speaker of this panel was Barbara Roggema (University of Florence) who gave an online presentation of her paper entitled “New insights into the Arabic *Apocalypse of Peter*: the historical apocalyptic part and the hitherto unpublished sections”. Roggema started by highlighting the fact that research on the lengthy Christian Arabic text entitled *The Book of the Roll* or the *Apocalypse of Peter* has been scattered and slow. She went on to describe it as a fascinating work of roughly between 100 and 200 folios that includes the *Testament of Adam* and the *Cave of Treasures*, several apocryphal texts on the Apostle Peter in Rome, and apocalyptic sections on the fate of Christians under Islamic rule. Roggema then explored two important issues concerning the Arabic *Apocalypse of Peter*: (a) the *Sitz-im-Leben* of this text, and (b) the reasons that led Mingana to omit some sections from his translation of the text. These two points, along with a detailed analysis of some technical terms contained in the work and several particular narrations, helped Roggema to give the audience a better sense of the contents. In addition, they were essential to the dating of the text, since they might provide a key to shaping the identity of Christians living in the Muslim world.

13. Emiliano Fiori chaired the fourth and last panel of the conference, entitled “Biblical Exegesis in Abbasid Caliphate”. The first paper, “The questions and answers on the genealogy of Christ in Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s *Commentary on the Gospels* (Mt 1,1-17): A preliminary investigation of the sources” was given by Joseph Faragalla (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München). The scholar began by presenting the most significant exegetical work on the Gospels in Christian Arabic literature, i.e. the *Commentary on the Gospels* by the East Syrian Abū al-Faraǧ ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṭayyib (d. 1043), a critical edition of which he is currently preparing. Faragalla then provided some insights into the literary structure and sources used by Ibn al-Ṭayyib, starting with an account of the methods and strategies Ibn al-Ṭayyib asserts to have employed in commenting on the Gospels, already in the introduction to his *Commentary*. Faragalla went on to examine one of Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s strategies, namely, his treatment of the text in the form of questions and answers, analysing this specific literary form and the related vocabulary in the *Commentary*. Then Faragalla considered the sources used by Ibn al-Ṭayyib in his *Commentary* on the genealogy of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 1,1-17). In conclusion, he discussed to what extent Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s *Commentary* differs from his sources and showed how he sometimes mentions his sources by name and at other times simply comments that “some people have said...”.

14. The second paper of this panel and the last of the conference was given by Eva Rodrigo (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and was entitled “East Syriac Exegesis in 10th century Mosul: the case of Emmanuel bar Shaḥḥare’s *Hexaemeron*”. Rodrigo first presented the figure and work of Emmanuel bar Shaḥḥare, or Emmanuel “the teacher”, as he is called in most of the manuscripts. He seems to have lived during the 10th century CE in the Upper Monastery near Mosul, which belonged to the Church of the East. The manuscript tradition transmits 28 *memrē* attributed to him, but as Rodrigo pointed out, one of these is certainly not by him since it is clearly one of Narsai of Nisibis’ *memrē*. Since none of the *memre* has been edited or translated they have received very little study. All that scholars so far know about Emmanuel bar Shaḥḥare’s *memrē* is that they are collectively called “Emmanuel’s *Hexaemeron*”. However, as Rodrigo pointed out, although only the first part seems to deal with the first chapter of Genesis, nevertheless it is evident that most, if not all of the *memrē*, are exegetical in nature. Although Emmanuel lived during the peak of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, when dozens of works dealing with secular sciences and philosophy were translated from Greek into Arabic, often through a Syriac translation, and although the Arabization process was well advanced in his time even in Christian circles, as there were already Christian authors writing in Arabic, he, nonetheless, wrote in Syriac. However, this does not mean that he was not oblivious of the vibrant intellectual context in which he lived, since, as Rodrigo demonstrated in her paper, we can see how he employs Greek concepts and knowledge in his *memrē* to explain the different elements of the creation of the world and how he also acknowledges the new Arab rule.

15. The conference was closed with my concluding remarks. I stressed that the initial aim of the conference, that is, to gather scholars of premodern Arabic Christianity from different fields in order to study the Bible in Arabic from different points of view and perspectives, had been successfully achieved. Moreover, if one were to judge the results of a conference and its success, I would not look for what and how many questions it answered but what and how many new questions it raised, a criterion that all the papers presented had met with considerable insight. Finally, the conference is another step taken in the field of *Biblia Arabica* and its proceedings will help distribute insights gained during these two days.

Bishara Ebeid specialized in Byzantine, Coptic, Syriac and Christian Arabic Theology at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, where he got his MA in 2012 and his first doctoral degree in 2014. His dissertation on the Christology of Christian Arabic authors was published as “La tunica di Al-Masīḥ. La Cristologia della grandi confessioni cristiane dell’Oriente nel X e XI secolo” (Roma: Edizioni Christiana Orientalia, 2018). This monograph was followed by an edition and study on Elias of Nisibis, “Elias of Nisibis. Commentary on the Creed (Tafsīr al-amānah al-kabīrah)”, CNERU-CEDRAC, Beyrouth. In 2019 he obtained his second doctoral degree from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, with a dissertation on the figure of Pontius Pilate in the New Testament and in apocryphal literature. Since February 2019 he has been working as an Assistant Professor at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice.

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