

THE ARABIC BIBLE AFTER A CENTURY

Some people who spend years in the Near East, whether original inhabitants or 'coming to belong', have often not only helped to make history, but have become somewhat legendary in the making of it. C. V. A. Van Dyck was just such a person. He was a man of many parts. Like E. G. Browne of Cambridge, he was a doctor of medicine who turned to literary endeavours. Medical missionaries, especially in the Near East at the turn of the century, were men (and women) to be remembered, and in this company Van Dyck was quite outstanding. Fifty years later people lovingly rehearsed a variety of legends about him. He was a scholar-missionary who knew the country and knew the people. All this was reflected in that mastery of the Arabic tongue which qualified him in due course to become the chief reviser of the Arabic Bible. Throughout the past hundred years the major Arabic Bible has been known as the Van Dyck version, after its illustrious reviser. But whether discussing minor matters of format or major matters of language and scholarship, the Doctor would have been the first to say that in reality he had simply entered into other men's labours. When he set out on the greatest undertaking of his career, there was both the fact of previous Arabic versions, going back several centuries, and the personal foundation of his immediate predecessor, Eli Smith, who was in advance of most of his missionary colleagues in regard to textual criticism.¹ This New Testament science had recently been brought to the public notice again through the discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus, and Dr Eli Smith was a most painstaking scholar in this field.

The Inheritance

Eli Smith had given the last nine years of his life to the work of revision. With Smith's draft before him, Van Dyck started afresh on the New Testament. Several books of the Old Testament had been translated and were nearly ready for the press. These included the Torah, some of the Minor Prophets and most of Isaiah. Both Dr Smith and Van Dyck must have been avid readers of Arabic. It was once suggested that the translation of the Book of Jonah was tackled after reading a quantity of *The Arabian Nights*, an indication of the value which the translators placed on Arabic style. At all times this was a prime consideration along with loyalty to the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek. Smith too had at hand grammars,

¹ In 1900 the American Mission in Syria published a *Brief Documentary History of the Translation of the Scriptures into the Arabic Language by the Rev. Eli Smith, D.D., and the Rev. C. V. A. Van Dyck, D.D.*, and the debt to this is hereby acknowledged, quotations being made from it. The same is true of the monograph by the Rev. John A. Thompson, *The Major Arabic Bibles*, published in 1956 by the American Bible Society.

lexicons, commentaries and previous versions. He also had recourse to some MSS. 500 years old, of which he had himself made copies. Passages used in the liturgies of the Eastern Churches were consulted, as were the Gospels first printed in Rome in 1590, and the New Testament in Leiden in 1616. Eli Smith had gathered these together as well as the more important helps to a full understanding and proper use of the Arabic language. But this was not all.

It was not only to work actually accomplished that Van Dyck fell heir. There were the men who had already spent years with Smith. Amongst them were Syrian scholars who meant as much to the enterprise as Tregelles, Tischendorf or Alford. Butrus al-Bustānī and Nāsif al-Yāziji shared in the initial and the final stages of a work that has stood the test of a century among a people whose language has become as 'sacred' as Hebrew and Latin ever were. There is the memory of a gifted pastor from the Lebanon on a visit to Jerusalem in the nineteen thirties, who remarked in all innocence that until a comparatively short time before he had supposed that the Van Dyck version was the first proper version of the Scriptures available to Arabic Christians. For him the pages had virtually fluttered down from heaven.

In 1924 at the Jerusalem Conference on Olivet, under the chairmanship of John R. Mott, Temple Gairdner brought with him from Cairo specimen sheets of a fresh translation of some New Testament portions on which, with others, he had been engaged.¹ These were laid before Professor Margoliouth of Oxford for his criticism and counsel. The Professor, rather contrary to expectation, was certain that he did not wish to see 'Van Dyck' superseded—not because there was no room for improvement but because he thought it was best for the version used in all the non-Roman churches of the Arab East to become as much a part of Christian life and vocabulary as had been the case with the Authorized Version in Britain since 1611. In a sense this was already true. The Professor was well aware of the standard set by the Qur'an throughout thirteen centuries. How many a missionary in the Near East in the two generations succeeding Van Dyck would not gratefully have acknowledged that his or her grasp of Arabic idiom and vocabulary came from learning to read the Scriptures in the Van Dyck translation! Furthermore, for many Arab students in the closing years of the nineteenth century the main textbook was this Van Dyck Bible. It is said too that in the whole of the fully vocalized edition from Beirut there was but one slight misprint. How this Bible must have commended itself to its Arab readers who like other orientals say that the only perfect workman is God Himself!

American missionaries were not alone in giving the Protestant churches their Bible. First-rate Syrian scholars shared the work from the beginning. Of these, two were Christians and others Muslims, and it is largely to them that the version owes its special distinction in matters of idiom and syntax. In Egypt in the twenties there were a dozen first-class missionary Arabists, but of them all there was only one who would confidently send a letter to

¹ This translation can be seen in the various New Testament commentaries which Gairdner wrote (Galatians, Philippians, etc.), where it is printed side by side with that of Van Dyck.

the Cairo press without having it 'gone over' first by a competent Arab scholar. No wonder that Smith and Van Dyck relied on nationals whose names have become household words in the annals of Arabic scholarship. Nāsif al-Yāziji was a master of Arabic grammar, 'his mind stored with Arabic words', though terms of natural history unfortunately were not among them. Yusif al-'Asir, a Muslim sheikh and a graduate of the Azhar in Cairo, was also brought in to help with the work, so that Egypt shared in a work whose current revision has been in the able hands of two men who have known Egypt all their lives.¹ Nāsif, of whom Eli Smith said that his 'aid is essential to the best success of the work', was a poet of some distinction and the composer of many of the hymns sung in the churches of Arab lands today. The name of Bustānī is perhaps even better known in Arabic circles.² True to his name, Butrus was a 'flowering' linguist, with Syriac as well as Greek and Hebrew to his credit, and it was he who was responsible for the laborious task of producing the first drafts. As a measure of the extent of consultation, it may be noted that the proof sheets were despatched to some thirty scholars—Muslim and Christian, national and foreign—which brought Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem, Egypt and sometimes Germany into the undertaking. This set the precedent for the present revisers of Van Dyck, who are following very similar methods. Of this practice, Dr Van Dyck reported:

'It is important to notice that by these means many minds are brought to bear upon the work, and it will be, when completed, the continued work of many, and not the result of one man's labor only.'

It is probably questionable whether this procedure can be predicated of any previous Arabic version, certainly not of the famous 'Newcastle' Bible of 1811, nor of the 1816 version made by Nathaniel Sabat under the supervision of Henry Martyn. It is interesting to note that both these early versions had failed to win wide acceptance, the one because it had been modelled too closely on the style and vocabulary of the Qur'an in an endeavour to attract Eastern Muslims, the other because it bore the defects of a one-man translation and in particular was inadequate in its choice of Christian terminology.

Sooner or later the attempt had to be made to produce a translation that would meet the needs of both Muslim and Christian communities, serving as an instrument of evangelism and as a basis of Christian education, worship and liturgy.

The question still remains unsolved: how to produce a version of the New Testament appreciated alike by Christians and Muslims? Added to this at the present time is the tendency in some countries of the Arabic-speaking world to want 'national' versions, either in their own form of the classical language, or in a colloquial dialect. Perhaps, however, in this

¹ Probably this Yusif and a Christian of the same name have not been so well known in later years as the other two Syrians, but it should be stressed that this work was a shared enterprise.

² The current Arabic-Arabic Dictionary is called *Al-Bustān*, 'The Garden'. The Rev. Paul Erdman, who was a stout defender of the Van Dyck Bible, also proof-read every page of this dictionary.

problem there is a lead from Van Dyck, who enlisted help from every competent source, both from Arabs and from foreigners. If a classical version true to the Greek text and yet not sounding strange in Casablanca and Kuwait any more than in Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem or Baghdad can be contrived, then national versions might well be based on such a text.

Some Matters of Interpretation or Translation

It was at its centenary celebrations in 1904 that the B.F.B.S. decided to adopt as its norm for purposes of translation the text of Nestle, which had been produced a few years earlier. For all practical purposes this has continued to be the standard basic New Testament text for translators. It was soon after the Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council in 1928 that an unofficial investigation of the text of the New Testament in the Van Dyck version was undertaken. The object was to try to see how far Van Dyck would require alteration or adaptation in the light of the Nestle text, aware as the participants were of the fact that Van Dyck often anticipated readings adopted in the Revised Version. The work was undertaken by a group consisting chiefly of missionaries in Arabic-speaking countries—eleven in all—who were asked to compare the text behind Van Dyck with that of Nestle, noting such other passages as they thought in need of comment in view of the greater light thrown on the text of the New Testament since 1864. This piece of research revealed some 350 differences in the Gospels and 300 in the Acts and Pauline corpus. The vast majority of these were points of detail, simple omissions—the result of the authority of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus—and occasional insertions and changes. One deduction may be allowed here: that the men in Beirut a century ago would approve the work of revision now based on Cairo. In this connection John A. Thompson recorded in his monograph *The Major Arabic Bibles* that when ‘H. H. Jessup gave his new copy of Alford to Smith, another missionary humorously remarked that the Arabic translation of the Bible had thereby been delayed, for now Smith would revise the whole New Testament again’.

It was left, however, to Van Dyck rather than Smith to use judgement both in the selection of what to accept from the channels of fresh knowledge and when to rely on the *Textus Receptus* or even on more local opinion. Only rarely is there slight evidence of occasional interpretation invading the realm of translation, as perhaps in Luke 5: 8, where the detail of the ‘boat’ is for some reason introduced; or the dual is used in the story of the Triumphant Entry in Matthew for the pair of animals. This might have been a place where previous Arabic versions could have stood correction. But these divergences are nothing more than blemishes, in no way detracting from ‘one of the truest and most exact Arabic translations . . . and there is no doubt about its literalness . . . nor of the expression of the spirit of the Book in the translation as in the original’. In the light of that comment Smith, Van Dyck and their collaborators would certainly have concurred in the present revisers’ treatment of *kurios* in its New Testament contexts. The Greek word offers more meanings than one. In Arabic it is rendered by two words, *Ar-Rabb*, which clearly recognizes the element of ‘divinity’, and *As-Sayyid*, which is used as a term of profound respect only, for instance, of the Greater

Prophets in Islam, including of course Jesus. In certain New Testament contexts it would seem obvious that the apostles and others spoke to and of Jesus using *kurios* in the sense of *Sayyid*. In the two incidents cited above, however, *Ar-Rabb* is employed in accordance with pious usage in what Peter said to Jesus in the boat, as also in the instruction given by Him as to what to say to the owner of the donkey in asking for the loan. This is a point to be borne in mind in Bible translating, especially in translations made for distribution in the Islamic world.¹ On the other hand, no one today would query the decision of Van Dyck and his associates to employ *Ar-Rabb* for Yahweh throughout the Old Testament.²

There are two passages at least where Van Dyck decided to follow the *Textus Receptus*, namely the retention of 'Son of God' in Mark 1: 1, justified (as maintained by Professor Turner and Vincent Taylor) in view of 15: 39; and the equally theological retention of Acts 8: 37. Perhaps scholars would say today that the 'Western' text should receive more recognition than hitherto in the western world.

A few Palestinian (Near Eastern) touches should not escape notice. The New English Bible makes no mention of 'with tears' in Mark 9: 24, and the Revised Standard Version relegates it to the margin. Why did Van Dyck give his support to this reading? More independent is his agreement with Jerome (and Torrey) over the identification of the second Simon in the Apostolic band as coming from Cana (of Galilee) in Matthew and Mark (there is no reason why he should not also have been a 'Zealot' as Luke mentions twice). This 'Van Dyck' understanding, if in part due to his Syrian residence, also has the support of Dalman in his *Sacred Sites and Ways*. It might not be out of place to suggest that the Gospels at least in any major translation might well receive their next revision in the country that gave them birth. There may be similar tiny points where Van Dyck might well be considered justified, as with 'boat' not left anarthrous in Mark 4: 1. How thankful we are that the word used for *kataluma* in Luke 2: 7 obviates the unnecessary introduction of an imaginary innkeeper into the narrative of the nativity. (Here the N.E.B. has reverted to wording still nearer to the pre-Van Dyck Arabic versions.) Later in Luke (6: 35) Van Dyck understands the phrase to mean 'hoping for nothing again' as in Erpenius. Against Erpenius, however, is Van Dyck's grasp of the genius of Arabic, which allows the 'coming' in John 1: 9 precisely to render the Greek, which is similarly indecisive with the participle. In Acts 19: 15 the two Greek verbs rendered 'know' in the A.V. are rightly translated by two Arabic verbs, as with some later versions in English. In Matt. 12: 21 there is the anticipation of the R.V. with 'hope' as against 'trust'. So too with the last clause of 2 Cor. 3: 18. Arabic dislikes the passive, a point which Van Dyck must have known well, so in Phil. 3: 12b the Greek passive becomes an Arabic active (as in the R.S.V.).

¹ For an experience over the use of *Ar-Rabb* in the Markan account of the Triumphal Entry, see *Apostles of Palestine*, p. 42 f.

² This was contrary to what Eli Smith would have suggested as he seems to have advocated transliteration. Van Dyck wrote a letter on the subject to Dr Jessup (September 8, 1888).

The decision of the American Bible Society and the British & Foreign Bible Society a hundred years ago to co-operate in the circulation of the 'Van Dyck Bible' was more than justified. It may be said to have been in one sense little more than the result of a temporary contingency, but history would now adjudge it to have been a landmark in Bible Society relationships, pointing the way to the growing co-operation of recent years. In July 1914 the A.B.S. gave a new set of the Van Dyck plates to the B.F.B.S. It was providential that they did so, because throughout the First World War the Bible could not be circulated from Beirut, the centre of the A.B.S. distribution, as the city was then in the Turkish Empire.

There is a Second World War story, too, that would have pleased Van Dyck himself. The press in Beirut had been importing paper from Italy for its books, but this quickly became impossible. One day the Director of the press, the Rev. Paul Erdman, was at the docks and was accosted by one of the Customs officers, who told him of a consignment of cigarette paper which had remained in the customs house unclaimed for months and which he might have as he needed paper. The paper was tested for 'taking' ink—and at the end of 1939 an edition of 5,000 copies of the Van Dyck New Testament printed on cigarette paper was sent through the Arabic-speaking world. Van Dyck had been credited with immense care in his choice of paper, ink and binding as well as type for the printing of the Scriptures—but even he could hardly have anticipated a refinement such as this!