

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS FOR MUSLIM AUDIENCES

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Traditionally, the Christian church has not been very interested in sharing its faith with “the people of the mosque”. This may be seen in the attitude of many western churches and mission societies, which prefer to concentrate their efforts (and, incidentally, their dollars) in places where results are more or less assured. It can also be seen in many Third World churches where, especially in those lands where Muslims make up the majority community, there is a suspicion of Muslims and hostility towards them. Having said this, I must also point out that the suspicion and hostility are often on both sides. Muslims have never forgotten the Crusades nor the “exploitation” which has taken place in their lands under the rule of so-called “Christian” colonialists.

To put it another way, Christians are often not anxious to share the Scriptures with their Muslim neighbors. Hence, they are not very much interested in new translations of the Bible which aim especially at communicating with Muslims. As a result, little attention or approval is given to alternate forms of names, footnotes, explanations or glossaries designed to help the Muslim reader become familiar with the Christian message. This makes our task even more difficult than it would otherwise be, since any Scriptures prepared for a Muslim audience must first of all be accepted, promoted and distributed by the local Christians in their own communities.

But even when we do approach Muslims, we must seek to communicate, not to drive people away. And therefore we should make every effort to avoid an atmosphere of argument and hostility, whether this is done intentionally or unconsciously (as is so often the case).

Knowing the audience

Even though there have not been many Christians who have taken seriously the challenge to witness to the Muslims, it would appear that in modern times even those who have done so have had much too simple an approach, a belief that sincerity and zeal can take the place of learning a language, a culture, and even a theology. Moreover, many have demonstrated an insensitive disregard for the basic principles of communication, one of which is that we learn more from those we respect and love than from those we distrust or hate. Or, in the words of the old maxim, “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”

To communicate effectively it is essential to know the particular audience we aim to reach. Our “product” may be centuries old, but its “packaging” must be geared to its intended audience in the latter part of the 20th century.

We also need to realize that in the case of a Muslim audience we are not dealing with animists who have no clear ideas about the theological issues which are dealt with in the Christian faith. On the contrary, the Muslim starts with very clear-cut ideas about God, man and nature. Hence, *anything* we say to him (whether in person or in the form of a written message) he will filter through what he already knows and believes about those things. In short, we do not begin with a blank tape on which we can record any message we choose; rather, we are confronted with a tape on which another message has

already been very clearly recorded.

We must also never forget that while Islam is a unified religion, there are certain varieties within it. A selection prepared for one area, for example, where the *Shiite* sect predominates, might be of no use in another area where the more orthodox *Sunnite* sect is in the majority. Likewise, folk Islam often differs widely from the traditional or orthodox forms of the faith.

Therefore, once again we must remember that “Selections” must really be *selective*, carefully chosen to appeal to a particular audience, not just “any audience”.

Furthermore, we must take into account a wide range in levels of literacy amongst Muslims, from the Arab sheikh who has been educated at Oxford or the M.I.T. to the vast majority of people who can barely read scattered over the Muslim world, stretching from Africa’s Atlantic coast to Asia’s Pacific coast. The Bible translations of the past have largely been of the literal type and a long way from common language. Consequently, none but the best educated could hope to understand even in part what the message was all about. We can be thankful, indeed, for the new emphasis on common language and meaningful translation; for without these newer translations God’s Word is not only not “open for all”, it is not even open at all.

In addition, Muslims vary in their economic status, from the richest of the rich (like the oil sheikhs) to the poorest of the poor (like Afghan villagers). They will not all be able to afford expensive luxury Bibles on the one hand, nor are they all likely to appreciate cheap paperback Bibles on the other. Our books may need to be sold for a lot less than they cost in order to find a ready market in some Muslim countries.

Producing the right style of book

With regard to the physical form in which our Scriptures are usually presented to Muslims, I would like to ask if we are not sometimes unduly influenced by our “distribution” requirements. The trend in recent years to selections, New Reader Scriptures, portions and the like, does not take into account the fact that to the Muslim reader a “holy book” is not something flimsy, poorly produced on cheap paper, and likely to be thrown away eventually (even if it is read in the meantime). If Muslims are to be considered a “special audience”, then their attitude towards the literature we produce—even its appearance (quite apart from its content), its color, and whether or not it is illustrated—cannot be ignored.

For example, some groups of Muslims are very particular about pictures; they may be acceptable, but they may also cause a book to be rejected. Even the color or format of a cover or binding can make the difference in whether or not a book will be accepted.

This may be the appropriate place to emphasize a point regarding the quality of the Scriptures we produce. It is clear that we need to develop better controls over manuscript preparation, proofreading and production quality so as to avoid the embarrassment that we have all felt at times when an otherwise good translation reaches the public in a mixed-up or unappealing form. Such productions are undesirable for any audience, but they are even more out of place when the intended audience is Muslim.

Let me now pass on to another matter, the *title page* found in many New Testament. The old Urdu translation, which is probably typical of many, says: "The Holy Gospel, that is, the New Covenant of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." Such a title, which does not come from any original Greek manuscript but is only an editor's choice of words, appears to be quite provocative to say the least. Does the "our" in the title include the reader or leave him out? While a Christian might gladly acknowledge Jesus Christ as "our" Lord and Savior, a Muslim who has not even read the book yet can hardly be expected to do so. It seems to me, therefore, that Scriptures prepared for Muslim audiences should be much more neutral in their appearance since our aim is to encourage the person who receives the book to read the text, not just what we say about the text.

At this point I feel I must point out another weakness (in my opinion) of both title pages and covers of Scriptures produced for a Muslim audience. It seems to me that it should be clearly indicated that the book in hand is a *translation* of the Bible, NT, Gospel or portion. Our failure to do this opens us even more to the charge constantly made by Muslims that Christians have changed the Bible. It also in many cases discourages the Christian church from even thinking about a new translation, even when such a translation is really required. We could easily point out—if the question is raised about why this translation is different from another one—that new translations are made from time to time in order to bring the message of the Bible to today's readers, not in the language of yesterday but in the language of today.

In connection with the new Urdu translation of the NT we are proposing to use some such title as "A *Translation* in simple Urdu (or, language) of the *Good News* about *Jesus Christ*" (the words in italics are the most emphatic). Such a procedure does not guarantee that what Muslims say about the Christian Scriptures will be abandoned; but it just *may* help to reduce the effect of these allegations in the minds of the ordinary people. And this is needed more and more as each new Bible translation and revision comes along.

When it comes to *titles* of NT books, especially the first four, I would add a further word of caution. To Muslims, the book of the Christians is generally known as the Injil (an Arabic effort to represent *euangelion*), or "Gospel". They acknowledge only *one* Gospel, not four. Therefore, the form in which the Gospel portions so often appear (such as "Gospel of Matthew" or "Gospel of St. Luke") is quite misleading. The Gospel is only one, and we should see to it that the titles on the portions which we publish tell the reader that this is *the Gospel* (or "Good News") *of* (or "about") *Jesus Christ*, as recorded or *written by* (or "through") Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

I will admit, however, that some Christians to whom I have made such a proposal have rejected the suggestion out of hand. They have always read "The Gospel of (St.) Matthew" and they are unwilling, even for the sake of communicating the message to their Muslim neighbors, either to change the form or to drop the "Saint". It does not matter to them that the Greek manuscripts we translate from all have "according to Matthew", "according to Mark", and so on, with no reference to "Saint" at all and no reference to "Gospel" (except in the opening words of Mark's account). What we read in today's version is really just an editorial device.

This may also be the place to mention the problem of the authorship of our Bible. Some people have cautioned against making statements which appear to equate our Bible with mere human books or works composed by many authors. But it may not be out of place in an *Introduction* to point out that *the* Author of the Bible is God but that he chose to give his message at different times and different places through different messengers. Their names are usually associated with the particular portion or portions of the Bible which they wrote, but Christians believe that they wrote “by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3.16). I see no reason to hide such information just because we do not have a situation like Muslims have in the Qur’an with only one writer.

Regarding the names of people, there are many proper names which occur in both our Bible and the Qur’an, but in different form. While I do not propose that the names from the Qur’an should be used—in most cases local Christians are strongly opposed to any such suggestion—I do think a list of these names should be given in an *Introduction* or *Glossary*. And this should not be put at the end of the publication (where it will probably not be seen) but at the *beginning*. Such a list of names should relate the form of the name used by Christians to the form commonly used by Muslims. For example, the name “Jesus” (often *Yisu*’ or some variation of it) can be listed with the note that he is also called *’Isa*; and “Jonah” (in Urdu, *Yunah*) is also called (or, “they also call him”) *Yunas* (the name found in the Qur’an).

Such lists and any other explanatory word lists (for instance, of the type found in the GNB, but concentrating on the kinds of things with which Muslim readers would have problems, like “son of man”, “son of God”, “denarius”, “sabbath”, “priest”, “Sadducee”, “Pharisee”) should be printed separate from the text itself so that the Muslim reader will realize that this material is not a part of the Biblical text.

While it is convenient and probably desirable to point out the relationship between a given name as used by Christians and as found in the Qur’an, I would certainly avoid identifying any Biblical account with a passage in the Qur’an. The descriptions of an event in the Qur’an and the Bible are often so different that it is better to leave unsaid what otherwise would have to be pointed out if the two accounts were placed side by side. Our purpose is to encourage the reading of the Bible and what *it* has to say; we need not spend time encouraging the Muslim to read his own book, since he is already only too willing to do this.

Some people have questioned the value in Scriptures prepared for a Muslim audience of giving footnotes which call attention to textual variants (such as, “Hebrew unclear”, or “Some Greek manuscripts do not have . . .”). The main reason given is that these notes only tend to confirm the Muslim’s suspicion that the Bible has indeed been tampered with. While there is a certain argument for this caution, we might also well ask *when* (if ever) we are going to deal with the text as we have it and not in accordance with the prejudices of those who may happen to read it? I have heard this argument many times in connection with Bible translation projects that I have been associated with. The force of it would seem to be that since all those famous “bracketed” passages of the Bible (for example Mt 6.13b; Mk 16.9-20; Jn 5:3b-4; 7.53-8:11) are so fixed in the thinking of Christian people and so commonly included in Bible trans-

lations, we would be asking for unnecessary trouble either by leaving them out or including them with a foot-note questioning their rightful place in the text. No doubt, the question of leaving out the doubtful passages has been raised before, but this action has been overruled on the grounds that people were not ready for such an approach to the textual evidence which has now been available for well over a century.

However, it may be asked if the public (and this includes the Muslim reader as well) will *ever* be ready for such honest treatment? And what is the translator to do in the meantime? It is almost like suggesting that since people used to think that the world was flat, no one should have upset them by proposing that it was round! People may argue that changes in attitude will occur in the end; but this is often over the span of tens or even hundreds of years. Do Bible translators have the option of waiting for such changes in public opinion to occur before they do an honest piece of work in dealing with the textual evidence now at their disposal? They are not translating for a century or two in the future; they are translating for today.

Choosing the right contents

Keeping in mind the special nature of our "Muslim audience", we will do well to share with the Muslim those aspects of the Word about which he may know a little (but not a great deal) and against which he has no strong prejudices. If it is "selections" we have in mind, then they ought really to be "selected" and designed to create a positive feeling so that the Muslim will not be turned off but will be encouraged to read on.

The selections needed for work amongst Muslims should reflect *the needs they feel* rather than our favorite theological statements. (What, for example, would a stick-on label done in beautiful Arabic lettering mean to a Muslim when it merely quotes John 15.5, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me"?)

Selections on the "Life of Christ" generally arouse interest amongst Muslims because of their high regard for Jesus as a prophet of God. His concern for the poor and outcast, and his lofty teaching on nondiscrimination, love, integrity, justice and judgment, are points about which there is usually a sympathetic hearing from a Muslim audience. (Particular needs, however, will vary from country to country and from time to time—for instance Iran in the 1960s and Iran today.)

Because of the deeply ingrained Muslim belief in "one God", those Bible passages which stress this truth offer a point of contact and can be used in selections to win the attention and interest of the Muslim with a view to suggesting that the Bible (and especially the Gospel, or what is called the NT portion of it) tells us not only about that one God but also how we can come to know Him and live in fellowship with Him.

At the same time it needs to be pointed out that the Muslim is not ready in the early stages for a presentation of the full Christian message about Christ. Matt Finlay (who has worked among Muslims in S.E. Asia) quite rightly suggests that "we can and should be very selective, in presenting to Muslims

those portions of Scripture which make the greatest impact upon the mind of the reader concerning who Christ is, without focusing on the difficulties, until the sense of wonder grows into a willingness to learn the mystery of Christ" (*TBT-P*, April 1979, pages 243-44).

My own experience has led me to avoid distributing the Gospel of Mark (with its striking first verse) and John in the early stages of contact and to concentrate on Matthew and Luke. In the case of selections, they can be carefully chosen to include sections of the Gospels that are not so full of theological difficulties. What I mean is, that many of the Gospel verses which Christians quote to Muslims hit them straight off with claims of the sonship of Christ but with no explanation whatever. Muslims cannot bear this, for they assume that we mean that God had a wife from whom Jesus was born (cf. Suras 4.51, 116, 171; 5.116; 6.101, 102; 19.35, 88-92; and the famous Sura 112). As I have already noted, it is better to avoid Gospel verses or portions that refer to sonship until we have established some firm relationship with our hearers. In casual, first-contact situations they can produce nothing but harm and misunderstanding and close the door to further discussion.

For the sake of argument Mr. Finlay even makes the suggestion that we could call Jesus "son of Elohim" on the ground that "a word which means nothing is preferable to a word which carries the wrong meaning" since it "would stimulate discussion, giving the Christian the opportunity of explaining our understanding of the term, which is far removed from the 'father-mother-son' idea which is as offensive to Christians as it is to Muslims". I doubt, however, that the Muslims whom I have met in West Asia would accept such an explanation. We might be able to substitute "Elohim" for "Allah" in a Malay translation project, but it is very unlikely that we could do something similar in the Middle East, the historic home of Islam. Nevertheless, the suggestion certainly makes us think.

At the same time Mr. Finlay warns against trying to produce a version in which the title "Son of God" is somehow removed altogether. He correctly observes that "every Muslim from the Grand Mufti to the most ignorant peasant knows that the Bible calls Jesus 'Son of God' [and] to produce a version in which this most controversial term has been removed [altogether] would create an uproar". In short, regarding the "Son of Man" and "Son of God" titles, he advises keeping them as literal as translation will permit, "as part of the biblical revelation, leaving it to the Holy Spirit to give enlightenment to the reader", since "whatever form of words we use, we can never explain clearly the mystery of the nature of Christ. This must remain a matter for faith". In other words, this is not basically a problem of *translation*, but a matter of theology—and there is not much we can do about changing it.

If we think of preparing selections which speak of the death of Christ we should remember that the vast majority of Muslims do not believe that Jesus died at all, but rather that he was delivered from the cross at the last minute and someone else was crucified in his place. I will not go into the reasons for this, except to point out that Muslims see in the Christian record of the crucifixion a grave miscarriage of justice. Why should an innocent person, they ask, suffer for a guilty one? However, we can emphasize in our selections which speak of this subject not merely those verses which state the facts of his shame-

ful death (as if he were nothing more than a victim of circumstances!) but also those scriptures that show that his death was deliberate and intentional, voluntary and also victorious (in that it ended in his resurrection from the grave).

One final point to be made with regard to the content of our publications directed to the Muslim audience is that fact that until a man is personally convinced that he is a sinner, he will never look for a Savior. Until he recognizes sin as rebellion against God (and not merely a breaking of some taboo), he will never truly repent. The Christian witness (translator, or distributor) has to rely upon the Holy Spirit to do what Jesus promised us the Spirit would do "when he comes", that is to convince the people of the world that they are wrong about sin and about what is right and about God's judgment (Jn 16.8-11). If the Bible translator and distributor cannot trust the Holy Spirit in his ministry, then he might as well give up; for the issues here are not merely theological, nor linguistic, but "spiritual" in the sense that Paul meant when he wrote (in 2 Cor 10.3-5):

It is true that we live in the world, but we do not fight from worldly motives. The weapons we use in our fight are not the world's weapons, but God's powerful weapons, which we use to destroy strongholds. We destroy false arguments; we pull down every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey Christ.

We must never forget in all of our work the *importance of the Bible itself*. People can quickly forget verbal messages but the Scriptures continue to speak. There are frequently places where only the Scriptures can go, and human witnesses are excluded. There may be circumstances, like those Paul found himself in when locked up in prison, where it can be said that only "the Word of God is not in chains" (2 Tim 2.9). Be that as it may, we have the glorious opportunity of making the Word of God available to those who in theory accept it but in practice have had little or no exposure to "the real thing". For them it is not an "open" book, but a closed one; and it is our job to unlock it and let it speak.

REVIEW

The Lion Handbook to the Bible. Tring, Herts, U.K.: Lion Publishing. 680p., hardback, £9.95 (ISBN 085648 010 X)

The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible. Lion Publishing. 320p., hardback, £7.95 (ISBN 085648 071 1)

The most striking feature of these two volumes is the range of excellent charts, maps and photographs which appear in very generous numbers throughout both books. It is also impressive to see how the editors have provided information through a vast amount of material covering the content of each book of the Bible and the background to many aspects of the biblical text.

The aim of the Handbook is to provide a simple guide to the contents of the Bible, and to show what places and objects looked like. It treats each book separately, with a general introduction followed by a section-by-section out-