

Article

Whom Do We Trust to Translate? An Early Eighteenth-Century Muslim Translation of the Gospels into Persian

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Abstract

Seventeenth-century Muslim scholar Khatun Abadi, commissioned by his shah, was the first native speaker to translate the Gospels into Persian. The goal was an accurate rendition, accompanied by notes intended to address contradictions and false claims of Christians. The translation was completed in 1703 but first published in 1995, in Iran. Understanding translation to be an act of interpretation, this study asks if we can trust a translation made by someone who does not accept the interpretation of the community that calls the text scripture. Based on analysis of translator notes, translation deviations from its Arabic base text, and the choice of key terms, the study concludes that the translator maintained the text's integrity with few exceptions but that his notes are problematic from the perspective of the Christian community. Lessons are suggested for Christian translators who work with persons of other faiths or prepare renditions to be used by them.

Keywords

Persian Bible translation, Khatun Abadi, Gospels, Muslim–Christian relations

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This paper is offered in honor of David Clark, remembering our conducting workshops together for the Pattani Malay translation project.

Introduction

Khatun Abadi's translation

The oldest known translation of the Gospels into Persian/Farsi by a Muslim (and the first by a native speaker) was completed in 1703 C.E.¹ and first published in 1995, in Iran (Ja'fariyan 2005).² The translation is the work of a distinguished Iranian Shi'ite Muslim scholar, Mir Muhammad Baqir ibn-i Isma'il-i Husayni Khatun Abadi (1660–1715). Khatun Abadi had tutored the Safavid shah, Soltan Husayn (ruled 1694–1722), in the shah's youth. Later, Soltan Husayn appointed him the first “chief of religious scholars” (Halft 2016, 162). He became the first head of a religious school in Esfahan founded by the shah,³ and it was the shah who charged him with making the biblical translation (*Tarjumah*, 4).

Soltan Husayn's aspiration, as an active promoter of Shi'a Islam, was that all his subjects become Muslims (Ja'fariyan 2005, xliv).⁴ He suspected that available versions of the Gospels used by Christians were inaccurate translations, and he wanted to see a correct rendition. Even more, Soltan Husayn believed that Christians had changed and distorted God's word according to their own opinions and could only falsely claim this to be the *injl* “Gospel.” Thus, he wanted Khatun Abadi to deduce from evidence within the text the reasons that Christians were misguided and had rejected their natural religion.⁵

In carrying out the shah's mandate, Khatun Abadi's own stated purpose was to translate clearly the intention of the original words of the Christians' Gospels. Notes of explanation and guidance would be added, outside the “law of translation.” It was these notes that could serve to correct some vain claims of Christians and the contradictions he found (*Tarjumah*, 5).

Khatun Abadi did not know Greek but was an experienced translator from Arabic into Persian. Printed versions of the Gospels in Arabic were available in his city of Esfahan, and one of these was the Roman Arabic Vulgate published in Rome in 1590 by *Typographia Medicea* (hereafter,

¹ All dates are C.E. unless otherwise indicated.

² Hereafter, *Tarjumah* refers to the translation and notes, and Ja'fariyan 2005 to the contemporary editor's introduction.

³ Known today as the Chahar Bagh Madrasedh.

⁴ Soltan Husayn forcibly converted Zoroastrians. Several traditionally Christian ethnic groups were in Iran in his time: Assyrians secluded in the mountainous northwest, Georgians from the Caucasus, and Armenians, many brought to Iran by Shah Abbas the First at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

⁵ In the Qur'an, the “book” given to Jesus is called the *injl*; cf. Suras 5:46 and 57:27. Islam is considered the natural religion.

Medici). It became Khatun Abadi's base text⁶ in spite of his criticism of its hopeless syntax, strange terminology, non-Arabic terms, and unusual collocations (*Tarjumah*, 4–5). It was a secondary translation—Arabic rendered from Latin, the Latin rendered from the original Greek. Now it was the source for a tertiary translation into Persian.

In its own time, Khatun Abadi's translation was available only in manuscript form, but the survival of more than a single manuscript suggests some circulation.⁷ Three hundred years later, its availability in published form allows contemporary Shi'ite Muslims to read the Gospels as rendered by a fellow Shi'ite. Four hundred copies were printed in 1995, and a reprint of two thousand was issued in 2005.

In the foreword to the published edition, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Misbah-i Yazdi says,

This is one of the most valuable works of one of the great Shi'ite scholars, who was also a learned translator. In his introduction, he says the existing Gospels are deviant and religiously have no authenticity for Muslims. . . . The publication of this text for the use of researchers in various groups, especially those of religions, is very useful, and it is hoped that other seekers and dear students also will make use of it. (Ja'fariyan 2005, xi)⁸

Approaches to an evaluation

The circumstances of this translation's creation and dissemination beg questions: The translator wanted to make a correct rendition of the Gospels in the face of what he believed to be Christian inaccuracies and distortions. In turn, Christians may ask if it is possible for an accurate translation, faithful to the original text, to be produced by a person who is not part of the faith community that reads the text as sacred writ—someone who acknowledges being negative toward the traditional interpretation of those who read the text as scripture.

In the history of translation, the involvement of persons from one religious community in the translation of another community's scripture has been a matter for discussion. Questions abound: Do the theological views

⁶ I treat the Medici edition (*Evangelium Santum* . . . 1590) as the base text here, thanks to the careful research of Half (2016, 168 n. 476), although I stated in Thomas 2015 that Khatun Abadi used Thomas Erpenius's version (Leiden, 1616). The two translations are identical for the direct Arabic citations in Khatun Abadi's notes.

⁷ Two manuscripts, belonging to Ayatollah Muhammad Ali Rowzati and to the library of the late Ayatollah al-Ozma Maraashi (MS. #3364), are the basis for the published text edited by Hojjatolislam Rasul Ja'fariyan, director of the national library (Ja'fariyan 2005, lxiff.).

⁸ Translated by M. Khajepour. Other translations are my own.

of a Muslim translator—divergent as they are from views of the biblical text’s Christian community(ies) of interpretation—significantly affect the translation as an act of interpretation? To what extent can a reader trust that the translator presents a clear reading that is an accurate, honest reflection of the original? Can reading such a translation provide a means for understanding the gospel message? Will reading it better enable Christians to engage in dialogue with Muslims?

Khatun Abadi was a solo translator. But, historically, persons from outside the Christian community have also been part of various New Testament translation teams, even if in minor roles. An examination of Khatun Abadi’s rendition should provide input into the continuing Christian conversation about the contributions of such translators, both solo and team—important today since involvement of persons of other faiths is common practice, in various forms, especially for languages whose speakers and readers are mainly other than Christian.

In my review of Khatun Abadi’s rendition of the Gospels, I used three main approaches: I examined his translator’s notes. I analyzed the places where he did not translate his Arabic base text literally when it agreed with the Greek original. And I compared his choice of key terms with those used by other translators.

I. Components of the evaluation

Translator notes

Khatun Abadi was, first of all, a reader of the text he intended to translate, but his goal also required him to discover how Christians read it. He recognized, too, that it is not possible to understand the full intention of a secondary text without reference back to the original language. Thus, he studied Christian books and scholarly works available to him. In addition, he had “discussions with those who were learned in the original words of the Gospels,” whom he called “fathers” (*Tarjumah*, 5). Since he says they helped him in relation to Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, I assume they were among the European Roman Catholic missionaries who began arriving in Esfahan a century earlier. Historically, it is possible that he similarly consulted with scholars of the Oriental Orthodox tradition, notably Hovhannes Merkouz, an Armenian who dialogued with two shahs, Soltan Soleyman I and Soltan Husayn.⁹ Merkouz was putting the Gospels into Persian (written

⁹Merkouz, a monk and bishop, resided in New Julfa at the edge of Esfahan (Gulbenkian 1981, 69–70).

in Armenian script) at about the time Khatun Abadi was working on his own translation.

Khatun Abadi's intent was not to disrupt the integrity of the text by including explanations or critiques in the Gospel text itself. Thus, assisted by his study and conversations, he wrote translator notes. They describe different views of various Christians as well as Islamic understandings of certain terms and concepts. In addition, they provide factual explanations for matters not easily understood by a Muslim reader. I read the notes for their insight into his processes, his thinking, and his religious convictions.

Deviations from the Arabic base text

Although Khatun Abadi refers to consulting contemporary Arabic versions of the Gospels beyond his base text, my comparison of his Persian rendition and the Medici translation verifies that he almost always followed it literally and that he likewise depended on it directly when he quoted Arabic within his notes. Consequently, determining the extent of his deviations from word-for-word adherence to a text may expose the inclinations that affected his discipline as a translator.

The process of tracking deviations is relatively simple since Khatun Abadi observed the method used by Persian scriptural translators until the nineteenth century. They kept the general word order and grammar of the text from which they were working, rather than conforming to Persian usage.

To discover deviations, I read through the complete Khatun Abadi translation, comparing it with the original Greek text. In those places that differ from the Greek, I then compared his translation with his Arabic base text to determine whether the differences were in the Arabic or were the result of his interpretation.¹⁰ Finally, I analyzed those instances in his translation that do not reflect the base text.

Key terms

A translator's lexical choices for key terms serve as indicators of interpretation. The first Persian renditions of one or more of the Gospels date from the beginning of the fourteenth century, and their translators selected from a variety of lexical possibilities. Of the five known translators during that century, at least three were Armenians and one was an Assyrian—all traditional Christians who lived in Iran but none of them native speakers of Persian.

¹⁰I did not check the full Arabic text but only those places where my method called for it.

After a gap of three centuries, the next cluster of Gospel translators appeared. They did not have access to a fixed Christian religious vocabulary in Persian, but they did inherit a few words for key terms that were persistently used.¹¹ They employed some of these words, but they also introduced other words not previously used. Of the period's translators—Father John Thaddeus, Padre Pedro, Merkouz, Khatun Abadi, all in the Esfahan area¹²—only Khatun Abadi was a native Persian speaker. Comparison of these translators' somewhat contemporaneous versions enables factoring out commonalities to give attention to differences.

II. Results of examination of the translation

A. Examination of lexical choices for key terms

1. A sample comparison of thirty-nine key terms in the Gospels¹³ shows that Khatun Abadi followed precedent in his translation into Persian of thirty-three of the sample selections; he used options not previously selected for a Gospel rendition in six of the thirty-nine. Three of the six seem ordinary, but three are noteworthy (and we do not know whether they were in wide use in his day).¹⁴

“*baptize*” *qosl* = *wash*. Although not used for baptism in Khatun Abadi's base text—an Arabic translation—*qosl* is an Arabic word. It is a qur'anic term (Sura 5:6) used in Islam for ritual ablution, the washing of the whole body of a person who is in a state of major ritual impurity (Gibb and Kramers 1953, 114). A Persian word for washing, *shosteh*, had appeared for baptism in two earlier Gospel translations. *Qosl* continued

¹¹ No Persian-language worshipping community, which would need commonly shared terms, existed at the time.

¹² Shah Abbas the First requested a translation from Padre Juan Roldán y Ibañez (called Father John Thaddeus) in 1616. He was a Spanish Roman Catholic, a Carmelite missionary. Three local mullahs and a local rabbi assisted him extensively, but he would have ensured the final product accorded with acceptable Catholic readings. The manuscripts are in the Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna [Cod. A. F. 85], and Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris [Persan 2]. Padre Pedro completed his rendition in the 1650s. He may have been the Flemish Carmelite, François du Jardin (also known as Father Peter of the Mother of God). The manuscript is in the Bibliotheca Lindesiana collection [#337], John Rylands University Library, Manchester, UK. No Merkouz manuscript is available for study.

¹³ Each key term was compared, in the study's thirty-three translations, at its first occurrence in Matthew (or John, if not found in Matthew). See the description in Thomas 2015, 355ff. The method does not exclude the possibility that the terms were translated differently elsewhere in a translation. The comparisons offer no judgment about interdependence between translations.

¹⁴ Glosses in English are used throughout for the Greek.

to be used by some later translators, including Khatun Abadi's grandson (1741, in a translation ordered by Nader Shah), Henry Martyn (1812), and a modern team using the Living Bible as its model text (Tafsiri, 1979). In the Tafsiri, *qosl* appears in combination with the more common *ta'mid*, also an Arabic loanword.

“Lord” *parvardegaar* = nourisher (a title for God, also for people such as teachers). In selecting *parvardegaar*, Khatun Abadi avoided the two choices previously used: *khodaa* “God” (used by two previous translators) and *khodaavand* (used in all other prior translations in my study and standard in the current vocabulary of Iranian Christians). He used *parvardegaar* both when the Greek *kurios* refers to God and when it refers to Jesus. He appears to have discovered a Persian word that allows the same kind of ambiguity as *kurios* does, thereby enabling him to refer to Jesus appropriately without making a statement about his divinity. In his note on Matt 7.21—where not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven”—he interprets this as meaning that “Jesus denied his deity and affirmed God’s omnipotence, as Muslims maintain.”¹⁵ Only his grandson adopted *parvardegaar* thereafter.

In John 20.28, where Thomas says, “My Lord and my God,” Khatun Abadi kept *parvardegaar* for “Lord” but used *elaah*, an Arabic generic term for “g/God,” as an alternative to the normative Persian *khodaa*. Doing this, he replicated exactly his base text. In the Arabic, the context required the change. The possessive “my” is never used with *Allah*, the standard Arabic biblical translation for “God” and the title otherwise used in his base text.

“church” *ma’bad* = place of worship; *majma’* = assembly. Exceptionally, in Matt 16.18 and 18.17, Khatun Abadi did not employ the word *kelisaa* (a word derived from the Greek *ekklesia*). *Kelisaa* had been used by all previous Christian translators of the Gospels and is still standard for Iranian Christians. His Arabic base text in both verses in Matthew had *bi’at*, a term for a church or synagogue building, and thus a somewhat generic word for a place of worship.¹⁶ Given this base, Khatun Abadi’s choice of *ma’bad* in Matt 16.18 was unusual but not unfaithful. He did understand, however, that “church” includes the concept of a body of people, for in Matt 18.17 he used *majma’* “assembly,” a correct representation of the Greek word. He also used *majma’* for “synagogue,” as in his Arabic base text.¹⁷

¹⁵ An observation of Halft (2016, 166 n. 271), concerning *Tarjumah*, 281, John n. 239.

¹⁶ Leopoldo Sebastiani (1813), an Italian Roman Catholic who favored Arabic root words, is historically the only Christian in my comparative study who did not use *kelisaa* but used *bi’at* in a Persian translation.

¹⁷ Used previously by Padre Pedro for “synagogue,” it was used later by Sebastiani.

2. Khatun Abadi's choice of *qosl* for "baptism" shows a preference for Qur'anic terms. He demonstrated a similar sensibility when he was one of the first users of the Qur'anic term *nejaat* "salvation" in a translation.¹⁸ And a comparable Islamic influence is apparent in his several renderings of the key term "law." In his use of *naamus* "law," an ordinary loanword from Arabic, Khatun Abadi followed precedent, but neither he nor his base text rendered "law" consistently.

"law" *naamus* and others. Khatun Abadi deviated from the use of *naamus* "law" in one instance that followed his base text; he used *sonat* "custom, tradition" in John 7.23. His additional deviations, which attract our attention, are his own determinations.

He used *toraat* "Torah" in Matt 12.5. In his notes, he equated *naamus* with the Torah and shariah of Moses,¹⁹ and he rendered "law" as *naamus va shariat* "law and shariah religious law" in Matt 5.17 and John 18.31. In these two passages, he employed a pair of words, a common Persian stylistic device. The addition of *shariat* "shariah" in the word pairing clarifies that "your law" refers to the religious law of the Jews.

In yet another instance of word pairing, Khatun Abadi rendered "law" as *din va ketaab* "religion and book" in John 1.17. In the Gospel writer's comparison of what came through Moses and through Jesus, the formation of a pair in the first half of the equation ("law" translated as *din va ketaab*) creates a balance with the pair ("grace and truth") already present in the second half. The rendering uses an Islamic concept that pictures the law given to Moses as a *ketaab* "book" with laws/commandments that are the basis of the Jewish *din* "religion."

B. Examination of textual alterations

A frequent first question heard from Christians about a Muslim translator of the Gospels is, How does he deal with passages related to the Trinity? Khatun Abadi usually accepted the strict principle of literal rendition in his translation of titles and references to the persons of the Trinity. His personal perspective on matters concerning Jesus is clear in his notes. His perspective on the Holy Spirit is less clear, and his treatment in the translation is unsure. He obviously wrestled with the biblical meaning of "spirit" and the role and significance of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ *Nejaat*, now a standard term in Iranian Christians' vocabulary, was previously used by Padre Pedro not long before Khatun Abadi's translation used it. It is found in the Qur'an once as a noun (40:41), referring to salvation in Paradise, and twice in verb form (12:45; 28:25), referring to deliverance/escape.

¹⁹ *Tarjumah*, 237, Matthew n. 19, and 239, Matthew n. 33. "Shariah" is the Islamic religious legal tradition(s) derived from the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Sunnah.

Jesus, Son of God, Son of Man. In his notes on Matt 5.9 (*Tarjumah*, 236, n. 18) and John 1.12 (273, n. 1), Khatun Abadi discusses the relationship between Jesus and God, even using the terminology of “persons” that Christians employ in talking about the Trinity. He understands the title “son of God” in the Gospels to apply to all the disciples and followers of Jesus; Jesus is a son of God in the same way that they are sons of God. Likewise, he sees that Jesus refers to God as “father”; so do his disciples and many others. Jesus does not have a special relationship with God that is different from that of others. He concludes that it is only by tradition that Christians interpret “son of God” to have a significance of divinity when applied to Jesus; that is, the text does not require it.

1. In three significant instances in relation to Jesus, Khatun Abadi did not conform strictly to a word-for-word principle in his translation.²⁰

Matthew 10.10—addition of “for the sake of God” and “from God” (text changes). Jesus instructs his disciples to go on a mission to the people of Israel. They are to take no money with them but to rely on the hospitality of the people, “for laborers deserve their food.” Khatun Abadi attached additional words (underlined): “for the person that works for the sake of God deserves his food from God” (*Tarjumah*, 25). By inserting phrases emphasizing God, he takes away the possibility of seeing the laborers as working for Jesus, who is the one who sent them out. He shows that God, and not the people, should be credited for the laborers receiving food. It is unusual for him to put a clarifying addition in his rendition, rather than in the notes.

John 14.6—“truth of life” in place of “truth and life” (text change). Khatun Abadi veered slightly from his text in his rendering of a claim made by Jesus about himself. The Arabic (in accordance with the Greek and Latin Vulgate) has “and” between “truth” and “life.” Khatun Abadi (or his copyist?) omitted *va* “and,” written by a single letter, leaving a sentence that can be read in Persian as “I am the way and I am the truth of life” (*Tarjumah*, 209). With this change, Jesus does not claim to be “the life” but the one who reveals or demonstrates the meaning of life. In other Johannine references to Jesus being “the life” (e.g., 5.26; 11.35), Khatun Abadi translated the text literally, without change. In the absence of an obvious reason, it may be best to see this word omission as a mistake.

Luke 22.70—replacement of “Son of God” with “God” (text changes). Khatun Abadi deviated from his Arabic base (which conformed to the

²⁰ I found only eight other places where Khatun Abadi’s Persian translation deviated from the Medici edition when the Arabic agreed with the Greek text. I do not see particular exegetical issues or indications of bias in them.

original Greek, the Latin Vulgate, and John Thaddeus) in one instance that involves the term “son of God” as it relates to Jesus. In Luke 22.66-70, when Jesus is tried before the council they ask if he is the Messiah. Jesus refuses to answer directly and, instead, begins to speak about the Son of Man at the right hand of God. In response, the elders ask Jesus, “Are you the **Son of God?**” and Jesus answers, “You say that I am.” Khatun Abadi introduces the word “God” and changes the placement of “s/Son of God.” His version reads, “They all said, ‘Then are you **God?**’ He [Jesus] said, ‘You say that I am [a] **son of God**’” (*Tarjumah*, 169).²¹

This small change is difficult to explain. The translator seems to be testing the assertion that Jesus is divine. Through replacing “Son of God” with “God,” the question to Jesus is made more pointed than the original. The question allows Jesus to make a clear claim concerning himself, and he does not respond with an affirmation. He deflects the question. Perhaps Khatun Abadi recognized that “Son of God” in the question of his base text (“Are you the Son of God?”) is generally understood to imply divinity, and therefore believed that substituting “God” was an acceptable rendering of the sentence’s intention. If so, Jesus’ answer, using “s/Son of God,” makes Jesus’ response more explicit than the original; Khatun Abadi would have assumed that “son of God” is not a claim to divinity.

2. Khatun Abadi gives literal word-for-word translations of the crucifixion narratives and passages related to Jesus’ death. He nonetheless turns away from the Christian interpretation of the narratives through notes that provide his own explanations. His note 25 about the crucifixion at John 19.30 is one of his longest (extending over two pages in the current printed edition; *Tarjumah*, 280–82, John n. 25).

He discusses Jesus’ statements about the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Son of Man and applies these words to Jesus’ ascension into heaven, not to crucifixion or death. This interpretation is partially based upon his readings of John 3 (the Son of Man is lifted up, v. 14) and Luke 24 (he is carried up into heaven, v. 51).

While giving several explanatory scenarios for the crucifixion advanced by Muslims, Khatun Abadi affirms what Muslims agree on: The Messiah was not crucified but was carried to heaven by the *parvardegaar* “Lord.” Another person, who the people suppose to be Jesus, was crucified.

John 19.26-27—translator’s note on “Woman, here is your son” / “Here is your mother” (no change in the text). The note asserts that, during

²¹ See also *Tarjumah*, 236 Matthew n. 18 and 273 John n. 1 for discussion on Jesus as “son of God.” The Persian script has no capital letters, and any grammatical marker to indicate “a” is missing; nothing clarifies whether this is “a son” or “the Son.”

the interchange in John 19.26-27, Jesus' mother Mary understood that the "disciple" standing next to her was actually Jesus and that the person on the cross was not her son. Khatun Abadi substantiates this interpretation by reference to Mark 16.12, a post-resurrection passage in which Jesus appears to two disciples "in another form." Khatun Abadi strictly translated his own Medici base text, which reads that Jesus changed into "other clothes." He asserts in his note, however, that other Arabic translations have Jesus changing into his "final form," a reading in accord with what he asserts is the Muslim understanding of the crucifixion narrative.²²

The Holy Spirit and the Paraclete. I found no note devoted to Khatun Abadi's understanding of the *ruh ol-qodos* "Holy Spirit." His note on the "paraclete," however, refers to the Holy Spirit. Khatun Abadi did not translate the Greek *parakletos* in the text of John's Gospel, but simply transliterated it, as his Arabic base text did. His very long note on John 14.16 (*Tarjumah*, 277-79, John n. 18) describes various Christian understandings of the term's relationship to Jesus and, in particular, refers to Christians' identification of the Paraclete as the Holy Spirit, the third person of the divine being. After a survey of texts about the Holy Spirit in the Gospels and Acts, Khatun Abadi concludes that *parakletos* cannot be a name for the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that he would send *another parakletos*, implying that Jesus himself is the first *parakletos*. Yet the only s/Spirit sent to the disciples—the Spirit that came upon them at Pentecost—is the *same* Holy Spirit of whom the Gospels speak, a s/Spirit already present when Jesus was with them. Therefore, the *other parakletos* is still to come.

Khatun Abadi followed the Islamic tradition to say that this other *parakletos* is the "last of the prophets," that is, Muhammad: He fulfilled all the roles of the promised "paraclete": teacher, comforter, and intercessor, in accordance with Khatun Abadi's definition of the *parakletos*.²³

In the following instance related to the Holy Spirit, Khatun Abadi did not literally translate his Arabic base text.

Matthew 5.3—addition of "by the arrival of" and addition of "Holy" to "Spirit." Although the grammatical forms used here by both the Greek and the Arabic allow "spirit" to be understood in either the referential or instrumental sense, they are usually understood as referential here, as elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the New Testament. In the tradition of Jewish and Christian translation of Matt 5.3, "in spirit" refers to

²² Thomas Erpenius's Arabic version, *Novum Testamentum Arabice* (Leiden, 1616), has "final form."

²³ Khatun Abadi refers to Imam Reza, the eighth imam of Shi'a Islam, as the one who confirmed this tradition (*Tarjumah*, 279).

the “poor,” so that the reading is “poor in spirit,” that is, humble or contrite.²⁴ Khatun Abadi took “spirit” to be instrumental and therefore assumed that the “Holy Spirit” is implied as the agent of the action. He rendered the passage as “Blessed are the poor by the arrival of the Holy Spirit,” adding “by the arrival of” to make the implied action complete.

III. Conclusion

This study investigates a particular instance of a figure from a dominant religious community translating the scripture of a marginalized minority community. We know from his notes that the translator was negatively inclined toward Christians’ own interpretations of their scripture; he certainly inherited Islamic interpretations of it.²⁵ Recognizing that every act of translation is an act of interpretation, can we trust Khatun Abadi’s version of the Gospels?

When Khatun Abadi relied on a secondary translation as his base text, he actually received a form of Christian interpretation of the original Gospels.²⁶ His commitment to communicate with Christian “fathers” also attests to his awareness that they were carriers of interpretation. Yet his intent to translate accurately was not the same as an intent to follow the Christian community’s understanding of the Gospels. Given the circumstances of his translation, it is notable that, for all the awkwardness of his word-for-word translation method, it led to maintaining the text’s integrity with few exceptions.

There is some evidence of disconnects with the text’s translation history. In the study’s sample of key lexical terms, we see that—in the case of two fundamental Christian words, *kurios* “Lord” and *ekklesia* “church”—Khatun Abadi did not use already established Christian terminology. These departures are somewhat startling but do not introduce inaccuracies. We can nevertheless fairly ask whether the variant words increase a reader’s sense of disconnect between the Muslim and Christian communities. Does the disconnect heap onto the Christian community a judgment of illegitimacy?

Khatun Abadi’s shift in the placement of the terms “God” and “s/Son of God” in Luke 22 seems like an opening to assert that Jesus made no claims for himself. Yet a reading of the source text, without the shifts, could still be interpreted by Muslims as referring to Jesus as a non-unique “son of God.”

²⁴ For a history of the use of “poor in Spirit,” see Betz 1995, 114, and 112 for a discussion of the form.

²⁵ Some Islamic interpretations of the Bible and Christian theology are embedded in the text of the Qur’an itself.

²⁶ Using a single base text avoided the temptation to pick and choose at personal will between textual interpretations found in various versions.

The text's switch has not drastically changed the interpretive possibilities open to the reader.

Khatun Abadi's translation is essentially trustworthy. His notes, however, are undeniably problematic. The explanatory notes represent a real effort to make the Gospels clear and are not part of the difficulty. It is the interpretive comments that complicate finding what Christians describe as the "gospel message," that is, the fundamental essence of Christian faith. Even in dialogue that aspires to allow both Muslims and Christians to interpret and discuss their own and the other's scriptures, the prior interpretive statements of the notes can be expected to make fresh contributions and authentic interchange more difficult; dialogue often needs to overcome the tendency to repeat prior opinions.²⁷

Khatun Abadi and Soltan Husayn intended that the translation and notes be read together. Rasul Ja'fariyan can be commended for making them available and for keeping them together. Nevertheless, his recent publication of the old rendition cannot take the place of what Christians themselves would wish to distribute as their scripture.

What can Christian translators learn from a study of this translation?

1. If Christians wish to present the Gospels as sacred writ, to be understood as their scripture, any translation (or even the text in Greek) needs to be made available accompanied by some connection to a Christian community or, minimally, with notes to guide the reader. Given the nature of language, the historical traditions of interpretation through which Christians read the text are not the only possible explanations of that text. Other possibilities include Islamic understandings, as demonstrated by Khatun Abadi's notes.²⁸
2. In a formal equivalent translation, a diligent and honest translator can make a generally trustworthy contribution (solo or team) even if he holds divergent interpretations and does not accept Christians' affirmations of faith. Further, a study of Khatun Abadi's work does

²⁷ Ometto believes "that a reevaluation of Khatun Abadi's *Translation* . . . on the part of the Christian communities of Iran, with some accommodations, could constitute a small step taken by Christians and Muslims, hand in hand, towards, the Truth." But he concludes that "the positions of Christians and Muslims as regards dialogue are still far apart and, despite the broad-mindedness of well-disposed intellectuals on either side, most people are still under the sway of traditional prejudices" (2002, 72).

²⁸ Ometto writes that Khatun Abadi as *translator* "reveals a basic intellectual honesty, which guarantees a generally faithful translation; as *commentator* and *critic*, however, he is a common or garden Islamic scholar, practiced in subtle disquisitions on *fiqh*, who gets entangled in tortuous reasoning . . . not out of malice, but out of an absolute conviction of the validity of his own faith" (2002, 69).

not seem to create any new obstacle to the assumption that a Muslim could provide contributions working on a dynamic equivalent translation team. Team members act as checks on one another in the broader interpretive openness of that setting.

3. A Muslim can be expected to offer helpful input toward a team's selection of key terms, especially in a society where Islamic terms are in common usage. Khatun Abadi offers strangely different options to translating "law," for example, yet he represents a sensibility that offers new ways of thinking about lexical choices that communicate.
4. Muslim input into a Christian translation may help identify passages or concepts that are confusing to Muslim readers. Khatun Abadi struggled, as evidenced by the translation and his notes (for example, those related to "s/Spirit"). Recognizing such struggles can be instructive to Christians seeking to render the text understandably.
5. Notes can be a useful, if risky, accompaniment to a translation. Khatun Abadi's explanatory notes were written for those who had no history of hearing the stories or the theological ideas that the Gospels contain; they thus facilitated open access for everyone. By contrast, his notes that are apologetic—that introduce negative comment from one religion about another—keep the rendition from being fully open to all readers. Notes attached to scripture are most useful when they sympathetically facilitate reading by all.
6. Muslims can be expected to have questions about the authenticity of Christian scripture. Khatun Abadi models a translator who, as a Muslim, understood that the integrity of scripture can best be trusted when it is prepared without additions or particular interpretations inserted into the text itself.
7. Involvement of a Muslim in the translation of Christian scripture opens the way to interreligious dialogue, at least among the translators and the scholars who are consulted in its preparation.

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