

The Punjabi New Testament in Persian Script

The Bible Translator

2021, Vol. 72(2) 189–199

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DOI: 10.1177/2051677021995970

journals.sagepub.com/home/tbt**Yousaf Sadiq**

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Abstract

This article discusses the Punjabi New Testament in Persian script. It explores different phases of its preparation and its translation features, as well as the individuals who contributed to its translation and revision.

Keywords

Punjabi New Testament, Punjabi Bible, Persian Punjabi, Bible translation, Punjabi language, Pakistan, Indian subcontinent

The Complete New Testament in Persian Punjabi: this long expected and much desired book is at length ready and the New Testament is available for the villagers of the Punjab in their mother tongue. (BFBS Archives, “Literary notes – Panjab auxiliary of B.F.B.S.,” September 1912)

Punjabi, or Panjabi, is an Indo-Aryan language from the family of Indo-European, Indo-Iranian languages (Bhatia 2003, 299). In 1947, the region of Punjab was divided by the Radcliffe commission into two parts (Spate 1964, 374): the Indian side, commonly referred to as Eastern Punjab (*Charhda* Punjab), and the Pakistani side, referred to as Western Punjab (*Lehnda* Punjab). In Pakistan, Punjab is the most populated province, and it is estimated that over a hundred million people (more than half of the population) speak Punjabi as their first language (Weiss 2011, 238). However, it does not hold an official language status at a national or provincial level

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in Pakistan. On the other hand, Punjabi enjoys an official language status at both a national and state level in India. It is spoken by approximately thirty million people in the Indian state of Punjab, and it is also an official language in Delhi, the Indian capital (Sachdev 2012, 35). Punjabi speakers can also be found across the globe, with relatively large communities living in Canada, UK, Australia, and the United States. The Punjabi language is ranked in the list of the top twenty most “widely spoken languages in the world” (Bhatia 2009, 886).

Before discussing the Punjabi New Testament in the Persian script, it would be helpful to look briefly at the Punjabi translation of the Bible in Gurmukhi, the script used for writing Punjabi in the Indian state of Punjab. The name Gurmukhi literally means that the words have come from the “mouth of the Guru” (Singha 2005, 87). It was the Punjabi language in which the Sikh gurus had conversed; the Sikh Scripture is written in Gurmukhi characters, which are regarded as a sacred script by the Sikhs. Unlike the Persian script, Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script is written from left to right.

The Christian Scriptures in Punjabi were first translated by William Carey in 1815, using the Gurmukhi script; they were warmly received by the Sikhs (Smith 1885, 263). Later, Carey realized that his assessments of the Indian languages needed modifications in light of his study of Sanskrit (Culshaw 1962, 66). Consequently, Christian Scriptures formerly translated into Indian languages needed to be revised accordingly. Rev. John Newton, a prominent missionary in the Punjab region, translated the complete Gurmukhi Punjabi New Testament by 1868 (British and Foreign Bible Society 1868, 278). The work had commenced in 1837 and was printed by the Lodiana Mission (Murdoch 1870, 96). This translation “came to mark a transition from traditional to modern Punjabi, and Newton is today considered one of the fathers of the modern Punjabi language” (Webster 2007, 44). Newton’s translation of the New Testament was revised from 1894 to 1899 by his son, Rev. Edward Payson Newton. He served as head of the revision committee, which also included Rev. Mian Sadiq, Rev. F. Newton, Mr. Talib-ud-Din, and Rev. E. Guildford (British and Foreign Bible Society 1896, 134). The complete Bible in the Gurmukhi script was published in 1959. Dr. Clinton Herbert Loehlin and Rev. Sunder Singh, with help from several other Punjabi Christians, translated the Old Testament (Loehlin 1953, 67). It is noteworthy that the Presbyterians in India were dedicated to translating the Bible into Punjabi, as Loehlin and the Newtons were part of the mission’s vital work. In 1984, Rev. Dr. James Massey completed a new translation of the entire Bible in Gurmukhi characters (Massey 1984, 261).

In contrast to the Gurmukhi script that has been associated with the Sikhs, the Persian script is linked with the Muslims in Punjab. Owing to these two completely different sets of characters used for Punjabi

orthography, those involved in Bible translation in India found it fitting to use separate terms in order to differentiate between the two variants of the one language—Musalmani Punjabi for the Punjabi used by the Muslims in Punjab (Hooper 1963, 195), and Gurmukhi Punjabi used by the Sikhs. Today, however, Punjabi in Persian script or as used in Western Punjab is commonly known as “Shahmukhi” (a name formed in analogy to Gurmukhi; Bhardwaj 2016, 373).

Robert Stewart writes that Rev. Dr. Andrew Gordon was the first person who passionately desired to see the Christian Scriptures in Persian (Musalmani) Punjabi (this is the same Gordon after whom the prestigious Gordon College in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, is named). However, Rev. Dr. David Smith Lytle had the privilege of initiating the arrangements for their production (Stewart 1899, 302). The work of Scripture translation in the language of the common person was very much on Lytle’s heart. It is worth noting that Lytle also had the honor of serving as head of the committee that prepared the much-cherished Punjabi *Zabur* (the metrical translation of Psalms into Punjabi; Sadiq 2014, 36). Rahmat Masih, a Muslim convert and licentiate with the United Presbyterian Mission, was appointed in 1884 by Lytle, and translated the Gospels into Persian Punjabi, the first of which was published in 1885. In 1886, the Punjab Auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) showed an interest in a Persian Punjabi translation and requested that the United Presbyterian Mission hand over the work to BFBS; the permission was granted. However, Stewart mentions that the progress made in the following years was rather slow (1899, 302); the same was mentioned in the 1909 BFBS report (British and Foreign Bible Society 1909, 270). For instance, the book of Acts was published in the year 1893 and the Epistle to the Romans in 1896 (Pick 1913, 33). Thus, the Gospels in Persian Punjabi were translated well before the completion of the entire New Testament (Sadiq 2012, 91).

The need for a Persian Punjabi translation for the western areas of Punjab was explained by Miss Elizabeth Gordon, writing about her missionary tour in the Sialkot district:

One of the great wants in village work is a Punjabi translation of the Bible. We take our Urdu Bible in our hand, and mentally translating as rapidly as possible, we read it off in Punjabi. But we have been afraid lest someone might detect us, and say that we were not reading that which was in the book. To relieve this difficulty, I turned my attention while in the hills in the hot weather to translating portions of the Scriptures into Punjabi, and this manuscript has proved a help to me in the work. (American Bible Society 1885, 148)

This indicates that the Punjabi Scriptures prepared at Lodiana (eastern part) were hard to comprehend for the majority in Sialkot and the surrounding

areas (western part), especially the women. This had to do with variations in Punjabi between east and west, across the main rivers, and the disparity between the scripts. As a cultural norm, female members of the community had little or no exposure to outside communities, which led to them being faced with additional challenges of dialect comprehension, as indicated by Miss Gordon. Hence, it was recognized that there was a necessity to produce Scriptures in Persian Punjabi in order to adequately meet the language and cultural needs of the target audience.

When the Scriptures in Punjabi became available, Christian workers were grateful, since they found both Urdu and English to be equally unintelligible for ordinary villagers. They no longer needed to engage in translating at sight, which was not a practical and effective exercise anyway, as it would often lead to the translation being very crude, overly literal, or incomprehensible to the listeners. Thus, the Punjabi New Testament in Persian script proved to be handy to them. A few missionaries started promoting its use among their local evangelists, and some personally made frequent use of it. Consequently, these efforts provided opportunities for the villagers to hear God's word in their heart language.

The unfamiliar Sanskrit-based key terms in the Gurmukhi Punjabi New Testament were replaced with more familiar Persian and Arabic vocabulary in the Persian Punjabi New Testament—for instance, *Khuda* instead of *Parmeshwar* for “God” (John 3.16), *Kalam* in place of *Shabad* for “Word” (John 1.1), *Khuda di badshahi* instead of *Surag da raj* for “kingdom of God” (Matt 4.17), *pak rooh* rather than *pavitar atma* for “Holy Spirit” (Acts 1.2), *fazal* and *salamti* instead of *kirpa* and *shanti* for “grace” and “peace” (Rom 1.7), and *jadal* in place of *partap* for “glory” (Rom 3.23). The two Punjabi versions showed identical terminology as well, including *Yesu Masih*, *rasool*, *nabi*, and *tauba* for “Jesus Christ,” “apostle,” “prophet,” and “repentance,” respectively.

The style maintained throughout the Persian Punjabi New Testament noticeably displays a strong influence from the Urdu New Testament in terms of sentence structure. For example, a corresponding pattern may be observed in 1 Cor 13 and the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5–7. In addition, the above-mentioned key terms employed in the Punjabi New Testament were consistent with the Urdu New Testament. Terms such as *batisma*, *hai-kal*, and *kalisya* (baptism, temple, and church, respectively) were transliterated, as in the Urdu New Testament, rather than translated. Therefore, it can be surmised that the translators and committee for the Persian Punjabi New Testament decided to follow closely certain aspects of the Urdu New Testament as part of the translation process. It surely was valuable to refer to the Urdu New Testament as a resource—for example, in translating theological terms. However, its excessive use at times gives an Urdunized

quality to the Punjabi New Testament, which could have been avoided by translating words and phrases in colloquial Punjabi as much as possible. For example, words such as *thokar*, *pait*, *pathar*, and *dhunde-ga* (“stumbling,” “womb,” “stone,” and “will seek,” respectively) have been retained from Urdu. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the translation lacks colloquial forms. On the one hand, the Persian Punjabi New Testament shares features of the Urdu New Testament. On the other hand, it exhibits distinctive characteristics that are worth noting.

Translators are often faced with the problem of transcription of biblical names (Clark 1995, 347). Except for *Younus* (Jonah) and *Ibrahim* (Abraham), the proper names show uniformity with the Urdu New Testament. One struggles to think of a principled reason for making such a specific modification in the Punjabi New Testament. However, the decision to follow the Arabicized form was practical. The majority of the people in Western Punjab were already well-acquainted with the existing Arabic form. In comparison, the transliteration *Yunah* (Jonah) and *Abarham* (Abraham) would not have been so relevant.

The practice of the prophet of Islam, or the traditional portion of Muslim law that later generations are to follow, is generally called *sunna* (Juynboll 2006, 166). In Western Punjab, among the Punjabi Muslims, this term was (and still is) commonly used to refer to the practice of circumcision (Wikeley 1915, 47). The words *sunnat* (circumcision) and *sunti* (circumcised) are used in 1 Cor 7.18-19 to explain that those who come to faith in Christ are no longer under the requirements of the law. The word choice made by the translators here indicates that knowing the audience for whom the translation is done is of utmost importance.

In the same vein, it was decided that the Persian Punjabi New Testament would not include the brackets of the bracketed material in the Greek New Testament, although the brackets were present in the Urdu New Testament that was used as a base. In the Islamic context, a common charge against Christians is that the Bible has been altered and corrupted by them (Nazir-Ali 1983, 47). The reason for leaving the brackets out was to avoid unnecessary questioning with regard to the authenticity of the Bible. In keeping the audience in mind, the translators found it wise to avoid needless “attention to textual variants” (Glassman 1982, 442).

One of the striking features of the Punjabi New Testament is the translation of passages that deal with agriculture. Punjab is primarily an agricultural area, which is blessed with fertile land that produces an abundance of high-quality crops. This has resulted in a rich and unique local agricultural terminology. For instance, the “Parable of the Sower,” the “Parable of the Weeds,” and the “Parable of the Mustard Seed” in Matt 13 have a Punjabi appearance, as they are painted with an indigenous agricultural vocabulary.

The result is that Punjabi villagers understand the parables within their local setting.

Another valuable feature of the Punjabi New Testament is the use of local equivalents of biblical weights. For example, the word *topa* appears in Matt 13.33 as a customary measure of flour. The word *seer* in John 12.3 is a traditional measure of quantity and volume. It is a useful practice for the biblical measures to be “communicated meaningfully into the host language,” to avoid any confusion in the mind of the reader or listener (Schmidt 2014, 1).

Idiomatic expressions add to the beauty of the Punjabi New Testament. For instance, the common expression *jhole da marya* (literally, one struck by paralysis) in Matt 8.6 and 9.2 is used for a person suffering from paralysis. Like several other South Asian languages, Punjabi makes use of doublets that may be formed in a variety of ways. For instance, Matt 15.27 uses the doublet *bhoray bharay*. It is a doublet with rhyme, in which the first word has a meaning (crumbs of bread) and the second word has no independent content. Its function is to form the rhyming doublet and expand or generalize the range of the more precise first word (Hoyle 2014, 341). The second word signifies everything else that could be associated with crumbs of bread.

An interesting feature to observe in the Punjabi New Testament is the appearance of the Punjabi version of a loanword from English. In the “Parable of the Shrewd Manager,” in Luke 16.6-7, the word *ashtam* is used, which is derived from the English term “stamped” (paper). The Indian Stamp Act was introduced in 1899 in order to collect revenue for the government (Karnatak 2010, 148). As a result, a stamped paper came to represent a legal document for any financial transactions. It could be produced in a court of law as a document of evidence. The stamped paper was commonly referred to as *ashtam* or *ashtam* paper among villagers in Punjab. The use of *ashtam* in context signaled the seriousness of the matter to readers and listeners—the shrewd manager was committing an illegal act by telling his master’s debtors to put false amounts on an *ashtam* paper in order to cause financial loss to his master. Although *ashtam* was an adapted loanword, its function and legal importance was understood by the people. The translators made a wise decision to use it in the translation.

The translation of the Punjabi New Testament in Persian script was published by the Punjab auxiliary of BFBS in 1912 (*Injil Sharif*). One thousand copies of the first edition were printed at Nawal Kishore Press through the Ghulam Qadir Masihi printer in Lahore. The whole edition sold out within four months (British and Foreign Bible Society 1913, 30). A second edition was published the following year and a third edition in 1940.¹ The revised

¹ Rev. Chandu Ray, Secretary BFBS Panjab auxiliary, to Rev. Wilfred Bradnock, Translation Secretary BFBS, 5 July 1951, BFBS Archives.

version was published in 1952; minor corrections were made in this version, mainly involving spelling and grammatical errors and the replacing of some awkward words.²

When the Punjabi New Testament in Persian script was first published in 1912, there was a good demand for the book.³ An advertisement published in the local newspaper said: "The Complete New Testament in Persian Punjabi: This long expected and much desired book is finally ready and the New Testament is available for the villagers of the Punjab in their mother tongue."⁴ The fact that the one thousand copies of the first printing were sold within a few months indicates how warmly the New Testament in Punjabi was received.⁵ The work of the New Testament in Punjabi was supervised by Rev. Thomas Grahame Bailey of the Church of Scotland Mission, while the final draft was prepared by Rev. Dr. William John Brandon and Mr. Daud Singh.⁶ Daud Singh was a Sikh convert who was known for his remarkable Christian character and a deep commitment to Christian service (Clark 1907, 60).

With the New Testament published, discussions began in 1913 on translating sections from the Old Testament. Rev. Bailey had departed to the United Kingdom by that time, and it was felt necessary to invite him to commence the OT work, as indicated in a letter dated May 7, 1913, from the secretary of the Panjab (as it was spelled at the time) auxiliary: "The New Testament edited by Mr. Bailey has been such a success that there was no doubt in the minds of the committee as to who should be invited to do further translation work in this language."⁷ Although the book of Genesis was completed in 1915 by Rev. Bailey, he was unable to continue with the translation work in Punjabi.⁸ The following year, Rev. Newton revised Genesis.⁹ After the death in 1918 of Rev. Newton, who had been involved in working on the Old Testament for more than two years, the matter of translating Scripture in Punjabi remained largely neglected until 1933. No suitable person was found to work on the translation,¹⁰ although requests were continuously made to BFBS by the Presbyterian Mission to resume translation in Punjabi.¹¹ As a result, in May 1934 a temporary revision committee for the

² Rev. Chandu Ray to members of the translation committee for Persian-Punjabi, 17 November 1949, BFBS Archives.

³ Mr. Church to Dr. Kilgour, 3 October 1912, BFBS Archives.

⁴ Literary notes of the BFBS Panjab auxiliary, September 1912, BFBS Archives.

⁵ Rev. Chandu Ray to Rev. Bradnock, 5 July 1951, BFBS Archives.

⁶ Mr. Church to BFBS in London, 16 June 1911, BFBS Archives.

⁷ Mr. Church to Dr. Kilgour, 7 May 1913, BFBS Archives.

⁸ Minutes of the Panjab auxiliary, 19 April 1915, BFBS Archives.

⁹ Mr. Church to Dr. Kilgour, 16 Feb 1916, BFBS Archives.

¹⁰ Mr. Church to Dr. Kilgour, 9 July 1918, BFBS Archives.

¹¹ Mr. Church to Dr. Kilgour, 3 December 1923, BFBS Archives.

New Testament was formed that included some notable names, such as Rev. Barkat Ullah, A. Dungwreth, A. Walker Gordon, Canon Hares, Rev. Labhu Mall, and H. F. Nesbitt. A major meeting of this revision committee took place on October 23, 1934, in Lahore, in which representatives of several mission agencies in Punjab participated.¹²

However, no progress was made during the next four years, from 1935 to 1938, as the committee could not decide on the person who could do the job. In 1939, another important committee meeting took place in which it was decided that Rev. Labhu Mall and Mr. Joshua Fazal-ud-Din be approached to take up the revision work, the former to act as chairman of the revision committee.¹³ After five years spent setting up this revision committee, no progress was made with regard to the work in Punjabi, as indicated by Rev. Krishnaswamy, secretary of the Panjab auxiliary of BFBS, in a letter dated July 26, 1943.¹⁴ The search for suitable personnel to revise the Punjabi New Testament and to initiate further OT translation work continued. In 1947, Dr. Nesbitt and Rev. Jalal-ud-Din were recommended to help with the revision work.¹⁵ Owing to their unavailability, a new revision committee was formed under the headship of Rev. Dr. Harris J. Stewart, and included Rev. Kundan Lal Nasir, Rev. Canon Jawahir Masih, Rev. Clyde Bronson Stuntz, Rev. James D. Brown, Rev. Paterson, Rev. Andrew Thakur Das, and Miss M. Sunder Singh.¹⁶

Finally, the revision of the New Testament in Punjabi was finished in 1951 by Dr. Stewart (who also served as President of the Faculty at Gordon College in Rawalpindi and Principal of the Theological Seminary and Training Center in Gujranwala), Mr. Feroz Khan Tarar (a Muslim convert who authored a book in Urdu on the moral theology of Christianity), and Rev. Qadir Bakhsh. It was hoped that the OT work would make similarly steady progress under the supervision of Dr. Stewart.¹⁷ However, no further translation work was done in Punjabi after 1951. Dr. Stewart returned to the United States after serving in India for many years, while Rev. Bakhsh passed away.¹⁸ During the next eighteen years, no meeting or discussion took place on Scripture translation in Punjabi. In 1970, Dr. Daskawie was proposed as a valuable person for future translation work in Punjabi, and the following year

¹² Mr. Church to Dr. Kilgour, 3 December 1923, BFBS Archives.

¹³ Mr. Church, Secretary Panjab auxiliary, 13 February 1940, BFBS Archives.

¹⁴ Rev. Krishnaswamy, Secretary Panjab auxiliary, 26 June 1943, BFBS Archives.

¹⁵ Minutes of the general committee meeting held on 16 April 1947 in Lahore, BFBS Archives.

¹⁶ Mr. Chandu Ray, Secretary Panjab auxiliary, 17 November 1947, BFBS Archives.

¹⁷ Mr. Chandu Ray to Rev. Bradnock, 31 July 1951, BFBS Archives.

¹⁸ Mr. Chandu Ray to Rev. Bradnock, 14 October 1955, BFBS Archives.

Mr. Joshua Fazal-ud-Din was recommended for the same task, but no practical steps were taken in this regard.¹⁹

At present, the Punjabi New Testament in Persian script is not available in print form for those interested in reading it. However, it is accessible online and can be downloaded for free.²⁰ The Academy of the Punjab in North America (APNA), an organization for the promotion of Punjabi language, literature, and culture, has made it available as well.²¹ The complete Bible in Persian Punjabi has not been produced thus far. A few years ago, Ralph Baron, owner of a website titled “Bible in Punjabi,” indicated in 2016 that the Pakistan Bible Society (PBS) was raising funds to produce the Punjabi Bible.²² Currently, PBS is working on the New Testament, to be published with minor revisions to the 1952 edition.²³

One might wonder why there has been such a prolonged delay in revising the Christian Scriptures in Punjabi. The complex sociolinguistic setting and the Islamic context of Pakistan have multifaceted aspects, and a separate article is needed to discuss them comprehensively. In another article I hope to investigate the status of the Punjabi language in Pakistan, the negative attitude toward the Punjabi language, the decision not to revise the Christian Scriptures, and the unavailability of the whole Bible in Punjabi, despite the fact that Punjabi is the first language of the majority of Pakistan’s population and a vast majority of the Christians in Pakistan speak Punjabi as their first language. I would also like to examine the significance of exploring culturally appropriate styles for Scripture translation in an oral culture, and the need for serious efforts to be made in order to bring positivity to Punjabi as a mother-tongue.

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¹⁹ Mr. Gauhar Masih, Secretary of the West Pakistan Bible Society, to Rev. Wootton of BFBS, 25 February 1970, BFBS Archives.

²⁰ Archive website: <https://archive.org/details/newtestamentpers00brit/page/n4/mode/2up>.

²¹ Academy of the Punjab in North America website: <http://apnaorg.com/navaanehad-nama/index.php?fldr=book>.

²² “Bible in Punjabi” website maintained by Ralph Baron: <https://sites.google.com/site/bibleinpunjabi/project-updates/pakistanbiblesociety>.

²³ The revision was published in late 2020, after this article was accepted. –Ed.

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Abbreviations

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| BFBS Archive | Cambridge University Library: British and Foreign Bible Society's Library, BFBS Archives (in References) |
| PBS | Pakistan Bible Society |