Bridging religious divides through translation

by Nicola Holzapfel

The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament were first translated into Arabic in the 8th century. Ronny Vollandt, Professor of Jewish Studies at LMU’s Institute of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, is studying this little known phase in the dissemination of the Scriptures.

Every day Ronny Vollandt’s research takes him back to the time when Islam had expanded far beyond the bounds of the Arabian Peninsula to reach the Atlantic shores and the borders of China. The conquest of this vast territory, which began in the 7th century, brought Muslims of Arabia into contact with Jewish and Christian communities of the Mediterranean littoral and established Arabic as the new language of administration in the region. Christians and Jews increasingly adopted Arabic as their everyday language, gradually leaving behind their native modes of expression. As a result, they could no longer understand the Bible either in the original Hebrew or in the Greek of the previously dominant Byzantine Empire.

“So Jews, Christians and Samaritans, the communities referred to in the Quran as the ahl al-kitāb – the Peoples of the Book – began to produce Arabic versions of their religious texts,” Professor Vollandt explains. The oldest of these manuscripts dates from the 8th century. Strikingly, many of these translations were not written in Arabic letters, but in the translators’ own scripts. “In this period, the relationship between the three religions undergoes a drastic shift. The Muslims are now in the majority, having made many converts among both Jews and Christians. Thus, the Arabic versions of their holy books were not intended just to make the texts accessible to all or to conserve their own traditions. They also had a defensive purpose – to counter some of the pressure placed upon non-Muslim communities to convert to Islam.”

Vollandt holds the Professorship of Jewish Studies at the Institute for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at LMU. As Joint Coordinator of the project “Biblia Arabica: The Bible in Arabic Among Jews, Christians and Muslims,” he is now engaged in studying a large number of extant Arabic translations of this era's Biblical texts, which have long been neglected by scholars.

Crossing religious boundaries

The most famous of these translations is the work of Saadia Gaon (882-942) who was born in Egypt and became one of the most outstanding scholars of his time. Around the year 920 he began to translate large portions of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic using Hebrew characters, and his version of the text achieved canonical status among the Jewish communities of the Near East, North Africa and Spain. At some later point, Gaon’s version was transcribed into Arabic script. This was a crucial turning point in its transmission, for it made the text accessible to Christians, who helped to propagate it further. Muslim authors also began to refer to Gaon’s translation. “This development shows how easy it was for Jewish texts to find their way into Christian and Muslim contexts. All one had to do was use a different script,” Vollandt points out. Much later, in the 17th century, a version of Gaon’s translation in Arabic script was included in the Paris Polyglot Bible, a multilingual printed version of the Biblical text.

“These Arabic translations very often found their way across religious divides and, in this sense, the Arabic Bible can be regarded as an important intersection among religions. The translations were important for adherents of all three monotheistic creeds, and therefore occupy a unique position,” Vollandt explains. Muslim scholars also took note of the Arabic version of the Scriptures. “Muslims consider both the Old and the New Testaments to be divinely inspired (though corrupted) texts, which are transcended by the text of the Quran. In its own terms, the Quran is the ultimate and most perfect expression of a progressive sequence of divine revelations. Muslims have always respected and
exhibited an interest in Biblical texts, although this relationship can at best be described as ambivalent. However, there are many instances in which Muslim scholars have drawn on the Bible for support of their own theological positions or used it polemically in the context of interreligious disputation.”

The Bible’s influence on the Quran

One other remarkable feature of the Biblical tradition in Arabic is the number and diversity of versions that have come down to us. Every religious community that evolved in the Near East has its own series of Scriptural translations, whether these versions are based on the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint, the Syriac Peshitta, the Coptic Bible or the Latin Vulgate. The Biblia Arabica project also hopes to elucidate the historical and cultural backgrounds in which the different versions emerged, to dissect the motives of translators belonging to different religious traditions and to trace how they may have influenced one another.

“The big question sparking controversy is whether or not the very first Arabic Bible predates the emergence of Islam. The Quran includes many Biblical narratives, of which the Joseph Sura is the longest. But the figure of Moses is also quite prominent,” says Vollandt. When might Muslims first have gained access to an Arabic translation of the Jewish Scriptures, and might such a work have had an influence on the canonical text of the Quran? “From what we know so far, we assume that Arabic versions of Biblical texts were transmitted orally in some form, but that no written translation of the Bible into Arabic existed in Islam’s earliest phase. Moreover, subsequent translations seem to have been made principally to serve the internal needs of Jewish and Christian congregations.” Ronny Vollandt’s own work focuses on translations of the Pentateuch, the five Mosaic books of the Bible. In early Arabic versions of these books, the language is very reminiscent of that used in the Quran. In one of these manuscripts (now in the Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula; see Fig. 1) the translator has used exactly the same version of a specific passage in the Joseph narrative as is found in the Quran. “That is, of course no accident. Christians could point to this passage and argue that everything in the Quran had already been revealed to their own predecessors. This is one example of the role apologetics played in the various translations,” says Vollandt.

Fig. 2: This trilingual fragment of the Book of Genesis (22:1-7, 22:23-23:8) comes from a trove found in the genizah (a storeroom in which texts of a liturgical nature were ritually deposited, together with secular documents written in Hebrew) of the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. The hierarchical arrangement of the Hebrew original and the Aramaic (Targum Onqelos) and Arabic (Saadiah Gaon) translations is reflected by the differing ways of indicating vocalization and the use of differing character sizes and writing styles. Source: Cambridge University Library

Fig. 3: In this manuscript, written on parchment, the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch appears on the right, with the parallel version in Arabic inscribed in the left column. The manuscript belonged to the Samaritan community (which broke away from Orthodox Judaism around 400 BCE). Note that both the Hebrew text and the Arabic translation are written in the Samaritan alphabet. Source: Berlin State Library
The translation of the Pentateuch into Arabic that is thought to be the oldest also belongs to St Catherine’s, one of the most ancient Christian monasteries in existence. Indeed, the monastery’s library possesses so many Biblical texts in Arabic that researchers are still cataloguing the collection, and Ronny Vollandt is confident that unknown translations remain to be discovered. In the course of the project, he and his colleagues hope to catalog and describe the most important Arabic translations, which are held by monasteries in the Near East and in research libraries scattered around the globe, and to prepare a comprehensive bibliography of the Arabic Bible.

Late pioneers

“These Arabic versions have long been ignored by researchers, because they are significantly younger than, for example, the Greek translations which appeared in the Classical Age. In addition, many are translations of translations, so that they have no intrinsic value from the standpoint of the Bible’s textual history or Biblical exegesis,” Ronny Vollandt explains. For their part, scholars of Arabic have traditionally concentrated on the literature of the Muslim community. The significance of Arabic translations of Scripture has only become apparent thanks to research done in recent years. “Translations of the Bible into Arabic are part of the exegetical traditions of Jewish and various Christian religions in the early centuries of Islam, and, as such, they form an integral part of their cultural heritage,” says Vollandt. In addition, they serve as witnesses to an era in which the Bible provided the basis for a unique series of cultural and intellectual exchanges between scholars representing all three monotheistic religions.