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## IN THIS ISSUE:

CHRISTIAN ARABIC IN BIBLE TRANSLATION: A PROBLEM FOR MUSLIM  
EVANGELIZATION, by Abu Yahya.  
PROJECT SUNRISE, by David Owen  
THE PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE IN THE QUR'AN, by M.B.  
BOOK REVIEW: Sacred Rage: the Wrath of Militant Islam,  
by Robin Wright

**FEEDBACK REQUEST:** Once again we feature two articles on the same subject: Arabic Bible Translations for Muslim evangelization. The first looks at the impact of Christian Arabic on Christian-Muslim communication, and comes up with some thought-provoking conclusions. The second briefly describes a special gospel-harmony type book on the life of Christ that will hopefully communicate with Muslims. In view of the controversial nature of the subject I am soliciting responses from select individuals and welcome feedback from any reader. These will be featured in a future issue. Ed.

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**CHRISTIAN ARABIC IN BIBLE TRANSLATION:**

**A PROBLEM FOR MUSLIM EVANGELIZATION**

By Abu Yahya

The problem which is the subject of this article is the fact that although the Christian and Muslim communities of the Middle East both speak Arabic, they use very different religious languages. This problem is not, of course, unique to the Arabic language, but more or less afflicts all Christian-Muslim communication, whatever the language. As Professor Ali Merad, an Algerian Muslim teaching in France, points out,

In the last analysis, the reasons for incomprehension are rooted in the idiosyncrasy and the ambiguity of language more than in the idiosyncrasy of religious experience. It is a fact that the language of faith of Christians has not always had the same sound to Muslims. The result is misunderstandings and simplistic reductions of the order of: Naṣāra = Kuffār = Muṣṣrikūn, i.e. Christians = unbelievers = polytheists.  
. . .

Our respective cultural traditions, elaborated separately and in ignorance of one another, have ended up raising between us barriers of concepts, of ideas, and of mental habits which are apparently insurmountable. Our theological language, with its increasing and complex technicality, with its heavy conceptual and emotional baggage, due to the accumulation of our cultural acquisitions and of our affective and religious experiences, is too often a source of ambiguity and of incomprehension. (1975:7)

Nevertheless, Christian Arabic presents a special challenge to Christian-Muslim communication. This is due not only to differences of worldview between the two communities, but also to the distinctive usage of the minority Christian community. We want to look at this phenomenon, especially in the history of Bible translation into Arabic, and at its consequences for Muslim evangelization.

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Roots of the Communication Gap

To understand the phenomenon we need to take a step back into history and look at its roots. To begin with, it should be noted that a large number of Biblical names and terms have been borrowed by the Qur'an. When they passed into Arabic, for the most part indirectly through the Syriac which is a sister to Arabic (Jeffery 1938:12ff), some of these names and terms underwent slight modification but still have essentially the same form. A few, however, such as <sup>ḥ</sup>Ṭsa, Zabūr and Yaḥya, are changed phonetically from their Biblical forms, although it is clear from the context that the person, place or object signified is the same--in this case Jesus, the Psalms and John the Baptist.

A few names have undergone minor semantic change (e.g. "Hāmān" becomes a wazir of Pharaoh, and "Miriam" the mother of Jesus is identified with the sister of Moses); such changes do not however seriously hamper communication because worldview is not involved directly. The most important semantic changes of Biblical names and terms, from the standpoint of the communication of the gospel, are those that have been introduced under the impact of the Islamic worldview. In some cases, the different doctrinal content which they receive in the Qur'an has resulted in a transformation of meaning that affects how Muslims understand and respond to the Biblical message itself.

At this point, let us pause to clarify the distinction between doctrinal content (or "value") and meaning (and between doctrinal change and semantic change), because the two are often confused (de Saussure 1959:114ff). The distinction can be illustrated by the Qur'anic forms <sup>ḥ</sup>Ṭsa (عيسى) and Injīl (انجيل). Although the form <sup>ḥ</sup>Ṭsa is far removed phonetically from the Biblical form "Iésous" (Heb. = Yashūa<sup>ḥ</sup>) and on crucial points has a different doctrinal content, it has exactly the same meaning: both terms denote "the son of Mary." Christian-Muslim communication is not therefore affected by the change of form, even though the two communities have different doctrines of Christ. By contrast, the form Injīl, derived from the Greek word "evangelion," has undergone a significant change of meaning in the Islamic context. It no longer means, as in the New Testament, the "good news" about Jesus Christ, or, by extension, a writing about his life, death and resurrection, but rather a book revealed to Jesus in the same way the Qur'an is thought to be revealed to Muham-

mad. Christian-Muslim communication is affected because, although the two communities use exactly the same form, each gives it significantly different meanings. It is this kind of change, and not the phonetic or doctrinal variations of the Qur'an per se, which is the root of the problem of Christian-Muslim communication.

To return to our historical retrospection, when the Christian communities of the Near East were arabicized and the Bible was translated into Arabic, the complex situation just described was further complicated by their widespread adoption of Syriac religious terminology and usage. As we saw above, quite a few Syriac forms of Biblical names had previously found their way into the Qur'an and Arabic usage, so there was already a fund of terms used in common. When however the Qur'anic form of the name was different (e.g. <sup>C</sup>Īsa and the like), they used the Syriac form instead. In other words, the criterion for acceptance was the term's form rather than its meaning. In addition, they borrowed some religious terms from the Syriac instead of using Arabic ones; however, although many Syriac forms are similar to Arabic forms, the meanings are often different. When these differing usages are combined with the semantic changes already mentioned, the net result is that Christian Arabic is often either not understood or taken in a sense other than intended. In view of the fact that Arabic-speaking "Christians" of all kinds constitute only about 6% of the total population in the Arab world, varying from about 17% in Egypt to well under 1% in most of the countries, it is clear why Christian Arabic constitutes a problem for Christian-Muslim communication.

#### The Arabic Translations of the Bible

This tradition has been perpetuated in Bible translation into Arabic, which is our special interest here. When the early missionaries translated the Bible into Arabic in the nineteenth century, the record shows that the choice fell on this Syriac based religious language, and that distinctive Qur'anic forms of Biblical names, as well as Qur'anic idiom and literary style, were studiously avoided. I am referring here mainly to the Smith-Van Dyck Version (S-VD) of 1865, the standard Bible of the Protestant churches (Jessup 1910:75, Thompson 1956, Saliba 1975).

To cite just a few examples of Syrianisms I have come across, in addition to the Biblical names used by both

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communities; the S-VD uses the distinctive Syriac forms of Biblical personal and place names, such as "Yasū<sup>C</sup>" and "Urshalīm" (Jerusalem), Syriac religious terms such as "al-Aāb" (آلآ), meaning "the Father" [with madda instead of the Arabic hamza], and the ecclesiastical terms for "bishop", "elder", "deacon" and the like. Some of these are unknown to Muslims, while others, such as the term "nāmūs" (law) and the verb "C<sup>a</sup>mada and its derived forms (to immerse/baptize, baptism), exist in Arabic but with other meanings.

The more recent Today's Arabic Version (TAV) New Testament of the Bible Societies and the Living Arabic New Testament (LANT) of Living Bibles International have corrected the more serious problems of the S-VD and are much more readable. They have replaced obscure terms with others which are more common: e.g. the confusing term "nāmūs" is replaced by the Islamic term "shariah". They have simplified the sentence structure, adopting a simple newspaper style Arabic aimed at reaching the common man. However they still use most of the old Syriac names and terms in the Christian Arabic tradition, and generally avoid Qur'anic idiom and style. Despite the improvements, probably a majority of Arabic-speaking Christians still prefer the S-VD. Many people oppose using any other translation with Muslims for fear that to do so would add weight to the Muslim charge of "taḥrīf" (corruption of the Bible).

#### Some Conclusions

This brings us to several conclusions which, it seems to me, flow from these facts. It is apparent, first of all, that despite real improvements in the more recent translations, the Arabic Versions of the Bible or the New Testament available to us for Muslim evangelization do not really come to grips with the problem of Christian-Muslim communication. Indeed, one must say that they are part of the problem. Despite good intentions, the language used makes them suitable only for use among the Christian communities of the Middle East.

Please note that I am NOT saying that Muslims cannot be won to Christ using translations in the Christian Arabic tradition. Neither am I saying that it is possible to make a "dynamic equivalence" translation which will completely eliminate Muslim misinterpretation, or to find purely linguistic solutions to the "scandal" of Christian faith.

Obviously, the Holy Spirit can and has used these translations to reach Muslims, and will continue to do so. There are moreover key theological terms--such as "son of God"--for which we will never find a "dynamic equivalent" capable of overcoming the Muslim's objections. This does not however mean that we do not have a problem. Neither does it change the fact that these translations often raise unnecessary barriers in the way of Muslims coming to Christ.

The second conclusion I draw from these facts is that, from the linguistic standpoint, Christian religious Arabic should be considered a distinct language, much as the various dialects of the Arab World are considered to be distinct languages. It has a distinctive vocabulary and a distinctive phraseology and style, and a long social tradition behind it. The social and psychological conditions for the distinctiveness of Christian Arabic are readily apparent. Islam organizes society on the basis of religion, segregating non-Muslims from the Islamic "Ummah" into separate "Millahs" or subject communities. Because this situation is generally oppressive to the minorities, the Arab-Christian community has responded by raising its own social barriers between itself and the Muslim community to try to protect itself against the overbearing pressure and inroads of the majority. I would suggest that the avoidance of anything Qur'anic and the use of a distinctive (Syriac based) language is one such barrier.

This conclusion would appear to be corroborated by an observation Hamilton Gibb makes about the revival of Arabic literature in the nineteenth century. Gibb observes that even though Syrian Christians (including several involved in the S-VD translation) made a significant contribution to the revival of Arabic literature, the kind of in-depth revival that actually took place could only come from the Muslim majority because the Christians had been cut off from its literary "mainsprings" in their formative years (1962:260-261). In other words, the gap between their literary models and those of the Muslim community were too great for them to bridge.

I want it to be abundantly clear that these remarks are not intended as a criticism of Arab Christianity. I appreciate the delicate situation in which Arab Christians find themselves, and fully sympathize with the need to protect themselves. My point is simply to underline the need to recognize the situation as it is and to acknowledge Chris-

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tian Arabic to be a distinct language. If this conclusion is correct, and I believe that it is, then it has significant implications for Bible translation into Arabic. For well over 135 years, the assumption that one Arabic translation can do for reaching both Christians and Muslims has been one of the guiding principles of Arabic Bible translation. What this has meant in practice, however, is that Arabic translations have invariably been in the Christian Arabic tradition, thereby perpetuating the communication gap.

I am therefore proposing, finally, that in addition to the Arabic translations that were made for the Christian communities of the Middle East, the effort to plant the church in Islamic society requires an Arabic Bible, or at least a New Testament, of Islamic expression. Generally speaking, such a translation should use the Qur'anic forms of Biblical names the meanings of which have not been changed, including those which differ from the forms found in the present Arabic Bible, as well as Qur'anic religious and theological terms which carry meanings close to Biblical meanings, and Qur'anic literary style. If it is seriously to come to grips with the communication problem that exists, I believe that such a translation will need to be based on a broad knowledge of the semantics of Qur'anic language (and of Islamic language in general). A comparative study of the "semantic fields" of Qur'anic and Biblical language, using modern tools of semantic and linguistic research, should prove most useful here. In other words, I am not saying that the Christian may spout Qur'anic forms in witness to Muslims without regard for their semantic fields in the Islamic context. There is too much of that already, which is one of the reasons for the present problem in Christian-Muslim communication. On the other hand, a translation of Islamic expression properly done could be an important first step toward alleviating the problem.

I recognize that this proposal is controversial, and that the argument has been abridged and tightly reasoned, and sometimes the intervening steps skipped over, because of space limitations. I welcome feedback of any kind, both pro and con, on any point, but would ask you to explain your reasons and give me your evidence. This will help us in reevaluating the article and determining what arguments might need correction and/or modification.

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## PROJECT SUNRISE

by David Owen

Project Sunrise is an attempt to move beyond the segregating tradition of ecclesiastical styled Bible translations in the Arab world. Through the centuries of Christian-Muslim encounter, we have presented to our Muslim friends a translation of Holy Scripture that has stubbornly circumvented the rich style of religious language found in Islamic literature. These Bible translations have carefully avoided virtually all Islamic theological terminology and have employed an artificial style of Arabic that has been either fully colloquial, if that was the intended style, nor literary if that was their goal. The result has been a long tradition of colorless, ecclesiastical Bibles, theologically sterilized from Islamic influence which was prejudicedly assumed by the Church to be corrosive and unfit as a vehicle for Biblical meaning. All this for the sake of "faithfulness to the original" and the "purity of the Gospel."

There has always been a trickle of Muslims who have come to discover the living Messiah through ecclesiastical translations. No one can deny this fact. Neither can we deny that this translation style has developed into a unique and self-justifying body of Arabic-Christian literature that has been appropriate for internal use among the various Arab-Christian communities in the Middle East. But where does this leave the Muslim? Have we not left him to flounder through a sea of language that to him is both unfamiliar and unexpressive in order to find the Pearl of great price? Is the Lord of the Harvest satisfied with only this trickle of believers who have come to Him? Can this handful of followers of Christ from a Muslim background organize into indigenous fellowships and build a liturgy, community life and witness that will have a truly dynamic impact on their society while still maintaining this sterilized tradition of Bible translation as their cornerstone?

Project Sunrise grew out of a struggle with these questions and is hoping to provide the Body of Christ with a presentation of scripture for Muslim readers that will use idiomatic, literary Arabic of the highest quality, but free of obsolete and difficult expressions. It will employ Qur'anic vocabulary and phrasing in a careful interweaving of

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language and style into the gospel text similar to the way Old Testament Hebrew was utilized in the writing of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. We are initiating this new style of Arabic translation by means of a thirty chapter Gospel harmony, using all the material from the four canonical Gospels joined in approximate chronological order. This has been under preparation for the past several years and will be printed in 1987. If this trial project proves effective, an entire New Testament or Old Testament employing the same style could be a next step.

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### THE PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE IN THE QUR'AN

by M.B. (North Africa)

If we asked the question the lawyer put to Jesus, "What must I do to receive eternal life?" how would the Qur'an answer it?

Those that believe and do deeds of righteousness -- those are the inhabitants of Paradise, there they shall dwell forever. (2:75)

So eternal life is granted to the one who: 1) believes and 2) does good.

A more complete definition of faith and goodness comes at 2:172:

True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen and orphans, the needy, the traveller, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms.

### PARADISE, THE ULTIMATE GOAL

Life in Paradise is described in terms of the enjoyment of well-watered gardens, full of natural produce and young women as spouses (2:23). There is shade from the sun (13:35). The believer will rest on couches. He will be free from sickness (37:40). Conversation will be purposeful with no "idle talk". No cause of sin will be found

there (52:17). Above all the believer will live in security (76:10).

The overall impression is one of youthfulness and relaxation. The absence of sickness, sin and death is also very attractive. Certainly life in Paradise is worth aiming for. Very little is said of God in Paradise: 33:42 describes believers meeting God on the day of reckoning; 10:10 offers this description of Muslims worshipping in Paradise:

Their cry therein -- Glory to thee, O God; their greeting -- Peace -- and their cry ends -- Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all being.

#### PARADISE IS PROMISED

Almost 50 times in the Qur'an comes the promise of Eternal Life. The word used is "wa<sup>c</sup>d" ( و اِدّ = promise), found 29 times as a noun and 19 times as a verb. Wa<sup>c</sup>d implies solid commitment, binding agreement. God's word is as firm as his character is unshakeable. Here are two examples. First in the noun form from 4:121:

Those that believe and do deeds of righteousness, them We shall admit to gardens underneath which rivers flow, therein dwelling forever and ever: God's promise in truth, and who is truer in speech than God?

Then in a verbal form from 47:16:

This is the similitude of Paradise which the godfearing have been promised: there are rivers of water unstaling, rivers of milk unchanging in flavour, and rivers of wine -- a delight to the drinkers, rivers too of honey purified.

In no case is the promise revoked. God's commitment can be depended on completely. Here is the strength of the Qur'an. It holds out a final destiny that no man can take away or disturb. It puts the frailty of this life into an eternal perspective. There need be no bar to the achievement of perfection in the next life.

#### WHO CAN ENTER PARADISE?

If Paradise is a rich experience that draws and attracts, who then will gain entry to those gardens? The answer lies

in the opening quotation from 2:75. The inhabitants of Paradise are believers and doers of righteousness. What becomes clear after a study of God's promise of Eternal Life in the Qur'an is that Paradise is only granted when there is proof of performance. A Muslim must demonstrate faith and goodness. He has to become qualified for the promise.

#### ETERNAL LIFE A REWARD FOR FAITH

Faith in God involves forsaking idols according to 2:257. Abraham's faith illustrates to all Muslims what believing in God means.

I have turned my face to Him who originated the heavens and the earth, a move of pure faith. I am not of the idolaters. (6:79)

So the conversion of Abraham from polytheism to monotheism stands as a definition of faith for all who follow him. But faith has the dimension of trust too. And trust will be shaken by the circumstances of life.

"Do you suppose," asks the Judge of all men on the Day of Reckoning, "you should enter paradise without God know (sic) who of you have struggled and who are patient?" (3:135). It is necessary for the believer to persevere to the end.

O believers, what is amiss with you, that when it is said to you, 'Go forth in the way of God,' you sink down heavily to the ground? Are you so content with this present life, rather than the world to come? Yet the enjoyment of this present life, compared with the world to come, is a little thing. (9:38)

It is only the one who endures in trust that can make God his "friend" (waly, ولي literally "one who is close") 5:60.

So Paradise turns into a well earned rest for the weary pilgrim. The unshakeable promise of God now depends on the unmovable faith of the Muslim.

#### PARADISE A REWARD FOR DOING GOOD

The word "as-saalihaat" (الصالحات) good deeds) is used to

sum up a number of good actions. It means "the deeds of righteousness" and is used in the context of the promise of Eternal Life.

The first area of goodness is kindness. A Muslim ought to give of his wealth to family and others in need such as the homeless, the unemployed and the one who is travelling and in need of food and shelter (2:76). What is immediately obvious here is that the Qur'an sets no minimum or maximum limit to the kindness required. There is no way of determining from the Qur'an itself how much charity God requires to admit a Muslim to Paradise.

The second kind of goodness is giving alms. This is quite separate from kindness and was a form of taxation in the early Islamic community.

Thirdly there are the prayers. The Qur'an prescribes the times when the prayers must be performed.

Before the rising of the sun, and before its setting, and ... in the watches of the night and at the ends of the day: haply thou wilt be well-pleasing. (20:130)

Here there is more certainly about the requirement to attain Paradise.

Fourthly, God prescribed fasting as a good work in 2:179 and 33:35:

Men who fast and women who fast, ... for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty wage (33:35).

Fortunately for the Muslim, fasting is laid out very clearly so there is no doubt about his duty.

But less clear is the necessity of a good character. That good works cannot be done with a hard heart is confirmed by 43:23

I do not ask of you a wage for this [Paradise] except love for the kinsfolk.

So good works must issue from a good person who has good intentions behind his good deeds. In 2:76 God commanded the Children of Israel (and by implication all Muslims) to "speak good to men". Actions have to be matched by speech.

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SEEDBED I/4 p. 62

There is no room for hypocrisy in the Qur'an's understanding of "the good deeds".

#### THE WAGE IS ETERNAL LIFE

The word "ajr" ( اجر reward, wage) is used on significant occasions in the Qur'an in the context of Paradise. Following are two examples.

Those who believe and do deeds of righteousness and perform the prayer and pay the alms -- their wage (ajr) awaits them with their Lord. (2:277)

But as for the believers, who do deeds of righteousness, He will pay them in full their wages. (3:50)

The rate of pay is not specified; 18:29 says that God does not leave "to waste the wage of him who does good works." Just how much a believer has to do to earn Paradise is not clear. There are suggestions that good works can offset evil deeds.

God has promised those that believe, and do deeds of righteousness: they shall have forgiveness and a mighty wage. (5:9 and other passages)

The appearance is given here that a big enough credit can write off a small debit. This is implied in the following passage.

We shall surely acquit them of their evil deeds, and shall recompense them the best of what they were doing. (29:6)

How the scales balance is left to the imagination. Nowhere is any indication given of how God will square a Muslim's evil deeds with his good works.

#### GOD'S PROMISE -- A MUSLIM'S ANXIETY

I have met three young men who have confided in me their anxiety about Eternal Life. They were not sure how they could be certain of gaining Paradise. Could their good works cancel out their deeds? Sin both as act and intention posed a serious problem for them. They were attracted to Christian radio broadcasts because Jesus was presented as one who removes sin and makes a man good in God's sight.

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All three were willing to accept that Jesus died a sacrificial death on the cross for their sin. Two of them would not go on to see Jesus as equal with God and they couldn't imagine worshipping Jesus. Nevertheless they were reached at the point of need. The gospel has begun to work positively because Jesus provides assurance which Islam does not. The third young man has been able to see a connection between the sacrifice of Jesus and his perfection. He has no difficulty viewing Jesus as having the same status and nature as God. He has already begun to worship Jesus as God.

The nature of the gospel is the gift of God. God makes promises too in the Bible. But He promises Eternal Life to the one who receives Jesus (John 1:12; 3:16; I John 5:11, 20). This language may be foreign to the Qur'an but it matches perfectly the unfulfilled longing in the heart of a Muslim.

Qur'anic quotations are from The Koran Interpreted. Trans. A. J. Arberry, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

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## BOOK REVIEW

Robin Wright. Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam. NY: Linden Press / Simon & Schuster, 1985. \$17.95.  
Reviewer: A. J. W.

Anthony Lewis of the New York Times says this book is "must" reading for all who want to understand the fanatical violence of the Middle East. Its jacket further claims that the rise of fundamentalist Islam, and particularly the Shia expression of it in Iran, is the most important event in the Middle East since the founding of Israel. Wright, a veteran foreign correspondent who lived four years in Beirut during the early 1980s, presents the growth and development of militant Islam and the terrorism that accompanied it from that viewpoint. The book reads very much like fifty Time magazines rolled into one. Starting with the "turning point of Iran," we are led through the major countries of the Arab world as seen through the eyes of revived Islam today.

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