



BIBLE IV. MIDDLE PERSIAN TRANSLATIONS

BIBLE

iv. Middle Persian Translations of the Bible

We have knowledge of Bible translations into Middle Persian at least from the fifth century A.D. onwards. Such versions may have been used by Persian adherents to Christianity, as well as by members of the Jewish communities of Iran. We have of course at this stage no way of telling what was the scope of this translation activity. It may be assumed that the Christians had more recourse to Middle Persian Bible versions than did the Jews, for whom the Hebrew original was always the only one that counted, and the translation was only meant to be used as an aid in understanding the text for people whose knowledge of Hebrew was limited. The Christians of Iran were dependent largely on the Syriac versions of the Bible, but the activity of creating new versions in the current vernacular must have been part of the missionary effort of Christians. Thus Theodoret, in the fifth century, mentions a translation of the Bible into the language of the Persians alongside with those of the Romans, Egyptians, Armenians, Scythians, and Sauromatians (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 83, Paris, 1859, cols. 947f.; quoted by Munk, p. 65 n. 2; Asmussen and Paper, p. 5). The existence of Iranian language translations of the Book of Esther in use among Jews is indicated by a question which is raised in the Talmud as to whether it is permissible to recite the text of the



Book of Esther on the festival of Purim in one of the following languages: Greek, Coptic, Elamite, or Median (Bavli Megilla 18a). The meaning of the last two language designations is uncertain, but they seem to refer to two varieties of Iranian. “Elamite” and “Median” could not have meant in the third or fourth century a.d. the ancient languages which used to carry these labels and which had long ceased to exist by this time but local varieties of the current Iranian language, presumably Persian. One may tentatively infer from this discussion that long before the Islamic period the text of the Book of Esther had apparently been translated into local Jewish dialects in the Iranian area.

The only extant Middle Persian Bible version is represented by fragments of a translation of the Psalms found at the ruin of the Nestorian monastery at Bulayiq near Turfan. Most of Psalms 94-99, 118, and 121-36 are contained in these fragments. The script is an early form of the cursive Pahlavi script (see Nyberg, *Manual* I, p. 129). The translation is close and literal and the language presents certain difficulties of interpretation. The date of the translation is not certain. The manuscript itself cannot be older than the sixth century since it contains liturgical additions, canons, composed in Syriac by Mār Ābā in this century. However, the language and orthography of the translation of the Psalms themselves may point to a much earlier date (Skjærvø, p. 179). The text was first discussed by Andreas (1910, pp. 869-72). It was then edited by Andreas and Barr (1933) with translation, glossary, and facsimiles. An up-to-date edition is a desideratum.

The existence of other Sasanian versions of biblical texts may be inferred from quotations contained in the Middle Persian apologetic work *Škand-gumānīg wizār* by the ninth-century author Mardān Farrox, son of Ohrmazddād. In the course of his polemic against Judaism and Christianity the author quotes extensively from the Bible, but unfortunately these quotations contain few clues to allow further identification of the translation (see de Menasce, pp. 177f.).

See also [PAHLAVI PSALTER](#).



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