



BIBLE VII. PERSIAN TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

BIBLE

vii. Persian Translations of the Bible

The following parts of the Bible have been translated into Persian: the Pentateuch (Pers. *Tawrāt*, Ar. *Tawrāh*, Heb. *Tōrāh*), the books of the prophets (Pers. and Ar. *anbiā'*, Heb. *nabūm*), and the writings (Heb. *ketūbīm*), including the Psalms (Pers. *zabur*; Ar. *mazāmir*; Heb. *mīzmōr*), from the Hebrew, collectively titled by Christians as the Old Testament (Pers. and Ar. *'Ahd-e 'atiq*); the Deuterocanonical books (Pers. *ketābhā-ye qānuni t̄āni* and *apokrifā-ye 'Ahd-e 'atiq*); and the Gospels (Pers. and Ar. *anājil*, sing. *enjl*, Gk. *euangélion*) and other writings in Greek, collectively known as the New Testament (Pers. and Ar. *'Ahd-e jadid*).

The earliest reference to a Persian translation is in the 4th century CE. John Chrysostom (fl. 391), patriarch of Constantinople, noted that the “doctrines of Christ” had been translated into the languages of the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Indians, the Persians, and the Ethiopians (*Homily on John*, in Migne, LIX, col. 32). In the 5th century, Theodoret, bishop of Cyr, wrote that the Persians venerated the writings of the Christian apostles and evangelists as having come down from heaven (*Graecarum affectionum curatio* IX.936, in Migne, LXXXIII, col. 1045c). These references in themselves, however, do not



establish the existence of a Bible translation. More concrete evidence comes from an archeological find.

Secondary Persian translations from Syriac before the 9th/15th century. Manuscript fragments discovered in the ruins of a Nestorian monastery at [Bulayīq](#) near Turfan in Xinjiang (Chinese Turkistan) give evidence to an early Middle Persian translation of the Psalms, written in an archaic form of the Book Pahlavi script. This so-called [Pahlavi Psalter](#) can be dated to the 4th or 5th centuries CE, although the manuscript itself may be younger (see iv, above). It contains canons composed by Mār Abā I after about 550 CE. The translator may be Ma'na of Shiraz, a 5th-century teacher and possibly a bishop who was associated with Mār Abā I and translated some of the Church Fathers from [Syriac](#) into Persian (Thomas, p. 39). The earliest Christian communities in Iran were presumably founded by Syriac speakers, and the first Persian translations of the Bible were made from Syriac translations. The earliest known translation into New Persian is a 9th or 10th-century fragmentary double page with parallel Syriac and Persian translations of the Psalms, also discovered at Bulayīq, that contains Psalms 146:5-147:7 according to the arrangement of the Syriac *Pešīṭṭā*, corresponding to Psalm 147:5-18 in the Masoretic text (Müller; Sundermann). The Persian is written in the Sogdian variant of the Syriac Estrangelo script (Sims-Williams, p. 51). These fragments from Bulayīq are important for the history of Syriac translations and Persian language studies.

The earliest surviving Persian translation of the four Gospels was also based on a Syriac original. It is a harmony of the four Gospels translated in the 7th/13th century by Iwannis 'Ezz-al-Din Moḥammad of Tabriz, probably an Armenian (Gulbenkian, 1980, pp. 58-59). Though the translator wrote that he had made several copies, the sole existing manuscript is a copy made in 954/1547 by the Jacobite priest Ebrāhim b. Šammās 'Abd-Allāh in Ḥeṣn Kayfā (modern Hasankeyf on the Tigris in Turkey). Scholars originally thought this text was a translation of Tatian's *Diatesseron*, a 2nd-century harmony of the four Gospels translated from Greek into Syriac. Later scholarship has determined that it was translated from a different Syriac text, though retaining many readings from Tatian (Metzger, 1963, p. 108). The translation maintains typical Hebraic parallelism and syntax, and the Gospels' quotations from Hebrew scriptures conform to the Hebrew text.

The only extant copy of another rendition of the four gospels, by Yuḥannā b. al-Kāṣṣ Yusof Ya'qubi, a Jacobite or Nestorian cleric, includes at its end the



identical inscription found in the Iwannis ‘Ezz-al-Din’s translation. The copy was made in 742/1341 in Kaffa (modern Feodosiya) in the Crimea by Simon b. Yusof b. Ebrāhim Tabrizi, an Armenian Catholic, and was sent to India in 1598 (Messina, 1943, p. 47). Eventually Bishop Brian Walton incorporated this translation into the London Polyglot Bible of 1657, the first Persian translation of the Gospels to be printed; it was accessible to translators in the 19th century, notably Henry Martyn.

Persian translations from Hebrew before the 17th century. The Jewish community in Iran produced translations from Hebrew into Persian, written in Hebrew script. The Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) reported that a Persian translation of the Hebrew scriptures existed long before the time of the Prophet Moḥammad. Quotations from Hebrew scripture are found in the 3rd/9th-century Zoroastrian text *Škand gumānīg vizār* by Mardān-Farrox, son of Ormazddād (Asmussen and Paper, p. 5; de Menasce, pp. 176 ff.). **Judeo-Persian** translations have been found in fragments of commentaries (*tafsir*) discovered in the Cairo Geniza. These fragments have been dated from the 3rd/9th to the 5th/11th centuries (Shaked, 2003, p. 198). During the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries, Jewish scholars in Iran were actively engaged in translating the Hebrew scriptures into Judeo-Persian (Fischel, 1972, X, p. 433).

In the late 10th/16th century an Italian, Giambattista Vecchietti, was sent on a diplomatic mission to Iran. He learned Persian and for twenty years sought Judeo-Persian translations of the Bible in Iran and India. He found manuscripts of all parts of the Hebrew scriptures, including a copy of Psalms dated 1316 CE (Blochet, I, p. 1, n. 1 [Figure 1]) and a manuscript of the Torah dated 1319 CE (Paper, 1972). He spent six years (1600-06) transliterating these works into Persian script, with the help of a Persian Christian named Šams-al-Din Ḳanji and a **Carmelite** monk named Dawlat Khan Ṭarazi b. Shaikh ‘Abd-al-Wahhāb Gwāliārli (Fischel, 1952, pp. 15, 20). All Vecchietti’s manuscripts may be the products of a single school of translators that flourished in the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries (Fischel, 1972, p. 433). Since then, other Judeo-Persian manuscripts have been found. All are characterized by uniformity of style and lexical choice and by the use of Aramaisms and Arabic vocabulary (Fischel, 1960, p. 1158).

The first Persian translation of any part of the Bible to be printed was a version of the Pentateuch prepared by Jacob ben Joseph Ṭāvus, professor of Persian at the Jewish Academy in Constantinople; it was included (in Hebrew



characters) in the Constantinople Polyglot Bible of 1546 (see further Bible vi, above).

Persian translations from Greek before the 11th/17th century. The earliest extant Persian translation from the original Greek is a Gospel of Matthew now in the Vatican Library (Pers. 4), copied in *nask* script by Mas‘ud b. Ebrāhim in 712/1312-13. Nothing is known about its translator or dating. It is believed to have been taken to India by the Chaldean bishop Mar Joseph in 1556 CE (Gulbenkian, 1980, p. 212 n. 80, citing Levi Della Vida, pp. 167-69).

The only other Persian translation of the Gospels from the original Greek known to have been made before the 11th/17th century is that of the four Gospels done between 718/1318 and 728/1328 by Sarkis Loudj b. Amir Malek, possibly from Urmia. A number of copies of this translation were made in India in the early 11th/17th century and are now found in several European libraries (Gulbenkian, 1980, p. 192). The first seventeen chapters of the Gospel of Matthew in Abraham Wheelocke’s 1653 London edition of the four gospels in Persian may have been taken from this translation (Metzger, 1977, p. 278; Gulbenkian, 1980, pp. 278-79).

Royal commissions. From the 10th/16th century onward, a series of Persian-speaking rulers commissioned Persian translations of the Bible. The Mughal [Akbar I](#) (r. 963-1014/1556-1605) was interested in a variety of religions and their scriptures. He commissioned his court historian, [Abu’l-Faḡl ‘Allāmi](#), to translate the Gospels into Persian, but there is no evidence that the work was ever done (Fischel, 1952, p. 19; Gulbenkian, 1980, pp. 206-07).

Shah ‘[Abbās I](#) (r. 996-1038/1588-1629) honored the Bible as the scripture of Europeans, with whom he wanted to have trade relationships, and his curiosity was peaked by illustrations of biblical stories brought to him by the first Carmelites who arrived in Isfahan as missionaries. In 1025/1616 he authorized a Spaniard, Carmelite priest John Thaddeus, to translate the Psalms and Gospels into Persian (Gulbenkian, 1981, p. 40). With the help of three Muslim mullahs and a Jewish rabbi, Father John translated the Psalms from Hebrew and the Gospels from Greek, presenting the results to the shah in 1027/1618 (Gulbenkian, 1981, pp. 39-42).

A later Safavid monarch, Shah [Solṭān Ḥosayn](#) (r. 1105-35/1694-1722) ordered an accurate translation of the Gospels that would be accompanied by notes to correct mistaken Christian interpretations of the gospel. The translator,



Moḥammad-Bāqer b. Esmā'il Ḥosayni Kātunābādi, was a Shi'ite Muslim who worked from an Arabic biblical text. Completed in 1115/1703, his work was published for the first time in 1995 under the sponsorship of the Written Heritage Research Center (*Markaz-e našr-e mirāt-e maktub*) in Tehran, with a current introduction and analysis provided by its editor, Rasul Ja'fariān, director of the National Library of Iran (Ja'fariān, 2005, p. xi).

Nāder Shah (r. 1148-60/1736-47) was searching for confirmation that a verse in the Qur'an (48:29) refers either to 'Ali or to the first caliph; he wanted to know if other "heavenly books" would support one position or the other (Abdulkureem, p. 89). Consequently, after his victory in India in 1152/1739, he appointed his court historian, Mirzā (Moḥammad-) **Mahdi Khan Astarābādi**, to make translations of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures into Persian (Gulbenkian, 1981, p. 45). In turn, Mirzā Mahdi recruited two other scholars, Mir Moḥammad Ma'šūm Ḥosayni Kātunābādi and his son 'Abd-al-Ġani. They were the son and grandson of Solṭān Ḥosayn's translator, yet nothing shows that they were aware of the earlier works. Mirzā Mahdi mustered further assistants, most of whom had inadequate knowledge of Persian: for the Hebrew scriptures, four Iranian Jewish rabbis, including **Bābā'i ben Nuri'el**; for the New Testament, Carmelite missionaries headed by Bishop Philip Mary for the Gospels and six Armenians (two Catholics, two Orthodox priests, and two Orthodox monks) for the rest, all working from an Arabic translation of the Latin Vulgate. The resulting biblical translation, completed in 1154/1741, was literal. It was presented to the shah, but he apparently never looked at it (Fischel, 1952, pp. 32-39; Gulbenkian, 1981, pp. 45-48; Chick, pp. 634-38). In 2009, however, the "Nāderšāhi Gospel" was published in a scholarly edition by Rasul Ja'fariān from a manuscript that had been preserved in Golestan Palace and, according to him, is the original. Ja'fariān concludes that the completed translation was really done by the Iranians (Ja'fariān, 2009, p. 23).

Modern translations. Before the 13th/19th century, none of the Persian translations of the Bible, including the ones not discussed here, had become generally known, and they were rather unfriendly renditions that did not easily conform to Persian grammatical style. Only a single Persian translation of the Pentateuch and another of the Gospels had been printed. Roman Catholics had not printed any of the translations that they had made or collected, since none was based on the Latin Vulgate text (Gulbenkian, 1981, pp. 49-50). The start of Western Protestant Christian mission activity to Asia in the 13th/19th century, however, coincided with globally increasing access to



printing technology, and an emphasis on fluent translation and the publication and distribution of the Bible began.

A number of Persian translations of the Gospels were made in colonial India at the beginning of the 13th/19th century by a varied cast: Mirzā Moḥammad Feṭrat, an ethnic Persian living in Benares, under the supervision of R. H. Colebrook, professor of Sanskrit at the College of Fort William in Bengal and surveyor-general there; Nathaniel Sabat, an Arab from Baghdad, under the direction of Henry Martyn, chaplain of the East India Company; and Leopoldo Sebastiani, head of the Roman Catholic missions to Persia and [Qandahār](#) (Waterfield, pp. 178-79; Gulbenkian, 1981, pp. 51-52). Martyn recognized that none of these efforts was satisfactory, since too many translators were not native speakers of Persian. He therefore went to [Shiraz](#), where he worked with Mirzā Sayyed ‘Ali Khan. Together they translated the whole New Testament from Greek in one year. The translation, completed in 1227/1812, was ritually presented to Faṭḥ-‘Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797-1834) in Tabriz, though Martyn was too ill to present it personally and died soon after in Turkey, on his way to England (Gulbenkian, 1981, pp. 51-52). The printing of the translation by the Russian Bible Society in St. Petersburg two years later was the first full New Testament published in the Persian language. The Calcutta auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society later republished the ‘Ali Khan/Martyn New Testament in 1816 together with Martyn’s Psalms translation that Martyn had not felt was ready for use. This highly acclaimed translation of the New Testament was the first rendition to be widely distributed for liturgical use and study by Christian clergy and laity, and it became the foundation for later work by others (Waterfield, p. 179).

Work on translation from the Hebrew followed, still heavily under the influence of non-native speakers. The first complete Persian rendition of the Old Testament by a Christian, made by Thomas Robinson, chaplain at Poona and Anglican archdeacon of Madras, later professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, with the help of an unidentified Persian scribe, was published in three volumes in Calcutta between 1836 and 1838. At the same time, William Glen of the Scottish mission at [Astrakhan](#) and Mirzā Moḥammad-Ja‘far of Shiraz were also translating the complete Old Testament from Hebrew, and it was published in Edinburgh in 1845. In the following year that rendition was combined with the Ali Khan/Martyn New Testament and published in a single volume at Edinburgh by the British and Foreign Bible Society, the first complete Christian Bible to be published in Persian.



After some years it was recognized that changes in the Persian language required a revision of the 1845 Bible (Waterfield, p. 179). With the help of others, Robert Bruce, a missionary and representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Iran, spent 20 years on this project. The revised New Testament was published in 1882, and the revision of the whole Bible was published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in Leipzig in 1895. The so-called “Bruce translation” is still the standard Bible translation in Persian, and it is the version by which all later renditions are judged.

In the 20th century, two widely-used New Testament translations from Greek and English into contemporary Persian were published. They followed modern principles of translation by means of functional equivalents in order to communicate the meaning of the original language, rather than adhering to the exact sentence structures and grammatical forms of the original. Both were prepared by small teams of people. In 1976, the Bible Society in Iran published its “common language” version edited by Mehdi Abhari and sponsored jointly by all the Christian churches in Iran, Catholic, Eastern, and Protestant. Later, the complete Bible in this version was published by the United Bible Societies in 2007 (Thomas, pp. 445, 447). A translation of the New Testament edited by Sāro Kačiki was published in 1979, and later on the complete Bible in this version was published in the United States in 1995 (Thomas, pp. 445, 447). Its team of translators was composed of all Iranians, a change after many centuries when Iranians’ lack of sufficient knowledge in Greek and Hebrew had affected choices about translators.

The first Persian rendition of the Pentateuch by Jewish translators since the 14th century was made from Hebrew by Māšā-Allāh Raḥmān Purdāvud, a Hebrew teacher, and Musā Zargari, a Jewish scholar. This was published as *Ketāb-eb-e moqaddas* in five volumes in Tehran, 1985, in Persian script with the parallel Hebrew text on facing pages.

In the 21st century, two especially notable new translations of the Bible into Persian were undertaken. Piruz Sayyār began translating the Bible from the 1998 French-language *La Bible de Jérusalem*. He started with the Deuterocanonical books, which were published in Tehran in 2001 and was the first Persian translation of these books to be published. This was followed by the publication of the New Testament in 2008 and the Pentateuch in 2014 (Thomas, pp. 446-47). The other new translation of the Bible, known as the New Millennium version, was made from Greek, Hebrew, and English. It was sponsored by Elam Ministries in England and edited by Mehrdād Fāteḥi. The



New Testament was published in 2003, followed by the whole Bible in 2013 (Thomas, pp. 446-47).

The first **Dari** (i.e., the Persian dialect of Afghanistan) rendition of the New Testament was made as an adaptation of the 1976 Iranian Persian translation and published in Lahore in 1982. Earlier, a Dari adaptation of the Persian common language translation of the Gospel of Mark was published in Iran in 1974. A first translation of the Old Testament was published with the 1976 New Testament in 2008.

A **Tajik** (i.e., the Persian dialect of Tajikistan) translation of the Gospel of Mark was published in 1981 in Cyrillic script in Stockholm, and the first New Testament followed in 1983. The complete Bible was published in 1992.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See [BIBLE iii](#), .

[Archived version of the EIr. printed edition.](#)
