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When Jesus speaks colloquial Egyptian Arabic: an incarnational understanding of translation

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Abstract

A*l-Khabar al-Ṭayyib bitāʿ Yasūʿ al-Masīḥ* (the Good News of Jesus Christ, 1927) is one of the earliest, if not the first, translation of the New Testament into colloquial Arabic. Initiated by the British missionary and civil engineer William Willcocks, the translation responds to different linguistic and ideological tensions at a time when Egypt endeavoured to configure its national identity. In using colloquial Egyptian Arabic, the translation was motivated by the then dominant missionary ethos of translating into the vernaculars, which was propagated at the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. However, the translation (and its main translator) had to engage with the linguistic markers of 'sacredness' in Arabic and the identity politics associated with the use of language varieties in Egypt at the time. This article has two aims: first to understand Willcocks' translation in light of two competing conceptualisations of 'sacred language' among speakers of Arabic in Egypt; second, to explore the synergy between theology and translation studies and test the viability of theological concepts such as that of 'incarnation' in explaining translation phenomena in the sacred context. The theological concept of 'incarnation' is explored in this article to test its implications for the study of Bible translation.

Key words: Al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib, sacredness, Colloquial Egyptian Arabic, incarnation, kenosis, Quran

Introduction

In 1927, Egyptian intellectual and reformist Salama Musa (1887-1958) conducted an interview with a retired British civil engineer in his seventies who, in addition to his successful career in the irrigation sector in Egypt, had attracted some attention in the cultural circles, mainly because of his interest in the Egyptian vernacular (*ʿāmmiyya*) and his belief in its ability to communicate the loftiest ideas[1] to the uneducated masses. When asked by Musa whether he was happy after his long career as a civil engineer in the Egyptian ministry of irrigation, the then 74-year-old William Willcocks (1852-1932) replied in the Arabic he learned and used for over forty years:

> Now I am serving God and Christ. I feel God's person (*shakhs allah*) close to me; here on my right and here on my left. I obey God and fulfil Christ's purpose by serving people (I go to the English hospital twice a week to take care of patients and offer them treatment) and by printing the gospel in the colloquial so that the common people would have access to Christ's words and sermons. In this I find more happiness than I used to find in engineering (Musa 1927: 1165)[2].

It was this passion for making the Christian Scripture available to the common people that drove Willcocks to translate the New Testament into the Egyptian vernacular (*ʿāmmiyya*) in 1921. The choice of the vernacular as the medium for the translation went against mainstream thinking in both Muslim and Christian circles at the time, not only because this challenged the standardised practice of using *fusha* (standard Arabic) in writing; but also, because this meant expressing the 'sacred' message in the register habitually used in mundane, everyday situations, which was (and continues to be) seen as iconoclastic by native speakers of Arabic, both Muslim and Christian. This article has two aims: first to understand Willcocks' translation in light of two competing conceptualisations of 'sacred language' among speakers of Arabic in Egypt; second, to explore the synergy between theology and translation studies and test the viability of theological concepts such as that of 'incarnation' in explaining translation phenomena in the sacred context. The theological concept of 'incarnation' is explored in this article to test its implications for the study of Bible translation.

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[1] The reference here is to ideas from sacred and literary texts which, as will be explained later, were the focus of William Willcocks in his endeavours to translate into the Egyptian vernacular.

[2] All translations from Arabic sources are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Negotiating Christian sacredness in the language of the Quran: changing norms of translating the Bible into Arabic

During the first Islamic century (i.e. the seventh century CE) and following the death of the prophet, the then emerging empire was busy in a massive process of Islamicisation and Arabicisation of the newly conquered populations in Syria, Iraq, Mesopotamia and North Africa. Griffith suggests that the earliest attempts at translating the Bible into Arabic, by both Christians and Jews, were launched in response to the need to translate the scriptures and write original theological works "in the new lingua franca of the new Islamic commonwealth"[3] (2013: 97). The oldest surviving manuscript of a portion of an Arabic version of the Bible is a fragment of psalm 77 discovered in Damascus and is speculated to date back to the end of the eight century (Schoeler, 2009, n66), while the oldest manuscript of the Christian Scripture with a certain date of its production is Sinai Arabic MS 151 whose colophon mentions the name of its translator, Bishr ibn a-Sirrī, and the translation date, i.e., 867 CE (Bailey & Staal, 1982: 4).

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[3] The dating of the earliest Arabic translation of the Bible has long been debated among two groups of scholars. One, including Cheikho (1901) and Kachouh (2012), suggests that Arabic versions of the Bible must have pre-dated Islam, arguing that the Quran draws on Biblical narratives which must have been known to the prophet and his audience. Another group of scholars, including Griffith (2013), argues that what was available before Islam was an oral Christian and Jewish tradition. For Griffith, for instance, the scripted Arabic translations of the Bible were enabled by three interrelated factors that did not have their full impact before late eighth and early ninth centuries. These factors were the collection of the Quran and its circulation in written form, the Islamicisation and Arabicisation of conquered lands and the codification of Arabic grammar and the development of Arabic lexicography.

The earliest Arabic translations of the Christian Scripture, produced during the ninth and tenth centuries, reveal a number of features which are witness to the dynamic linguistic situation of the new Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims in the conquered lands. The grammatical and syntactic irregularities of these translations demonstrate what came to be known by Arabic language historians as 'Middle Arabic' (Griffith, 2013: 138). These irregularities were due to two key facts: first, interference from Hebrew, Greek, Syriac or Coptic which were the languages of the *Vorlagen* used in the translation; second, the translators and the readers for whom the translations were produced spoke Arabic as a second language (ibid). As the process of Arabicisation[4] continued to bear its fruit, coupled by consistent efforts to codify the Arabic language through the production of systematic grammar and lexicography in later centuries, these irregularities were gradually removed. The translations of the Gospels produced by Abu l-Faraj ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib (d. 1043) and al-Asʿad ibn al-ʿAssāl (d. 1253 ca) are witness to the refined linguistic quality of the Arabic versions that continued to be produced from the eleventh century.

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[4] This covered, not only sacred Christian texts, but other activities, including the civil and scientific domains.

The increasing tendency to produce translations with the highest Arabic register drove early Arabic-speaking Christian translators to use phraseology from the Quran, which was seen, in addition to its religious authority, as the normative standard of language usage. Arabic-speaking Christian translators were well aware of the ‘sacred’ status the Arabic language had acquired because of its association with the Quran. The Quran itself (Quran 12: 2) and the Ḥadīth (i.e. sayings of the prophet) attest to this ‘sacred’ status. This self-referentiality is further attested to in statements such as “the speech of the people of heaven is in Arabic” (Suleiman, 2003: 44).

This Quranic diction is noticeable in the early translations[5], including the Sinai Arabic MS 151, and continued to be used in different degrees until 1865 when the translators of the well-known Bustānī-Van Dyck version decided to de-Islamicise their translation. Commenting on Vatican Arabic No. 18 (dating back to 993 CE) and other stylistically similar translations, Bailey and Staal (1982: 5) observe that Arabic-speaking Christian translators tended to “cast the gospels into this rhymed prose” that is characteristic of Quranic style and use “many Arabic terms now thought to be distinctively Muslim in character.” They conclude that “either Arab Christians and Arab Muslims were linguistically closer together during that period than they are today, or this particular literary effort was directed towards a Muslim audience.” Whatever the interpretation may be, the presence of Quranic diction in Arabic translations of the Bible gradually diminished until the Bustānī-Van Dyck version distanced itself completely from this practice.

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[5] For a discussion of the ‘sacred’ status of Arabic and how this is negotiated by an early Arabic translation of the Gospels that sought to emulate the language of the Quran, i.e. Al-Subawi’s *Rhymed Gospels* (1300), see Hanna (2018).

The Bustani-Van Dyck is the Arabic translation of the Bible widely used among Christian Arabs, almost across all denominations. The translation, published in 1865, was the outcome of a team work involving American missionaries Eli Smith (1801 – 1857) and Cornelius Van Dyck (1818 – 1895), as well as Arab Christian scholars like Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819 – 1883) and Naṣīf al-Yazijī (1800 – 1871), in addition to an Arab Mulsim linguist, Sheikh Yusuf al-Asīr. In the last editorial meetings involving all team members, the question of using Quranic diction was reportedly raised and "*All native Christian scholars [in the team] decidedly objected to this*" (Smith & Van Dyck, 1900: 28; emphasis in original).

Despite their objection to the use of Quranic style, the Arab Christian scholars in the team were firm believers in the high symbolic capital attached to classical literary Arabic and were keen that the Bustānī-Van Dyck version would exhibit this high style[6]. For more than 150 years, this translation of the Bible, with its characteristic nineteenth-century literary Arabic, came to be widely circulated and used in multiple editions in all Arabic-speaking countries. In commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the first edition of this translation, the Bible Society of Egypt published a book documenting the history of the translation and its continuous impact in "supporting the unity of the [Arabic-speaking] church for more than a century and a half" (Megalaa, 2017: 113). This long-standing respect that the Bustānī-Van Dyck version acquired made it difficult for newer versions, still using standard Arabic, to displace it. In this context, to think of producing a translation in the vernacular would be inconceivable and probably seen as almost 'heretic' by some. In addition to *al-Khabar al-*

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[6] For a detailed discussion of the Bustani-Van Dyck version of the Arabic Bible, see Grafton (2015).

Ṭayyib, a few attempts have been made later to produce translations in the vernacular, but these have not gained much ground. This is only explained by the fact that Arabic-speaking Christians, just like their fellow Muslims, have developed a deep-rooted conviction that 'sacredness' is only communicable through the loftiest levels of *fuṣḥa*, i.e. classical, literary Arabic. In an interview with a group of Egyptian Christians, Arabic socio-linguist Niloofar Haeri asked her interviewees about their reactions "if someone would translate their Bible and all their standard prayers into Egyptian Arabic." One answer came: "No. All our books are in fusha, no. My personal opinion is no. I have our Book in the Arabic language (il-lugha il-ʿarabiyya il-fusha) and that's it; we are used to it and I pray in it and understand it and everything" (Haeri, 2003: 59). Another interviewee thought of *ʿāmmiyya* (the vernacular) as desecrating of the Arabic Bible: "And this book, I can't change anything in it so long as it is the work of the Holy Spirit or Our Lord, there will not come a time when I'll say that I'll write it in ʿammiyya." (ibid). It is against these attitudes toward *fuṣḥa* as the sole vehicle of sacredness that one can understand the challenges that missionaries in 1920s and 1930s, including Willcocks, had faced in their attempts to publish Biblical literature in the Arabic vernaculars in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Egyptianising the Good News: profiling the translator and the translation

The fact that Willcocks was involved in some missionary activities, including his translation of most of the New Testament, did not in itself attract much criticism, though his use of aspects of the Egyptian vernaculars[7] in the translation was obviously seen by many

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[7] As the well-researched study by Badawi (1973) demonstrates, the Egyptian dialect is not one monolithic entity and it has different sub-varieties and levels (*mustawayāt*), depending not only on the region where it is spoken, but the educational, religious and cultural background of those who use it.

Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian, as a matter of concern. In one of its weekly editions in 1928, the Egyptian newspaper *al-Siyāsa* dedicated a whole page to Willcocks. This newspaper usually caricatured an Egyptian statesman every week, but in that particular weekly issue they "poked dry humour at Willcocks, even sketching him on the front page with an open Bible, and dressed in parson's clothes with a dog-collar." In a letter to the editor of the *Moslem World*, Arthur Upson, the then director of the Nile Mission Press and the publisher of Willcocks' translation, thus describes this article: "nothing finer has ever been written about an Englishman". Upson quotes one sentence from the caricatured portrait which shows the respect Willcocks received at the time, despite the many disagreements, and occasional heated debates, his views triggered – the author of *al-Siyasa* article says: "I'll just tell you the sort of Willy-Cockis is – he's been here nearly forty years and fighting all the time, but nobody has ever seen him once fighting for his own advantage." "A splendid testimony!" was Upson's comment on the quoted extract (Upson 1928: 82).

The picture portrayed of Willcocks in the work of some Egyptian historians[8] of the cultural scene in early 20th century Egypt is almost in stark contrast to the life of a Christian mystic we are presented with in *al-Hilal* interview, *al-Siyāsa* article and other resources. In the writings of these historians, who valorised standard[9] Arabic as the vehicle of national, as well as religious identity, Willcocks was seen almost as a 'hate figure' (Suleiman 2004, 68). The 'hate campaign' against him was not triggered in the main by his translation of the New Testament into Egyptian colloquial Arabic (*ʿāmmiyya*) which he published in a first edition in

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[8] See, for example, the work of Saʿīd (1964/1980); al-Dusuqi (1948/2000).

[9] 'Standard Arabic' is usually interchangeably used with 'classical Arabic' to mean the grammatically sound variety of Arabic, which is used for formal registers, mainly in writing. However, 'classical' also connotes the formal register specifically used in literary and religious discourses.

1921. This translation only fanned the flame which was already burning since Willcocks had decided to go public about his call for the use of the ʿāmmiyya in writing more than twenty five years before the publication of his translation. In 1893, Willcocks gave a speech entitled ‘Why does not the power of invention exist among Egyptians now?’ In answering the question, he mainly argued that thinking and writing in *fuṣḥa* (a language register that Egyptians learn at school) is the main reason why Egyptians lack in creativity and inventiveness. He emphasised the potentials for using *ʿāmmiyya* in literature, giving the example of the British people who rejected Latin and adopted English[10] as their language of literary expression and hence achieved progress (al-Dusuqi, 1948/2000: 44-5). When Musa asked Willcocks what advice he would give to Egyptian young men, he answered:

> I am more interested in the uneducated, the peasants and the poor. But if you ask me about educated young men, please tell your readers that I like to see Egyptians being able to write in the Egyptian language[11] and stop wasting their time in learning the Arabic language [i.e. literary Arabic]. The grammatical rules of this language [i.e. *fuṣḥa*] and its stilted vocabulary deprive them of their [intellectual] energy, so that they are unable to either think or invent (Musa, 1927: 1165)

The 1893 lecture was later published in *al-Azhar* magazine which Willcocks co-edited with Ahmed Al-Azharī. In order to show the potential *ʿāmmiyya* has for expressing literature in writing, he published in this magazine extracts from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *Hamlet* translated in the Egyptian colloquial. More than two decades later came Willcock’s translation of the New Testament which he entitled الخبر الطيب بتاع يسوع المسيح أو الإنجيل باللغة المصرية(*Al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib bitāʿ Yasūʿ al-Masīḥ aw al-Injīl bi-lugha al-Miṣriyya*). On the back cover of the translation, he provided the English equivalent of the Arabic title: 'The Good News of Jesus Christ or The New Testament in Egyptian'[12].

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[10] A similar line of argument was given by Mustapha Safouan (1998) in the introduction he wrote to his published translation of *Othello* into Egyptian colloquial Arabic. For a detailed study of the history of the debate on the use of *fuṣḥa* and *ʿāmmiyya* in writing, see Hanna (2009).

[11] Unlike most Arabic linguists, Willcocks considers the Egyptian colloquial a ‘language’ not a ‘dialect’.

This translation survived until the 1940s after which time it totally disappeared from Christian and Bible Society bookshops. When I checked with pastors and Christian ministers from different denominations in Egypt about this version, it turned out that a few people know that the translation exists, but no one has really read it or used it in church services. The fact that this translation vanished from public libraries (including libraries of seminaries) and Bible Society bookshops after the 1940s is itself telling of the value attached to it, as well as the place it occupied in the cultural and theological archives in Egypt. The copy I had access to is only a photocopy available in the library of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo[13].

The socio-cultural contexts in which this translation was produced, disseminated, received and finally muted raise a few questions about the translation of the Bible in the Arabic vernaculars. This paper explores the socio-cultural context which motivated Willcocks' translation and the role of translators' agency in negotiating the norms of translating the Bible in a linguistic tradition where 'sacredness' has been conditioned and encoded by the *fuṣḥa* of the Quran.

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[12] It is worth noting that the English title does not literally translate the Arabic one which should be back translated as 'The Good News of Jesus Christ or The Gospel in the Egyptian Language'.

[13] I am grateful for Dr Wageeh Mikhael and the librarians of the seminary for kindly giving me access to this copy.

The first edition of Willcocks' translation of the New Testament was published in five serialised volumes that started with *Matthew and Mark's Gospels*, published in one volume in 1921, followed by *Luke and John's Gospels* (volume 2)[14] and *Book of Acts* (volume 3) in 1926. The first edition of the translation was completed in 1927 with two more volumes, *Selections from Early Epistles* (volume 4) and *Selections from the Later Epistles*[15] (volume 5). The translation went into a second edition in 1928 and Saʿīd (1964/1980: 61) indicates that she had access to a 1949 edition of it, after which time the translation seems to have gone out of print. In addition to his translation of the New Testament, it is claimed that Willcocks also translated the books of Genesis and Psalms into the Egyptian vernacular (ibid), but there is no evidence to support this claim.

Not much information is available on the circumstances surrounding the launch and development of this translation project. The paratextual aspects of the published translation, including a couple of short prefaces by Professor Rev. A. H. Sayce[16], a friend of Willcocks and a specialist in Biblical languages, and a note by Willcocks himself, published in the second edition of the translation of Matthew and Mark's Gospels, give us a few hints on how the project began and the rationale behind it.

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[14] The copy of volume 2 I had access to is of the second edition published in 1928. The first edition of volume 2 must have been published anytime between 1921 and 1926.

[15] This included a few portions from the *Book of Revelation*.

[16] Archibald Henry Sayce (1845 – 1933) was a British Assyriologist and professor of Assyriology at university of Oxford. In addition to his many publications on Biblical languages and cultures, he contributed a number of entries on the same areas in *Encyclopedia Britanica*.

In a note appended (*mulḥaq*) to the second edition of *Matthew and Mark's Gospels*, Willcocks recounts the events leading up to the translation. In October 1920 while he was having a walk in Kensington Gardens in London, Willcocks was thinking about the book he was planning to write to defend himself against the libel brought against him in the Consular Court after he opposed the British government's plans to build a dam in upper Sudan. He had already signed a contract with a press to print 1000 copies of the book for 500 Egyptian pounds (Willcocks, 1928: 188). Preoccupied with his thoughts on the book, Willcocks claims to have heard a voice that commands him to cancel the contract with the press and instead start a translation of the four gospels in the Egyptian vernacular. Back in Egypt, he sought help from an Egyptian young man, Manṣūr Effendi Bakhīt, who shared the same passion for writing in the vernacular (*ʿāmmiyya*). Not much is known of Bakhīt, apart from the fact that he translated parts of the gospels into the vernacular and his translation drafts were praised by all who read them[17] (ibid). Willcocks also mentions that a few other Christian young men were equally passionate about this project and they later helped in completing the translation of the four gospels. Again, no specific mention is made of the names of these co-translators. In the absence of detailed information on the background of these co-translators and the division of labour between Willcocks and them, our discussion of translatorial agency in *al-Khabar al-Tayyib* remains speculative. However, there is much evidence that proves

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[17] We also know that Bakhīt translated another book for the Nile Mission Press in 1924. The English title of the book is *Wonders of the Universe* and in Arabic translation it was entitled *'Ajā'ib al-Kawn*.

Willcocks' active role in promoting the translation, both among speakers of Egyptian Arabic and English-speaking audiences with interest in missionary work and evangelisation among Arabs. As for the print run of the translation in its first edition, Upson mentions in his letter to the editor of the *Moslem World* that the "Nile Mission Press has printed for him no less than 169,200 volumes of Gospel books in about four years" (Upson, 1928: 82). Upson adds that Willcocks distributed the greater parts of these copies himself (ibid).

A. H. Sayce was asked by Willcocks to write an introduction to the translation of Matthew's gospel and another one when the whole translation of the New Testament was completed in 1927. Both introductions, published in the last volume of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* in both English and Arabic, provide the rationale which motivated the translation. In both introductions, Sayce is keen to justify Willcocks's use of the vernacular on two grounds: the language used by Jesus in the gospels and by Paul in his epistles and the first audience for whom the New Testament was written. He indicates that the Aramaic used by Jesus was "the dialect of the people among whom He had been brought up". This meant that "he talked familiarly to the peasantry" and "not as the scribes in the extinct Hebrew or the learned language of the schools" (Sayce, 1927b: 3-4). The fact that a few of his original words, like 'Ephphatha' or 'Talitha Kumi', have been preserved to us was only meant to show "their variation from the corresponding literary or scholastic forms" (4). Even when the life and teaching of Christ were written into the Greek of the gospels (in itself an act of translation), it was the "colloquial Greek" which "differs from literary Greek just as the English heard in a country village differs from literary English" (Sayce, 1927a: 2). Likewise, Paul's letters were "addressed to converts of various social ranks" and were written "not in classical Greek, but in the current colloquial" (Sayce, 1927a: 3). The fact that the gospels and the epistles[18] were written in the colloquial only meant that "they were intended to be understood by the educated and the uneducated" (ibid). Because of the language used in writing the New Testament and the nature of its target audience, it makes sense for any translation of it to reproduce this language and target a parallel audience in the host culture. For Sayce, the parallel audience in Egyptian culture that comes close to the original audience of the New Testament are the modern Egyptian peasants whose thought "differs but little from that of the Galilean peasant whom our Lord addressed on the shores of the lake of Galilee" (Sayce, 1927a: 2). Consequently, Sayce concludes:

> […] we may expect that if the substance of the Gospels can be put into the language of the modern Egyptian peasant we shall get nearer to the mind of Christ[19] than is possible so long as it remains in its present literary form (1927b: 4)

'Getting nearer to the mind of Christ through getting closer to the language of the Egyptian peasant' is the rationale that seems to have motivated the translation of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*. In reconciling the mind as well as the language of Christ to the language and mind of ordinary people, this rationale seems to have captured the essence of Christian theology which is premised on the doctrine of incarnation, i.e., God making himself accessible to all and translating himself to people from different backgrounds. Though in line with

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[18] The only exception, according to Sayce, is the epistle to the Hebrews, which was written in literary Greek

[19] The 'mind of Christ' is a direct reference to Philippians 2: 5-7 where the expression means Christ emptying himself and giving up his glories as the second Person of the Trinity in order to become human. See below the discussion of the theological concept of *kenosis* and its implications for translation.

Christianity's foundational theological doctrine, this rationale obviously violated a key doxic practice in the field of translating the Bible into Arabic where God's word was by-default seen as elevated and elite and hence was traditionally rendered in classical, literary Arabic (i.e., *fuṣḥa*). As will be explained later, the dominant translation norms in this field were established in response to the hierarchical relation between *fuṣḥa* and *ʿāmmiyyaa* endorsed by the Quran and the Arabic literary establishment.

No wonder, then, that this 'iconoclastic' translation was not published with the Egyptian Bible Society or a mainstream Christian publisher at that time, but was published instead with the Nile Mission Press, a Cairo-based publishing mission that was so active in publishing Christian literature in Arabic vernaculars, not only in Egypt but in other Arab countries[20]. Founded by two British missionaries, Annie Van Sommer and Arthur T. Upson in 1905, Nile Mission Press (NMP) was operated from Tunbridge Wells, England, though based in Cairo. NMP was known for publishing translations in the colloquial and Menzie (1936: 169) reports that the "late Sir William Willcocks said that the Nile Mission Press was the only Press that he knew which took pains to print colloquial accurately." Its publication of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* was part of NMP's mission to bring Christian literature to Arabic-speaking readers from various backgrounds. In 1923 alone, its catalogue listed 82 books and more than 320 smaller tracts (*Christian Literature in Moslem Lands: a Study of the Activities of the Moslem and Christian Press in all Mohammedan Countries* 1923: 53). The second longest catalogue by another publisher or distributor in Egypt at that time had 32 books on it (ibid). At the top of its agenda was the publication of material in the colloquial: Sharkey (2005: 41) reports that by 1922, NMP[21] published colloquial translations of "Bible passages, commentaries, two hymn books and stories of the Creation and fall of mankind".

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[20] The Nile Mission Press moved to Beirut in 1958 and recently became a Christian multimedia mission operating from Cyprus. For details on the Nile Mission Press and other missions that were active in Egypt at that time, see Sharkey (2005).

Jesus speaks like an Egyptian: describing the language of the translation

One linguistic feature that strikes the reader of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* is the language variety it uses. Although we are not told which Egyptian dialect the translators opted for, it is clear that the dialect spoken in Cairo is the one which is mainly used in the translation. Cairene Arabic is an urban dialect that is predominantly used in day-to-day oral communication and in different degrees of informality, depending on the situation and the relation between addressor and addressee. As is usually the case with urban dialects, the symbolic capital attached to Cairene Arabic is much greater than that associated with other regional dialects spoken in Egypt, especially in the south. The fact that Cairene Arabic is used in the translation goes against what Sayce emphasises in his introductions where he states that the translation was mainly targeted at Egyptian fellaheen (peasants). Apart from a few words from the dialects used by peasants in Northern and Southern Egypt, the Egyptian dialect used is mainly Cairene. One obvious example of the dialect used by upper Egyptian peasants is the word used by Christ when calling His Father, i.e. أبوي(abu:y). See, for instance, Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17 where this term of address is consistently used throughout the chapter. Elsewhere in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*, a few of the words used by the peasants in Delta and Northern Egypt are used. For instance, the word used for translating 'yoke' in Matthew

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[21] Despite the support that NMP had received from Egyptian protestant churches at the time, I would assume that the support coming from the Coptic Orthodox church, which comprises the majority of Egyptian Christians, was minimal, if non-existent. No information is available, though, to support this assumption.

11: 29 is نافي (nāfī). In a footnote to this verse, Willcocks and co-translators provide the word used by upper Egyptian peasants which is كَرَب (karab). In the same footnote, the translators add that the standard Arabic word for ‘yoke’ is نير which, for them, is itself a foreign word that was borrowed into Arabic.

The translation is designed to appeal, not only to audiences from different regions within Egypt, but also to readers from different social and educational backgrounds. The language variety combines stylistic features that make it familiar to the educated, the uneducated and those who stand somewhere in between these two categories. Switching between these different registers is conditioned by the situation and the speaker and addressee in the gospel section translated. For instance, the language of narration in the gospels oscillates between the varieties used by the educated and the semi educated; the language used by Christ in his teachings edges more towards the colloquial used by the educated. A good example of the variety used by Christ in his teachings can be seen in the sermon on the mount which can be generally described as a hybrid dialectal variety, though it is more inclined to the colloquial of the educated. The verses from 3 to 9 in Matthew 5 read as follows:

يا بخت المساكين لأن مملكة السما ملكهم

يا بخت الحزنانين لأنهم رايحين يتعزوا

يا بخت المتواضعين لأنهم رايحين يورتوا الأرض

يا بخت الجعانين والعطشانين للصلاح اللي يرضي الله لأنهم رايحين يشبعوا

يا بخت الشفوقين لأنهم رايحين يترحموا

يا بخت الطاهرين لأنهم رايحين يشوفوا الله

يا بخت المصلحين بين الناس لأنهم رايحين يتسموا أولاد الله.

(Willcocks and Bakhīt, 1928a, 13)

The opening expression in each of these verses (usually translated in most English versions into ‘blessed are those’) is rendered into the colloquial phrase يا بخت(ya bakht) which is much closer to the understanding and linguistic sensibility of the uneducated than the classical expression طوبى(ṭu:ba) used in the authoritative Arabic version of Bustānī-Van Dyck. Apart from this phrase, the lexical choices made are mostly standard Arabic or variant forms of standard lexical items, e.g. حزنانين(ḥaznānīn) instead of حزانى(ḥazāna), literally ‘mourners’ and جعانين(gaʿānīn) instead of جياع(giyāʿ), literally ‘hungry’. A few words are typical of the high and formal register that is mainly used by the educated. Examples include شفوقين (shafuqīn), literally ‘most merciful’ and ‘muṣliḥīn’ (peacemakers). To make the translation even more appealing to readers from different social and educational backgrounds, Willcocks and co-translators render the keywords in the beatitudes in such a way that makes them rhyme: masākīn (poor in spirit), ḥaznānīn (mourners), gaʿānīn (hungry), shafuqīn (most merciful), ṭāhirīn (pure), muṣliḥīn (peacemakers). Because of the influence of the Quran in Arabic-Islamic culture, rhyming prose (*saj'*) has been taken to be a characteristic feature of religious discourse. Rhyming prose is also characteristic of folk narratives which are mainly consumed by the uneducated[22]. This is one of the few places in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* where Willcocks makes use of rhyming prose, a literary feature not used in the standard Bustānī-

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[22] It is interesting to note that the use of rhyme is used in both the sacred language of the Quran and the secular language of folk narratives. What may explain this common feature is the fact that both the Quran and folk literature are meant to be primarily spoken, and hence the oral/aural qualities of their discourse are significantly important. Traditionally, and even before the advent of Islam, rhyme was a key feature of Pre-Islamic poetry which guaranteed its perlocutionary effect on the hearers. It was this discursive quality that both the Quran and folk narratives drew on.

Van Dyck's version despite its high sacred status in the Arabic context. Using rhyming prose, though at a limited scale, may be taken as an attempt by Willcocks and co-translators to highlight the sacredness of their translation.

As mentioned earlier, the spectrum of registers within Egyptian Arabic, as used in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*, is conditioned by the backgrounds of the participants in the speech situation, as well as the topic of discussion. One example can be seen in the register used by Jesus in his debates with the Pharisees and scribes, where the language is critical and almost offensive. When invited by a Pharisee for a meal, Jesus sits to dinner without washing, which causes the Pharisee to judge him in his heart. At that point, Jesus addresses him, with all Pharisees, and says:

> Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You **fools**! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? (Luke 11: 40, ESV[23])

The Greek word for 'fool' is *ἄφρων* which means 'without reason' or 'without wisdom'. The Arabic word used in Bustānī-Van Dyck's version is الأغبياء(aghbiyāʾ) which is a generic word meaning 'lacking in natural intelligence'. Of course, the word can acquire different connotations in different contexts, but it does not, I believe, communicate the critical and angry tone of Jesus in this situation. The word used in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* is مُغَفلِين (mughaffalīn) which, in addition to its colloquialism, implies a stronger tone and communicates an additional meaning that is pertinent to the situation and which the standard aghbiyāʾ fails to communicate. The colloquial word mughaffalīn is derived from the Arabic standard verb غَفَلَ(ghafala) which means: ‘to fall asleep’ or in more metaphorical sense ‘to lose sight of’ and the noun غفلة(ghafla) means ‘failing to see’ in both the literal or the spiritual sense.

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[23] Quotations from the Bible are from the English Study Version (ESV).

In accommodating different styles and registers within Egyptian Arabic that best represent speakers and addressees from different socio-cultural backgrounds, Willcocks and co-translators had to occasionally use colloquial expressions which, by the standards of linguistic decorum, might be deemed vulgar. On finishing his defence against those who accused Jesus of casting demons through the prince of demons, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and addressed him, saying: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed! (Luke 11: 27). This verse is translated in al-*Khabar al-Tayyib* as:

يا بخت البطن اللي حملتك والبزاز اللي رضعت منهم .

(Willcocks and Bakhīt, 1928b: 60)

The word ‘bizāz’, which is the colloquial variant of the standard word ‘ṣadr’, is the translation used for ‘breasts’ (μαστός in Greek). The word is commonly seen as a vulgar expression by the majority of speakers of both standard and colloquial Arabic and is only expected to be used by people who have no education or no appreciation of the conventions of linguistic decorum. Using this word to describe the mother of Jesus, who is equally venerated by both Muslims and Christians, might have been seen as offensive. However, the translators may have used this term to draw attention to the peasants and common people that Jesus is said to have mingled with. This may have also been intended by the translators to highlight the tension in the gospels between him and the Pharisees as gate-keepers of institutionalised religious language and culture.

Another key linguistic feature of *al-Khabar al-Tayyib* is its use of Egyptian Arabic to make ‘abstractions’ as tangible and as intelligible as possible. This applies to both abstractions pertinent to theological notions and others related to human experience. The attempt to use Egyptian Arabic to make the opening verses of John comprehensible is worth looking at[24]. In *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*, this passage is rendered as follows:

> 1 في البداية خالص كان الكلمه والكلمه كان عند الله والكلمه كان الله 2 دا كان في البدايه خالص عند الله 3 كل شي
> هو اللي عمله. ومن غيره ما اتعملش شي من اللي اتعمل 4 فيه كانت الحياه والحياه كانت نور الناس 5 والنور ينور
> في الضلمه والضلمه ما حصلتوش.
>
> (Willcocks and Bakhīt, 1928b: 123)

Two examples from this passage are illustrative of the use of Egyptian dialect in concretising abstractions. The word ‘beginning’ (ἀρχῄ in Greek) in the opening phrase is not easy to conceptualise, especially for readers who could hardly read Arabic and have no education, let alone theological education. There is an almost unanimous agreement among theologians that the ‘beginning’ in John 1 precedes the ‘beginning’ of Creation in Genesis 1. In John 1, the reference is to the ‘beginning that has no beginning’, i.e. the eternity that precedes the creation of time. To make this abstract notion of ‘timeless eternity’ accessible to readers, Willcocks and co-translators used the colloquial modifying word خالص(khāliṣ), literally meaning ‘extreme’ or ‘absolute’, with the whole phrase meaning ‘in the absolute beginning’ which implies the ‘furthest beginning’ you could think of. The second example from this passage is the rendering of ‘overcome’ in the ‘darkness has not overcome it’ (v.5). The Greek verb καταλαμβάνομαι is semantically complex and denotes two categories of meanings: 1) attack, seize, overpower; and 2) understand and learn about. To capture these two groups of meanings in one word that makes such an abstract sentence intelligible proved not to be an easy task. All English translations opt for one of these groups of meanings, translating the Greek word either into ‘comprehend’ or ‘overcome’. The Bustānī-Van Dyck version uses تدركه(tudrikuhu) and manages to capture the two meanings, though the word remains too abstract to conceptualise for a wide range of Arabic readers. The clause ما حصلتوش(ma ḥaṣalitūsh) in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* means ‘did not catch up with’ or ‘did not overtake’. The dynamic and tangible image communicated by this expression is of darkness endeavouring to overtake light with no success. Moreover, the standard Arabic verb حَصَّل(ḥaṣṣala) used in this colloquial clause also means to ‘comprehend’ or ‘understand’. This is a clear example that illustrates the semantic capacity of the colloquial which can both concretise the abstract and combine more than one meaning in one lexical item.

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[24] In ESV, these verses read: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. [4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1: 1-5, ESV).

Colloquial idiomatic expressions are also used in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* to make human experience as accessible and as familiar as possible to the wide range of readers targeted by the translators. Willcocks reflects on his linguistic choices in a paper published after completing the translation where he describes the Egyptian Arabic colloquial words he used in translating the gospel of Luke as “good racy words and expressions which can be heard every day” (Willcocks, 1926: 5). Aware that Luke’s is a translation of spoken Aramaic into koine Greek, Willcocks comments that his translation into the colloquial follows in the steps of the gospel writer: “Luke is indeed an exact translator and in Egypt we are well placed to appreciate his work” (ibid). One example of a ‘racy expression’ that is taken from the lips of ordinary Egyptian people is seen in the story of Elizabeth in Luke 1; when the angel’s word to Zechariah comes true and Elizabeth becomes pregnant, she says

> Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people (Luke 1: 25, ESV).

The Bustānī-Van Dyck version renders the Greek verb ἐπεῖδον, translated in ESV into ‘look on’, as نَظَرَ إليَّ (nadhara ilayya), literally meaning ‘looked at me’. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages*, the Greek verb means “notice, consider, look at, with the implication of showing concern or favor” (Swanson, 1997). While the Bustānī-Van Dyck, as well as most of the English versions, went for ‘look at/on’, *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* opts for a colloquial idiom that communicates the meaning of “looking at with the implication of showing concern or favour”:

> كدا عمل وياي الرب في الأيام اللي فيها جبر بخاطري علشان الناس ما يعايرونيش.
>
> (Willcocks and Bakhīt, 1928b: 5)

The colloquial idiomatic expression جبر بخاطري (gabar bi-khaṭrī) literally means ‘mended/healed my heart/mind/thoughts. This rendering unpacks and concretises the connotations of ‘look at/on’ which, in its Arabic translation in the Bustānī-Van Dyck, does not say much to the average Arabic reader, let alone the semi or uneducated readers in Egypt.

Other instances of concretising abstractions in *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* include using familiar idiomatic expressions in Egyptian Arabic which appeal more to the senses, compared to the Bustānī-Van Dyck rendering. One such example is the translation of σκιρτάω in Luke 6: 23, where the Greek verb is rendered into ‘leap for joy’[25] in ESV. In *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*, the verse is rendered as follows:

افرحوا في داك اليوم وطيروا من الفرح علشان نصيبكم رايح يكون كبير في السما وكدا كمان والديهم عملوا ويا الأنبيا

(Willcocks and Bakhīt, 1928 B: 30)

While al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib uses طيرو من الفرح (ṭīrū minil faraḥ), literally meaning ‘you fly out of joy’, Bustānī-Van Dyck uses the classical, almost archaic imperative تهللوا (tahallalū). Although the latter translation communicates a higher degree of rejoicing, it is very formal, not commonly used in Arabic and, more importantly, falls short of communicating the powerful image of the Greek word which literally means ‘jump for joy’. This example demonstrates, not only the exegetical endeavour made by the translators to grasp the meaning of the Greek text, but their keen interest in reproducing in Arabic what many scholars describe as the ‘incarnational’ nature of the Bible.

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[25] The verse reads: “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets (Luke 6: 23, ESV).”

The translation decisions made by Willcocks and his co-translators are appreciated, not only when seen against the backdrop of the history of the Arabic translations of the Bible and the normative practice followed by Arabic-speaking translators, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. These decisions are also appreciated when seen through the practices of Christian missions which were active in Egypt at that time and which shaped the work of Willcocks among other missionaries and mission organisation in early twentieth century.

Christian mission and translating the Word for 'stuttering' readers

This iconoclastic translation challenges both the norms of writing in Arabic and the norms of Arabic translation of the Bible. Very few attempts in the history of Arabic print culture sought to use the colloquial in writing (and these have been mainly in literature) and these attempts have not been looked at with favour by the literary establishment[26]. Furthermore, using standard Arabic, with its different levels, has always been a foundational translation norm in the field of the Arabic translation of the Bible with its long history. The translation of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*, to use Bourdieu's words, "breaks the silence of doxa" (Bourdieu, 1993: 83); it disrupts a habitual practice in Arabic print culture in general and the field of translating the Bible into Arabic in particular. This challenge to the fundamental norms of publishing and the norms of translating the Scripture can only be understood when situated in the context of the missionary activities worldwide and in Egypt in early twentieth century.

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[26] There are different views regarding the use of the colloquial in written literature – for a detailed analysis of the socio-cultural implications of this tension between *fuṣḥa* and *ʿāmmiyya* in Arabic, see chapter 6 in Hanna (2016).

Although Willcocks was not a full-time missionary, it is safe to say that he devoted some of his time to missionary work, including his help in the Church Missionary Society hospital in Cairo and his translation and distribution of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*. He networked with a number of British and American missionaries who were active in the Middle East and Egypt around that time and missionary work was generally deemed a crucial aspect of who he was (see Upson 1928; Goldschmidt Jr. 2000). Publishing his translation with the Nile Mission Press, itself a missionary publishing house, testifies to his endorsement of missionary ideals and the vision missionaries had for evangelising at that time. Understanding this vision should help us better understand the strategic translation choices made by Willcocks and co-translators.

The Nile Mission Press, which is considered "one of the largest publishers of colloquial texts" (Sharkey 2005: 141), drew support from the interdenominational North Africa Mission in addition to a number of other missionary organisations which were based in Egypt: these included the American Presbyterians, Church Missionary Society, the Egypt General Mission, the Young Men's Christian Association and the British and Foreign Bible Society (Sharkey 2008: 77). The Nile Mission Press published its own material as well as Christian literature produced by other missionary organisations. It is reported that in sixteen years after its launch, the Nile Mission Press printed "two and a half million of its own publications, but seven million copies for other societies" (*Christian Literature in Moslem Lands: a Study of the Activities of the Moslem and Christian Press in all Mohammedan Countries* 1923: 225-6). A large number of these publications (mostly stories or hymns inspired by the Bible, but not actual Biblical texts) were printed in the colloquial, i.e. ʿāmmiyya, especially during the

1920s and 1930s when British and American missionaries were very keen to promote Christian literature in the colloquial (Sharkey 2005).

This strategic interest in making portions of the Bible available in the Egyptian colloquial made it imperative for other missionary organisations in Egypt to seek different versions targeted at different audiences. The British and Foreign Bible Society, for example, published a colloquial version of St. Luke's gospel in 1908, translated by John Gordon Logan and a group of missionaries and Egyptian natives, including Judge Wilmore. North (1938: 31) reports other translations into the colloquial published by both the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Egypt General Mission—these include Genesis, St. Luke and St. John's Gospels (1932); Exodus (1925); Psalms (1933); Romans, Corinthians and Galatians (1935-37); and a further revision of St. Luke (1937). In producing these versions, missionary translators of the Egypt General Mission, for instance, "abandoned all pretence of classicism. They have sought to make the Word not only understandable by the untaught of Cairo's streets, but actually so familiar in its words and cadences as to appeal to them as a thing not alien but their very own" (North 1938: 54).

These efforts to promote the Bible in the colloquial were not only coordinated by a locally agreed strategy among missionaries in Egypt and the Arab World but were also driven by a world missionary vision that had already started to develop in early twentieth century. The clearest expression of this vision came through the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. The proceedings of the conference, published in the same year, set the agenda for Bible translation into world languages and shed light on the practices of missionary translators into Arabic, including Willcocks and others. On the importance of translation of the Scriptures, commission 2 of the conference reports:

> The translation of the Scriptures has occupied the first place in the provision made for the instruction and building up of the converts from heathenism, and the story of the translation of the Scriptures is a very important and thrilling chapter in the missionary enterprise of the Reformed Churches. *It is remarkable how general has been the consensus of opinion and of action on this subject*.
>
> (The Church in the Mission Field 1910: 235; emphasis added).

The proceedings of the conference also underlined the importance of the production and promotion of translations in the vernacular:

> *A method which cannot be relegated to any secondary position is the translation and circulation of the Bible in the vernacular*…God's message answers to an indisputable need of every human heart. It would be wholly futile to hope for permanent missionary success without it (Carrying the Gospel to All the non-Christian World 1910: 313; emphasis added).

The conference, which brought together Protestant missionaries from different parts of the world, including Egypt, also made recommendations on the most viable methods for producing these translations. One such recommendation is that "greater use should be made, wherever possible, of the services of the intelligent, educated native Christians in the translation and revision of the Scriptures and in the translation of books for the instruction and edification of the Church" (The Church in the Mission Field, 1910: 263). This recommendation draws attention to an already established practice by missionary translators and explains why Manṣūr Effendi Bakhīt was asked to co-author *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* with Willcocks[27].

The impact the Edinburgh conference had on world missions, including the ones based in Egypt, cannot be emphasised enough. One British missionary working in Egypt, William Temple Gairdner, attended the conference and even wrote a summary account of its proceedings. When Gairdner, who was a member of the British Church Missionary Society, returned from the conference, he started promoting the learning of *ʿāmmiyaa* and his efforts ultimately lead to publishing a textbook in 1917 on *Egyptian Colloquial Arabic*. He also wrote plays and stories in Egyptian colloquial, with biblical themes and mixed folk Egyptian songs with Christian hymns (Padwick 1929). In 1922 and five years after Gairdner published his book, a group of American missionaries from different denominations convened in Cairo to discuss the Christian literature available to Muslims. In this conference, as Sharkey (2005) reports, these missionaries agreed that the high rate of illiteracy as well as the poor quality of standard Arabic pedagogy among Egyptians would make it almost impossible for them to evangelise Egyptians using *fuṣḥa*. Conference members "advocated printing simple illustrated texts that would use the colloquial language" (ibid: 138). Constance Padwick, a literature missionary[28] in the Nile Mission Press and later in Church Missionary Society, asserts that "Moslem lands to-day, with the modern increase of primary education, have a new population of half-readers or stuttering readers, who cannot attain to the glories of high literature" (Padwick 1925, 162-3, cited in Sharkey 2005, 138). It is for these stuttering readers that *al-Khabar Ṭayyib*, together with other missionary publications, caters. As described by the report on Christian Literature in Moslem Lands, these target readers "have had enough schooling to teach them the phonetic values of the Arabic alphabet, but who, as they mouth out their syllables, fail to get the sense of what they read in classical Arabic, because they have not gone far enough to learn the literary vocabulary" (*Christian Literature in Moslem Lands: a Study of the Activities of the Moslem and Christian Press in all Mohammedan Countries* 1923: 76). The report also emphasised that the colloquial that the missionaries sought to use in their publications was not the crude slang that is deemed offensive or rough, but what the report described as a "simpler form of Arabic...in the best form of spoken Arabic" (ibid: 77). Probably apart from a few examples (see translation of Luke 11: 27 above), the diction of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* is generally in line with codes of linguistic decorum and at some points comes close to the standard.

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[27] The model of a collaborative team involving missionary translators and natives was already used in the production of the Bustānī-Van Dyck translation of the Bible in 1865.

[28] This expression was used in the missionary reports at that time to refer to those missionaries whose job was to produce Christian literature, through translation or original writing, for distribution among the locals.

'A holy book soiled with the muds of the streets': an incarnational approach to translation

North (1938: 54) described missionary attempts to translate portions of the Bible in 1920s Egypt as giving Egyptian readers "a holy book soiled with the muds of the streets". While this clearly echoes the missionary ethos that fashioned practices of Bible translators at the time, it does not help us understand the tension within such translations as *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* between the tendency to use the vernacular, on the one hand, and having to use elements of standard Arabic, on the other. Moreover, the fact that this translation did not survive the 1940s, as reported by Saʿīd (1964/1980), and that it was used as part of the 'hate campaign' launched against Willcocks since his public call for the use of *ʿāmmiyya* needs to be explained. To meet these two purposes, i.e. accounting for the tension in the translation and explaining its reception, I suggest applying the concept of 'incarnation' from Christian theology and exploring the theoretical implications and explanatory power it has for understanding this and other similar translations of the Bible.

Traditionally used to denote a foundational theological principle in Christianity, 'incarnation' has been also used as a metaphor to explain both the nature of the Christian Scripture and, to a lesser degree, the dynamics of Bible translation. Enns (2005: 11), a contemporary theologian, suggests that "an incarnational approach to the Scripture was employed generations ago" by Smyth (1892) in his attempt to "address problems introduced by the modern study of the Bible". Expanding on what he calls 'the incarnational analogy' for understanding the Bible, Enns (ibid: 5) argues that "*as Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible.* In other words, we are to think of the Bible in the same way that Christians think about Jesus" (emphasis in original). For Enns, this only means that the Bible needs to be seen as both a divine and a human book. Valorising the one over the other risks compromising the identity of the Biblical text, exactly as is the case with the personhood of Jesus. Incarnation, within the Christian belief system, is God's way of revealing himself in space and time, of making himself accessible through the cultural, religious and linguistic codes of first century Judaism. In the language of the New Testament, God, through Jesus, 'became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14); and in dwelling among us, Jesus was "*made like his brothers in every way*" (Heb. 2: 17). Enns (2005: 5-6) outlines the implications of the incarnation analogy for understanding the nature of the Bible:

> So, too, is the Bible. It belonged in the ancient worlds that produced it. It was not an abstract, otherworldly book, dropped out of heaven. It was *connected* to and therefore *spoke to* those ancient cultures. The encultured qualities of the Bible, therefore, are not extra elements that we can discard to get to the real point, the timeless truths. Rather, precisely because Christianity is a historical religion, God's word reflects the various historical moments in which Scripture was written.

Seen through this incarnational approach, the Bible is only capable of communicating its divine message through its *belonging to* and *situatedness in* the cultures of its audiences, both first and subsequent. This understanding is particularly relevant to Bible translation and a number of scholars found the 'incarnational analogy' explanatory of how Bible translation works. Nida, for example, configures 'incarnation' as the model that structures our understanding of how divine revelation is communicated and translated. For him, "all divine communication is essentially incarnational" (Nida, 1960: 32). As Nida rightly argues, the Greek New Testament books were not written in the "high style of the schoolmasters of the first and second centuries A.D", but were rather "couched in the words of the common people" and hence, the task of the translator is to put "eternal truths into the speech of everyday life" (Nida, 1952: 23)

This interrelatedness of 'incarnation' and 'translation' goes well beyond using the former as a metaphor to explain the latter. Walls, for instance, contends that incarnation is fundamentally an act of translation: "When God in Christ became man, divinity was *translated* into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language." (1996: 27; emphasis added). This "first distinctive act of translation" of God into humanity "gives rise to a constant succession of new translations" of God's word into human languages (ibid). Using translation to explicate incarnation, Walls goes on to say that “Christ was not simply a loanword adopted into the vocabulary of humanity; he was fully translated, taken into the functional system of the language, into the fullest reaches of personality, experience, and social relationship” (ibid: 28). In view of this understanding, Christian faith, according to Walls, “rests on a divine act of translation” and hence, “[a]ny confidence we have in the translatability of the Bible rests on that prior act of translation” (ibid: 26).

The ‘paradigm of incarnation’[29], on which the whole of Christian faith is premised, is what affirms “the possibility of interlinguistic transfer and successful Bible translation.” (Scorgie, 2003: 21). It is obvious that *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* is motivated by an incarnational approach to the Christian Scripture and its translation. However, given its reception, it would be paradoxical to describe it as ‘successful’. In order to make sense of this paradox, the concept of ‘incarnation’ needs to be further unpacked and contextualised in the light of the cultural scene of the 1920s in Egypt.

Incarnation, in Christian theology, is not only about God becoming human, but it is also about him descending to the lowest point humanity can reach. This is what is meant by the Greek theological concept of κένωσις (*kenosis*), literally, ‘emptying the self’, which is best illustrated in Philippians 2: 6-7[30]

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[29] Scorgie speaks of ‘incarnation’ and ‘Pentecost’ as offering two heuristic ‘paradigms’ that legitimate and guarantee successful communication of Christian Scripture across language boundaries.

[30] “[…] Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself [*ekenosen*], by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (ESV).”.

Kenosis is commonly understood by Christian theologians to mean that "in becoming incarnate, the second person of the Trinity somehow emptied himself (ekenosen) of certain divine attributes in order to become truly human"[31] (Crisp, 2007: 118). Historically, 'self-emptying' has been interpreted by theologians as Christ divesting himself of "glories of heaven" in order to be able to "take on the nature of a servant, assuming the likeness of men"[32] (Lightfoot, 1869: 110). How these glories are voluntarily given up, in order for Christ to reach down to humanity, while remaining fully God, is a question that has kept theologians busy for centuries[33]. Two exclusive interpretations of *kenosis* resulted in what are considered two theological heresies: Docetism emphasised the divinity of Christ, regarding his kenosis into the 'likeness of men' as mere semblance that does not represent his divine reality. Arianism, on the contrary, denied Christ's divinity, emphasising only his created humanity.

To extend the analogy further to this discussion on translation and language register, Bible translation becomes incarnational only when it willingly divests itself of the 'glories of classical language', in order to be in the 'likeness' of the language of ordinary people, while at the same time maintaining a divine character of sorts. Nida speaks of the challenges facing

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[31] Although there is common agreement on this general meaning, there has been a historical debate in Kenotic Christology on the dynamics of this 'self-emptying' and which 'divine attributes' were relinquished by Christ. For details on this debate, see Crisp (2007) and Brown (2011).

[32] This is the view of a number of contemporary theologians, including N. T. Wright; for a full discussion, see Wright (1993: 56-98).

[33] Perhaps the picture portrayed in John 13: 3-5 is the best illustration of 'kenotic incarnation' and offers us a visual correlative of Philippians 2: 6-7. John presents us with the second person of the Trinity who, despite "knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God", he rose from supper, "laid aside his garment" and took on the likeness of a servant and started washing his disciples' feet. This moment of 'laying aside' the garment of the master, the rabbi, and more widely the Son of God, and sitting at the disciples' feet to wash them is visually representative of Christ's *kenosis*.

Bible translators in Asia who, in order to produce this incarnational translation, need to break away from the institutional classical language of religion which “smells of holiness” but cannot take on the language of ordinary people, and hence do not have the spiritual authority that could “instruct men in holiness” (Nida, 1952: 23). Although church authorities in later centuries opposed what Sanneh (2003: 98) called “the subversive implications” of translation into the vernacular, “Christians found themselves propelled toward a popular mode for translation and for communicating the message.” (ibid). This understanding of translation was enabled by an understanding of revelation “not primarily in terms of the arcane and the recondite…but in terms of the koine and the Vulgate” (ibid: 100).

Judging by Willcocks’ and Sayce’s introductions to *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* and by the general linguistic character of the translation, I would argue that the translation is motivated and characterised by a ‘kenotic’ endeavour to strip religious language of the ‘garment’ of social prestige and institutional authority in order to reach the marginalised fellahin of Egypt, among other sectors in society. In the words of Sayce (1927b: 4) in his introduction, the translation was primarily meant to “get nearer to the mind of Christ” of which Paul speaks in Philippians 2 when he elaborates kenosis. In using the Egyptian vernacular, *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* sought to distance itself from established norms of the ‘sacred language’ in Arabic, encoded by the Quran and partly embraced by the Bustānī-Van Dyck version. These norms promote what Sanneh (2003: 100) would describe as “the hallowed language of religion” that is “designed to mystify, to intimidate, to overwhelm”. In contrast, in making the New Testament intelligible, even for ‘stuttering readers’, the translators of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* were keen to challenge a widely held belief that religious language is most venerated when it is least understood[34].

The 'evangelical sentence' and the identity politics of Bible translation in 1920s Egypt

In challenging the accepted norms of 'sacred language', *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* was deemed heterodox, if not heretic. In view of the socio-cultural economy of *fuṣḥa* and *ʿammiyya*, this translation was obviously marginalised because it was not seen as fitting with the established linguistic practices of Arabic. Although the translators strove to emphasise the humanness and 'kenotic' character of their translation, the language used might have been seen as compromising the sacredness of the Biblical text. In their attempt to distance their translation from Docetism, their occasional use of expressions violating linguistic decorum is likely to have associated the translation with Arianism, to use the 'incarnation analogy' and its theological underpinnings. The rendering of Luke 11: 27 (discussed above) was most likely taken as sacrilegious by both Christians and Muslims, given the highly venerated status of the mother of Jesus in both Christianity and Islam.

Reasons for regarding the *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib* translation heretic would include the political as well as the religious, or a conflation of both, especially at a time when Egyptians were trying to configure their national identity with its political and religious alignments. Under

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[34] One of the recognised traits of institutionalised religion, Sanneh (2003: 100) convincingly argues, is "encouraging a superstitious tendency in their followers to like best what they understand least." In an unpublished conference paper, Sabri Butrus (2015), the general editor of the Arabic version of the NIV Study Bible, relates that he once recorded a portion of the gospel in the Egyptian vernacular on an audio tape and gave it to an uneducated Egyptian woman. When asked about her feedback, she said she liked it, but did not think this was the gospel, as she understood it all.

British occupation, which had started in 1882, the Egyptian cultural scene witnessed a number of heated debates on literature, language and religion which were mostly motivated by attempts to promote two conflicting versions of national identity, i.e., the Egyptian and the Pan-Arab. Religion played a key role in these debates, mainly because *fuṣḥa* had always been seen, in both Islamic tradition and the contemporary public domain, as the language of Islam; and hence, the close association between being Arab and being Muslim used to be an uncontested assumption. Because of this conditional relationship between *fuṣḥa* and Islam, the proponents of of *ʿāmmiyya* in early twentieth-century Egypt were usually accused of opposing Islam, on top of such other charges as imperialism, secularism and anti-Arabism. When Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963), writer, politician, educational leader and a strong supporter of the use of *ʿāmmiyya* as the language of literary expression, called for the Egyptianisation of *fuṣḥa*, M. Sadiq al-Rafʿī (1880-1937) responded with a damning article in *al-Bayān* newspaper where he accused al-Sayyid of being anti-Islamic and considered any attempt to Egyptianise *fuṣḥa* a ludicrous attempt to Egyptianise Islam itself (al-Jindi 1983, cited and translated in Hanna, 2016: 172). The association between *fuṣḥa* and Islam is evident in the fact that most, if not all, 'text correctors' (*muṣaḥiḥ al-lugha*[35]) in Egypt are male Muslims qualified in Arabic linguistics, as well as Islamic Studies (Haeri, 2003: 55).

In defense of *fuṣḥa* as the cornerstone of Arab-Islamic identity, al-Rafʿī published his book *Under the Banner of the Quran* in 1926, one year before Willcox completed the multivolume first edition of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*. The book's subtitle, i.e. 'The Battle between the Old and the New', sets the tone for the whole discussion and echoes the contentious intellectual debates in Egypt at the time. The book, originally published as articles in literary magazines, is a scathing criticism of two groups of intellectuals: those who called for the Egyptianisation of *fuṣḥa* and for using *ʿāmmiyya* as the language of writing; and those who called for introducing new methods for the study and practice of Arabic literature, implying that the conventional rhetoric of the Quran and classical literature needs to be innovated. For al-Rafʿī, these two groups formed a 'new' wave that threatened Arabic-Islamic cultural heritage, with *fuṣḥa* at its heart. In one chapter of the book, significantly entitled 'The Qur'anic sentence' (al-jumla al-Qurʿāniyya), he argues that the *fuṣḥa* of the Quranic sentence fashioned Arab identity, enhanced our talents, sharpened our logic and polished our taste (al-Raf'i, 1927/2014: 25). It is the Quranic sentence, al-Rafʿī continues to argue, which preserved our history for us, connected us to the logic exercised by the prophet and his eloquent companions. He then asks a rhetorical question, intended for those who challenge the *fuṣḥa* of the Quran: "If I am to give up the Quranic sentence and its eloquent Arabic…would I follow instead the translationese (ʾuslūb al-tarjama) of the *evangelical sentence* (al-jumla al-injīliyya), degrade myself into using this debased, Arabised jargon, speak this twisted tongue, turn against my own language and national identity and write in a way that would make my Muslim ancestors die a second time?" (ibid; emphasis added). By the 'evangelical sentence', al-Rafʿī was mainly referring to the linguistic changes introduced by the then published Arabic versions of the Bible: these included translations using a de-Islamicised *fuṣḥa* which distanced itself from the language of the Quran and others which, like *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*, mixed *fuṣḥa* with different levels of *ʿāmmiyya*.

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[35] Usually working in newspapers, publishing houses or other institutions dealing with different forms of print media, the language corrector (*musahih al-lugha*) is responsible for making sure the written language used is grammatically correct and any citations from the Quran or Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) are accurate. These correctors are usually graduates of either al-Azhar, Dar al-ʿUlūm or Faculty of Arts, where their training involves varying degrees of Islamic studies. For a detailed discussion of the socio-cultural implications of this role in Egyptian print media, see Haeri (2003).

Although al-Rafʿī only mentions the example of the Jesuit Arabic version of the Bible, first published in 1876, it is clear his denunciation of the 'evangelical sentence' was levelled against other translations, including Bustānī-Van Dyck and *Al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*. His denigration of those who support the use of a de-Quranised Arabic or the use of Egyptian *'āmmiyya* is in direct reference to these translations. In one of his strong statements, he contends that the main reason behind the vulgarisation of Arabic in the public space is that the 'Quranic sentence' had been invaded by the 'evangelical sentence' (al-Raf'i, 1927/2014: 26). To support his argument, al-Rafʿī cites the example of the Jesuit version of the Arabic Bible, which was produced by the Jesuit mission in Beirut. After finishing the translation, the catholic missionaries commissioned Ibrahim al-Yaziji [36](1847-1906) to proofread the translation. When al-Yaziji attemped to remove the foreignness of the translation and make it sound more like classical literary Arabic, al-Rafʿī reports, the Jesuit missionaries disapproved the attempt, restricting him to only correcting the Arabic grammar[37] (ibid). The fact that the 'evangelical sentence' did not, in the case of the Jesuit Arabic Bible, adapt itself to the rhetorical conventions of the 'Quranci sentence' resulted in a style that is, according to al-Rafʿī, closer to Hebrew than Arabic. This hybrid style, he argues, will continue to affect generations of speakers of Arabic, with negative implications not only for their communication skills, but also for their consciousness of their Arab-Islamic roots (ibid).

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[36] Philologist, poet and editor who edited a number of Arabic-speaking newspapers and magazines. He was raised in the Greek Catholic church by his father Naṣīf al-Yaziji (1800-1871) who was also commissioned earlier by the American Protestant missionaries to edit the Bustani Van Dyck translation.

[37] The poet, politician and historian Shakīb Arsalān (1869-1946) sent a letter of support to al-Rafʿī in response to his article on 'The Qur'anic sentence'. In the letter, which was included later in *Under the Banner of the Qur'an*, Arsalān reiterates what al-Rafʿī says by citing the example of an earlier Arabic translation of the Bible, which was co-authored by Samuel Lee (1783-1852), an orientalist and professor of Arabic at Cambridge, and Lebanese writer and linguist Fāris al-Shidyāq (1805 – 1887). As reported by Arsalān, al-Shydiāq was not allowed by Lee to use the features characteristic of the Arabic used in classical literature and the Qur'an, including rhetoric and rhyming prose (*saj'*). The translation, which was commissioned by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, was completed and published by Thomas Jarrett (1805-1882) after Lee's death in 1852. For Arsalān's letter, see (al-Raf'i, 1927/2014: 31-36). For al-Shidyāq's report on his discussions of the translation with Samuel Lee, see (Al-Shidyaq, 1866/2014: 70-71).

Conclusion

Al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib, like the main translator who initiated the project, is paradoxical. Willcocks was seen as both a Christian mystic and an agent of British imperialism, a defender of the identity of the Egyptian masses and an iconoclast of Arab-Islamic identity, a carrier of the 'good news of the gospel' and a distorter of Biblical sacredness whose translation was muted and pushed out of collective memory. The paradoxical nature of *al-Khabar al-Tayyib* is due to the tension it creates between its intent to 'incarnate,' to belong to the culture of those it seeks to speak to, on the one hand, and its awareness of the linguistic markers of sacredness in the host culture, on the other. This is a translation that is pulled in two opposite directions: the desire to maintain the *identity* of Christian 'sacredness' and the desire to *identify* with the institutionalised marks of sacredness in Arabic; to flag its uniqueness and to show its similarity to the religious linguistic code in the host culture. The endeavour to resolve this tension, i.e., to be *kenotic* and divest itself of the institutional marks of 'sacredness' without vulgarising the sacred, as conceptualised in the host culture, does not seem to have succeeded.

Al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib underlines two implications that are worth investigating at length in the future with regards to the relation between scared text translation and the theological outlooks underpinning it. First, the theological understanding of the Scripture (i.e., how the divine message is communicated and received) is not always congruous with the popular understanding of it. This, in turn, has its bearing on the dynamics of producing and receiving translations of sacred texts. While the production of one translation project is rooted in and motivated by a specific theological perspective, its reception might be determined by a different theology that is embraced by its audience. Second, the theological understanding of the Scripture (and its translation) is itself a historical construct, i.e. it is always conditioned by the socio-cultural and political contingencies surrounding it. This is particularly evident in the history of the Arabic translations of the Bible which demonstrate various modes of translating motivated by different conceptualisations of how the divine message should be communicated.

Two concluding remarks are worth underlining. First, the synergy between theological reasoning and translation research needs to be invested in more fully. Unlike other fields in the humanities and the social sciences, religious studies seems to have exercised the least impact on translation studies in recent years. This is most ironical, given the historical roots of translation research which was made possible only through the translation of sacred texts. As this article seeks to demonstrate, the theological concept of ‘incarnation’ has the potential for capturing the paradoxical nature of translation. More investigation into different religious cultures and theologies would provide us with metaphors, narratives and conceptual tools with explanatory force of translation phenomena. Second, the conditional relation between ‘sacredness’ and the use of *fuṣḥa* in the Arabic tradition continued to be challenged, despite the seeming failure of *al-Khabar al-Ṭayyib*. A number of translation experiments have emerged in recent years, where *ʿāmmiyya* is used. Using media other than print, including audio-visual and social media, a number of translations secured different degrees of successful reception. This too is worth investigating in future research.

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