

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a brief history of Bible translation in Iran, particularly into the Persian language.

2.2 Persian Language

Persian (also called Iranian or Farsi) is an Indo-Aryan branch member of the Indo-European language family (ethnologue⁴), a direct descendent of Old Persian and Middle Persian, with Pahlavi as its main representative, the language of Parthians and Sassanians (Noss 2007: 49).

2.3 A Chronology of Bible Translations into Persian

2.3.1 Middle Persian Bible Translations

Christianity came to Iran during the Parthian period. It is recorded in the book of Acts that on the day of Pentecost devote Jews from all nations were in Jerusalem and among them Parthians are mentioned⁵. Apparently during the period of the Parthian kings Christianity was tolerated in Iran and the Christians flourished, but during the Sassanian kings they were severely persecuted. This persecution continued after the Islamic conquest of Iran (Noss 2007: 50).

The Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament have both been translated into Persian. Although it is not known when the first Bible was translated into Persian (Noss 2007: 50), it has been recorded that John Chrysostom, a patriarch of Constantinople, had noted that the doctrine of Christ had been translated into the languages of the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Indians, the Persians and the Ethiopians in the 4th century A.D. (Thomas and Vahman 1985).

⁴ http://www.ethnologue.com/show_family.asp?subid=2-16 December 5, 2011.

⁵ The KJV Bible. Acts 2:5-11.

2.3.2 Judeo-Persian Translation of the Bible

Judeo-Persian, or Jewish-Persian, is a text written in the Persian language using Hebrew characters. Judeo-Persian Bible translations are the most important as well as the earliest monuments of the New Persian language (Asmuseen 1989).

Three inscriptions and a letter from 8th century A.D. are the oldest known Judeo-Persian texts (Asmuseen 1989). In the 17th century, an interest in Judeo-Persian Bible translations awoke in the West and as a result, a Judeo-Persian Pentateuch version was translated and published in 1657 (Asmuseen 1989).

2.3.3 New Persian Translations (11th – 14th Centuries)

During this era some Psalms were translated into a bilingual New Persian-Syriac text from Syriac in the Sogdian Syriac script (Thomas 1985).

During the 15th to 17th centuries, some translations of portions of Scriptures were published in Hebrew, Armenian, Georgian, and Persian characters (Thomas 1985). Some translations were done from Greek, some from Hebrew and some from Arabic.

2.3.4 Modern Translations

Before the 19th century only one complete Persian translation of the Pentateuch and only one complete translation of the Gospels had been published. None of the other Persian translations of the Bible were known or had gained publicity. In fact, each translation was done without the knowledge of the previous translation (Thomas and Vahman 1985). There is no doubt that the New Testament had been translated to Persian many times, but either the translations were not accepted or just remained in libraries (Mohammadian 2001: 30).

In the 20th and 21st centuries other translations of the New Testament into contemporary Persian have been published; some have followed more modern principles of translation, i.e. dynamic equivalence in order to communicate the meaning of the original text, rather than the structure and grammatical forms of the original languages (Hebrew and Greek).

The Bible Society in Iran published a translation of the Bible in 1976. A second translation was published in Tehran in 1979. These translations were only the New Testament (Thomas and Vahman 1985).

2.3.5 Translations under Study in this Thesis

In the 19th century, a series of Persian translations of the Gospels were made in India. Mīrzā Moḥammad Fetrat (under the supervision of R. H. Colebrook) and Nathaniel Sabat (under the direction of Henry Martyn and Leopoldo Sebastiani) translated the Bible (Thomas and Vahman 1985). Martyn realized the translators were not Persian native speakers, and so he traveled to Shiraz to work with Mīrzā Sayyed ‘Alī Khan, a Persian scholar. In one year they translated the whole New Testament from Greek and Psalms from Hebrew. In 1812 he presented a copy of their translation to Faṭḥālī Shah in Tabrīz. Soon afterwards, Martyn died in Turkey. Two years later the Russian Bible Society in St. Petersburg published Martyn’s work, the first known complete New Testament into Persian. Martyn’s translation was highly acclaimed and soon became the foundation for later works. This translation was also the first one to be widely distributed and used by the Christian clergy and laymen (Thomas and Vahman 1985).

William Glen and Mīrzā Moḥammad Ja’far translated the whole Old Testament from Hebrew which was published in 1845 in Edinburgh. This Old Testament was combined with Martyn’s New Testament and published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. This was the first ever complete Bible in Persian. A few years later, Robert Bruce, with the help of Carapet Ohannes and others revised the translation. In 1895 the British and Foreign Bible Society in Leipzig published this Revised Bible. This Bible, which is known as Old Translation (*Tarjome-ye- Ghadim*) (OTV), is still considered as the standard Bible translation in Persian and is used by all communities of faith (Thomas and Vahman 1985).

Sharif Translation (*Enjil-e Sharif*) (SHT) was published by the United Bible Societies in 1976 in Iran. Unfortunately the book does not contain any further information. However, Thomas and Vahman report of a translation which was published in 1976 by the Bible Society in Iran. This version was translated by Šams Eshāq and Edwin H. Jaeger; and edited by Mehdī Abharī and Lewis Johnson. This translation was a joint project by Catholic, Eastern, and Protestant churches (Thomas and Vahman 1985). According to the year and the place of publication as well as both being published by the United Bible Society, it is logical to conclude that both refer to the same translation which is known as the Sharif Translation.

The Farsi Contemporary Translation (*Tarjumeḥ-ye Tafsiri*) (FCT), which is a translation of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, was published in 1995 by the International Bible Society.

In 2003 the New Millennium Version (TarjumeH-ye Hezare-ye no) (NMV), which is a translation of the New Testament, was published by Elam Publications in England. This translation is the work of a group of translators and editors.

And finally Pirouz Sayar translation (Ahd-e Jadid), which is a New Testament, was translated by Pirouz Sayar based on the French translation of the Bible and was published in 2008 by Ney Publication in Iran.

2.3.6 Bible Translation in Other Persian Languages

The earliest known modern Iranian translations of the Bible into languages other than Farsi are in the early 19th century. John Leyden, a professor at Fort William College, was involved in translating the gospel into Pashto, Baluchi and some other languages (Thomas 1985).

Pashto. The entire New Testament was published in 1863. A new translation of the New Testament (1891) and a complete Old Testament (1895) were published (Thomas 1985).

Baluchi. The New Testament plus Genesis, Exodus, and Psalms which were published in Arabic as well as Roman characters towards the end of the 19th century (Thomas 1985).

Kurdish. Quite possibly the Translation of Matthew in Armenian characters was the first book ever published in the Kurdish language. The New Testament was published in 1972 (Thomas 1985).

Mokri. In 1909 the Gospel of Mark and in 1919 the four Gospels were translated into Mokri in Arabic characters (Thomas 1985).

Asōrānī. In 1972 the Living Bible International published the Gospel of John in Asōrānī (Thomas 1985).

Ossetic. The Gospels were translated into Ossetic and were published in 1836 but never circulated. Three other translations of the Gospels were published in 1848, 1861 and 1984. Meanwhile the New Testament from Acts to Revelation was translated but never published (Thomas 1985).

Dari. (Persian now spoken in Afghanistan). In 1982 the New Testament was translated from the Persian translation of 1976 (Thomas and Vahman 1985).

Tajik. (Persian now spoken in Tajikistan and written in Cyrillic script) in 1983 the New Testament was published (Thomas and Vahman 1985).

Azeri. The Bible has also been translated to Azeri language⁶, The New Testament was published in 1878 and the Old Testament in 1891⁷.

⁶ <http://www.korpu.net/Bible.html> December 5, 2011.

This list may not be complete.

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⁷ <http://www.ethnicarvest.org/bibles/azerbajjani.htm> February 17, 2012.