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D. Morgan Davis

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Book Reviews

Sidney H. Griffith. *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by D. Morgan Davis

THE BIBLE TRANSLATED INTO ARABIC is a happening, an event or artifact that craves explanation. As a text it is both product and producer. It has come into being and it brings into being. It is the result of the transformative events of seventh-century Arabia, and in turn, it has resulted in or facilitated the formation of new religious and social realities that have shaped the cultural contours of the Islamicate world for centuries.

Sidney H. Griffith, the doyen of Arabic Christian studies in North America, has been nominally retired for a number of years now but has once again set his emeritus status beside the point of authoring another valuable contribution to the field, this time a summary of the research to date (much of it his own) on the history of the Bible as translated into Arabic. Drawing together many strands of historical and lexical investigation, he has braided a stout cord of historical narrative and philological argument that will reward the attention of scholars of Arabic Christianity for another generation.

As with his other studies, Griffith's latest volume is structured to move methodically through the subject matter. An introductory chapter lays out the major contours of the book and gives a foretaste of what will be salient in each subsequent chapter. In this case, he proceeds both chronologically (opening with chapters on "The Bible in Pre-Islamic Arabia,"

“The Bible in the Arabic Qur’an,” and “The Earliest Translations of the Bible into Arabic”), as well as thematically (“Christian Translations of the Bible into Arabic,” “Jewish Translations . . .,” “Muslims and the Bible in Arabic,” and concluding with a final chapter on the impacts of the Arabic Bible on Muslim, Christian, and Jewish relations). If Griffith’s language is somewhat old school (e.g., “the present writer” or “one” as the subject, and further self-effacement by resorts to the passive voice), his points are nevertheless freshly and clearly stated and then restated as they become relevant to other discussions in other sections of the book.

In the first substantive chapter, Griffith observes that the Qur’an represents the earliest attestation of a fully developed written Arabic and that it is also the earliest written source for any hints as to the identity of the Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews living in Arabia prior to and during the emergence of Muhammad’s following. The consensus is that the Jews to whom it speaks were those contemporary with Muhammad and with whom he is known to have interacted—for example at Yathrib (Medina). There is less clarity about the Christians, so Griffith lays out his case (compelling, in my view) that “contrary to prevailing scholarly consensus,” the Christians to whom the Qur’an occasionally addresses itself “were in fact among the contemporary Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians” of Arabia and its periphery—in other words, those mainline Christian sects in Muhammad’s milieu rather than heretical factions like the Ebionites or Nazarenes (pp. 8–15, 27–28). To buttress this argument, Griffith points to tantalizing linguistic evidence in the Qur’an and other early Islamic sources that Syriac and Ethiopic Christian influences were present in Muhammad’s world (p. 18).

Turning to the biblical figures and stories that are related in the Qur’an itself, Griffith adduces a Qur’anic typology of prophethood by examining the Qur’an’s references to every patriarchal or prophetic figure (biblical and not) and identifying a significant set of features common to its treatment of all of them. This is an impressive elucidation and is helpful not only for making the case that there appear to be no quotations from the Bible of any significant length in the Qur’an (and that, therefore, the Bible in Arabic almost certainly postdates the written composition of the Qur’an), but for showing how the Qur’an

is working to establish Muhammad as the natural and culminating successor to all who had preceded him. This chapter, though long on detail, is Griffith at his most perspicacious. The paradigm by which he adduces the Qur'an's prophetic typology is effective and elegant. He concludes by observing that not only does the Qur'an advance its own distinctive prophetology, even while making reference to biblical figures, it also sets itself forth as a corrective to both Jewish and Christian readings, thereby obviating, in many Muslim minds, the need for any serious consideration of the Bible. The Qur'an also established a vernacular for sacred language in Arabic that was significant not only for Muslims, but for Arabized Jews and Christians as they began to consider ways of rendering their sacred texts and liturgies into Arabic.

Griffith's next task is to offer an informed opinion about the origins and dating of the earliest translations of the Bible into Arabic. First he summarizes the results of his search through medieval reports, catalogues, and biographies for secondary mentions of early translations of the Bible, or portions of the Bible, into Arabic. He includes here the intriguing evidence of early (eighth-century) Muslim authors who only quoted biblical passages in their works, but who presumably had access to now-lost early translations. Based on the evidence, the Gospels were probably the first canonical texts to receive Arabic translation, and the translations likely happened at monasteries in Syria/Palestine and in the Judean Desert as early as the late seventh/early eighth centuries. There is admittedly much surmise here, and Griffith's suggestions can certainly be challenged, but only on the basis of further guesswork; his treatment of the evidence, including extant manuscripts (none of them primary), is careful and thorough.

Examination of these extant manuscripts also suggests that the first Arabic translations were likely made from Syriac *Vorlagen*, with later translators revising the work of their predecessors rather than generating completely new translations. "In all probability," writes Griffith, "this practice attests to the liturgical contexts in which the translations were used, where continuity and familiarity would be desirable" (p. 118). In addition to the liturgical motive for these Arabic translations among Arabized Christians, there was an early apologetic motive that extended

to Jews as well since the Qur^ʿan, in addition to establishing a sacred idiom in Arabic, had also proclaimed its own primacy over the sacred books of Jew and Christian alike. Both communities would therefore have been concerned to “set the biblical record straight” with respect to the Qur^ʿanic treatment of Jewish and Christian history, theology, and prophecy (p. 126). And Arabic versions of the Bible would have been an important step for such a program.

By the ninth century, and continuing thereafter, translations of the Bible into Arabic were becoming more numerous and more widely available, fueled in no small part by the intellectual and cultural foment being generated at Baghdad and the well-known translation movement there. Griffith develops separate chapters on the Bible as translated by Christians and Jews, respectively, during this period. Such a move is understandable, given the complexity of the textual traditions he is chronicling and the real differences at work between Christian and Jewish approaches to their scripture. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the two traditions did not develop in isolation from one another, that the confluence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim currents at Baghdad was a signal characteristic of the period, and that the specific features of each community’s textual production cannot be properly understood without this fact born firmly in mind. Griffith reflects these crosscurrents throughout his discussion. For example, he cites Ronny Vollandt’s important dissertation showing that

while the Melkite and Nestorian Christian communities possessed what [Vollandt] calls “preferred, quasi-canonical versions of the Pentateuch,” done under community auspices from the Septuagint and Peshita versions respectively, the Jacobite and Coptic communities were more inclined to adopt and adapt translations made by translators from other communities, including . . . the widely appreciated Arabic translation of the Torah made in the tenth century by the Jewish scholar Sa^ʿadyah Ga^ʿōn. (p. 130)

This passage demonstrates the variety of Christian approaches to the Arabic Bible, as well as the fact of Jewish influence in some Christian circles. A further section discusses what Richard M. Frank called a Muslim

cast to the language of Christian translations of the Bible into Arabic, featuring “stock phrases or oft-repeated invocations from the Qurʾān that soon became common wherever Arabic was spoken” (p. 137).

Griffith’s book contains more than a brief review can convey—the role of Judeo-Arabic in the evolution of the Jewish Bible in Arabic, the role of Arabic translations from Syriac or other languages for addressing lacunae in the textual traditions of those languages, the significance of individual translators and commentators for the evolution of the Arabic Bible, and so forth. There are occasional bracing admonitions, as well, such as when Griffith remarks that modern scholars often become “so focused on the biblical text itself that they systematically leave out of account any other information, liturgical, historical, or editorial, that the manuscripts may also contain. The result is a continued scholarly camouflaging of the role of the Bible in Arabic in the wider religious culture of the Arabic-speaking world in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages” (p. 208).

Griffith finishes weaving the work of so many scholars into this history by exploring the ways that the three religious traditions—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—have themselves been woven together, sometimes harmoniously, more often in tension, by the Bible in Arabic. His concluding example is of the figure of Abraham, who functions so differently in each tradition as to have historically been invoked by sectarians to highlight their mutual incompatibilities. And yet today, in an ironic twist of history, he is sometimes uncritically acclaimed as a unifying factor for all three (pp. 213–14).

Much more than an overview of a subject of paramount importance to students of the Islamic world, Griffith’s work is a guide to the literature and to the scholars who have produced it over the past half century. His footnotes and bibliography are a trove of information about the state of the discipline and the scholars who have made, and who are currently making, significant contributions to it. It is perhaps no surprise that, as often as not, Griffith’s own previous work features in the notes, and not just peripherally, but as central to a stunning variety of specific issues. It is an inadvertent disclosure, no doubt, but no less certain as such that Griffith’s legacy as a benefactor second to none in this field was assured well before he braided this latest shining strand.

Errata

I noted a few mechanical errors in passing, which I give here in case some of them might be remedied in future printings of this significant and valuable work. The levels of the headings in chapter 3, “The Earliest Translations of the Bible into Arabic,” have a few problems: The second subheading on p. 106 (“Reports on Bible Translations”) should probably be styled one level lower, like that on p. 108, while the subheading on p. 122 (“Earliest Jewish Translations of the Bible into Arabic”) should be styled one level higher (also like that on p. 108).

I also noted a few typographical errors, though I make no claim to being thorough in this regard:

p. 43, l. 14: The “in fact” here is redundant.

p. 44, l. 14: “in an early Islamic texts” should read “in early Islamic texts.”

p. 102, l. 16: “these development” should be “these developments.”

p. 147, n. 72: “Aziz Z. Atiya” should be “Aziz S. Atiya.”

D. Morgan Davis, is a research fellow at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, where he serves as the director of its Middle Eastern Texts Initiative.

Frans van Liere. *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Carl Griffin

SOME NEW BOOKS FILL SUCH a clear need that it is a wonder they were not written sooner. This is one of them: Frans van Liere’s *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*. The Bible in the Middle Ages is a subject of intense study in a number of different fields, including history, literature, and religion. This is no obscure topic. But while this book has clear antecedents, there is no other today quite like it. It is concise but