Melkite (Greek Orthodox) approaches to the Bible at the time of the community’s cultural reawakening in the early modern period (17th–early 18th centuries)*

Carsten Walbiner

Introduction

The 17th century witnessed an impressive intellectual revival within both the main Christian Churches of Bilād al-Shām, and it is not wrong to call this period a pre-nahḍah, as it prepared the way for many later developments and even anticipated some of them. Maronites and Melkites – who in this century were still exclusively the Greek Orthodox – developed manifold cultural, scientific and literary activities. In the case of the Maronites, these activities resulted mainly from their close relations with the Vatican and were largely carried out by the graduates of the Maronite College established in Rome in 1584 by order of the Pope. Often Europe, and not the Near East, was the setting for the scholarly undertakings of Maronite men of learning. It may suffice here to mention John Sionita and Abraham Ecchellensis, who both became involved in the project of the Paris Polyglot Bible.1 The Melkite intellectual revival, which happened chiefly in Syria, and here especially in Aleppo, resulted from a more diverse set of influences. Besides the encounter with the Western European world of thought – mediated by the contacts with missionaries, diplomats and merchants residing in Syria, but also visits to Europe by Near Easterners and the reading of books of European origin – there was an obvious impact from the Greek-speaking world as well as from other Orthodox regions such as the Romanian principalities and Russia.2

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Both Churches took a lead in Arab Christianity’s approach towards modernity and thus became pioneers for the Arab world as a whole.

The Bible was amongst the subjects which met with intensified interest among Maronites and Melkites alike. In the following, the approach of the Melkites towards the Holy Scriptures shall be portrayed. For them, as for all other Christians, the Bible occupied a central place within theological thinking and spiritual life. Although the Orthodox Church by no means prevented private reading of Scripture and individual reflection on it, the Liturgy and other services had become the usual place where the ordinary believer came into contact with the text of the Bible. The intellectual decline of the Orthodox Church in the later Middle Ages, which resulted amongst other things in a widespread neglect of theological education of the clergy, meant that the services were the only occasions where many priests, too, encountered the Bible. What Astéris Argyriou has observed of Greek-speaking Orthodoxy also holds true for the Orthodox of the Arab lands: “Le culte devient ainsi le centre de toute la vie religieuse, spirituelle et théologique. Il devient aussi le lieu privilégié sinon unique de la lecture et de la méditation des [Saintes] Ecritures.” Accordingly, the Bible existed predominantly in versions for liturgical use which were arranged according to the needs of worship and acquired a kind of sacred dignity. Complete texts of the Bible, which “could have served for knowledge and teaching” were mainly absent.

The Melkites went through a long and not entirely recognisable process of Arabisation. The earliest activities of translation, which included Bible texts, can be traced back to the eighth century. This process, which happened on two levels – the vernacular and the liturgical – came to an end in early modern times and with the beginning of the 17th century the Greek Orthodox Meletius Karmah,
soon to be discussed, could state with every justification: *inna al-ʿarabīyah lisā-nunā* (“our language is Arabic”).

In the 17th century the Arabic lectionary in use amongst the Orthodox was generally attributed to ʿAbdallāh b. Faḍl al-ʿAntākī, the famous eleventh-century translator and author. Thus Macarius b. al-Zaʿīm, who will be introduced later, said of “the Deacon ʿAbdallāh b. Faḍl al-ʿAntākī” that “he was very learned in Arabic, Greek and Syrian and [...] translated the New and the Old Testament together with their commentaries into Arabic for the [Arab] Christians, ordering them to read them on all Saturdays, Sundays and feasts of the Lord.”

*Meletius Karmah’s translation project*

But there was also an awareness that many other versions of the Bible were in circulation. Meletius Karmah, who was from 1612 until 1634 Metropolitan of Aleppo and then for one year until his death Patriarch of Antioch, and who must be regarded as the *spiritus rector* and a main protagonist of the intellectual awakening amongst the Orthodox of Syria in the 17th century, was well aware of the multitude of existing Arabic Bible translations, in which he saw a reason for the corruption and defectiveness of the Bible text in use by Arab Christians. In a letter to Rome he says:

“Concerning the books in the churches of the Arab Christians, not a single one is correct and contains the right writing (*kitābah qaṭwaṁah*), because some were translated from Syriac, others from Greek, Armenian or Coptic. The Bible which lately appeared in Rome and had been translated from Coptic into Syriac is taken there [i. e. in Rome]

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to be correct, as Arabic is not your language. But it turns out that it is not correct and true, [but] a weak version, and its publication has been in vain.”

In another place Karmah speaks of the “weeds […] which the heretics sowed [in the Bible texts]” and which must be extracted.\textsuperscript{13} It is interesting to observe that Karmah included the Medici Bible printed in Rome in 1591 in his critique as he had found in it “many mistakes”.\textsuperscript{14}

Karmah made a revision of the liturgical books in use in his Church the main field of his own intellectual activities, and the Bible was naturally included. So Karmah composed a revision of a commentary of the Gospels by John Chrysostom in the translation of ‘Abdallāh b. Faḍl al-Anṭākī\textsuperscript{15}. More interestingly, he conceived an ambitious project for a new translation of the whole Bible into Arabic, for which he designed an approach that sounds very modern. By proposing the inclusion of a Roman Catholic and a Maronite scholar he transgressed confessional boundaries, a most remarkable attitude for his time. Furthermore, the project bears multidisciplinary features as Karmah opted for a cooperation between linguists and theologians.\textsuperscript{16} It remains open to debate to what extent this concept was really Karmah’s own and whether and how it had been influenced by Tommaso Obicini,\textsuperscript{17} an orientalist and missionary whom Karmah proposed as the head of the undertaking. As remarkable as the design of the project is Karmah’s endeavour to have its outcome printed. He clearly recognised that the new medium of book printing offered the previously unavailable opportunity to multiply an identical text in hundreds, if not thousands of copies. Thus, there existed the possibility of unifying the different versions of the Bible in use.

But Rome decided against the proposal from Karmah, who obviously did not see any alternatives for the realisation of his project, which thus remained unaccomplished. But as Hilary Kilpatrick has rightly observed, Karmah’s efforts for a new translation of the Arabic Bible deserve a place of honour in the history of Arabic Bible translations.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{The historical studies by Macarius b. al-Za‘im}

None of those around Karmah possessed the ambition or opportunities to realise his Bible project. Macarius b. al-Za‘im, Karmah’s most faithful disciple, who like

\textsuperscript{12} Walbiner, “‘Und um Jesu willen!’”, 169.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Nasrallah, \textit{Histoire}, vol. IV/1, 78; Idlibī, \textit{Asāqfāt al-Rūm}, 50.
\textsuperscript{16} For details see Walbiner, “‘Und um Jesu willen’”, 165–170, and the contribution by Hilary Kilpatrick elsewhere in this volume.
\textsuperscript{18} See the conclusion to her contribution to this volume.
his mentor became first Metropolitan of Aleppo and then Patriarch of Antioch and who has to be regarded as the most prolific Arab Orthodox writer in early modern times, focused in his work on other issues. Macarius was deeply interested in history and concentrated on providing his community with knowledge about a diversity of subjects. He derived this information mainly from Greek manuscripts and printed books, but also from other sources. It was especially during his two long journeys to the Balkans, Russia and Georgia that Macarius came across the material for his compilations and translations. His notebook-like collections, which are a typical feature of his work as an author, contain a number of entries on the Bible. Besides more “technical” information on the Bible, for instance on “The names of the books of the Old and the New Testament according to the arrangement in the Greek copies” or “The number of the chapters and sections of the Gospels”, one finds explanations of the biblical stories and their protagonists. Here only a few examples will be mentioned. In his collection *Majmūʿ latīf*, Macarius tells his readers “Why Joseph [of Arimathaea] took down the body of Christ [from the cross] already on Friday and did not wait until Saturday”. Another entry sets out “How God in the beginning created 22 innovations within six days”. The *Majmūʿ mubārak* contains amongst others a concise “Explanation of the Gospel of Matthew” and a short “Explanation of sayings and parables from the Gospels”. In the *Kitāb al-Nahlah* Macarius provides short entries “On the fourfold occurrence of biblical things, amongst them the four Evangelists”, “On Moses’ staff and other stories about him”, “On the three holy kings”, “On the 30 pieces of silver for which Judas sold the Lord”, “On the language that Adam spoke” and other matters. In another work there is a longer treatise on place names mentioned in the Bible and other works of Christian provenance which

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26 MS. Homs, Greek Orthodox Metropolitanate 27, fols. 23b–24b.

27 Ibid., fol. 30b.

28 Ibid., fol. 33a.

29 Ibid., fols. 51a–51b.
many people were no longer able to identify. Finally, it is worth mentioning a little tract in which for each letter of the Arabic alphabet Macarius has collected five verses of the Bible (ṣitkhūnāt) starting with the letter concerned. He has done so because, as he observes, many teachers of the Church had done likewise in their liturgical canons and because “many Christian poets have composed verses and poems beginning with the letters in the Arabic alphabetical order”.

As these examples show, Macarius strove mainly for a deeper understanding of biblical events and an illumination of the background to them. Although his approach was unsystematic and purely descriptive and lacked a critical and theological attitude, Macarius nevertheless inspired his readers to think more thoroughly about the Bible, which he saw as a historical document amongst other things, and which he therefore made a subject of his own research.

The printing of the Gospels by Athanasius al-Dabbās

The Melkite approach towards the Bible reached its climax in early modern times with the activities of Athanasius al-Dabbās (1647–1724). The Damascus-born al-Dabbās lived for a while as a monk in the monasteries in and around Jerusalem, which gave him the opportunity to acquaint himself with the Greek world of thought and to enter into close contacts with the Western missionaries stationed in the Holy Land. In 1686 the Aleppans chose him as anti-patriarch against the ruling incumbent Cyrillus al-Za’im. Also supported by Rome, al-Dabbās was able to challenge his opponent successfully for some years. But finally, in 1694, he had to back down and content himself with the diocese of Aleppo for a quarter of a century until, in 1720, after Cyrillus’ death, he became the rightful patriarch of Antioch, a post he held until 1724. In Aleppo al-Dabbās engaged in lively intellectual activities. A long sojourn in Walachia at the turn of the 17th/18th centuries not only provided him with many intellectual impulses but also gave him a deeper understanding of a medium which had not so far found a home in the Arab world – the printing of books with moveable type. Financed by the ruler of Walachia, in 1701 and 1702 two Arabic liturgical books were printed “at the request and under the supervision” (bi-iltimās wa-mushārafah) of al-Dabbās. It seems al-Dabbās learned the

31 MS. St Petersburg, Institute of Oriental Studies, B 1227, fols. 40a–50a.
32 Ibid., fols. 122a–126b.
33 Ibid., fol. 122a.
craft of printing and was, when departing from the Balkans, awarded the necessary equipment for a printing shop. Back in Aleppo, where he returned in 1705, he installed the press and in 1706 the first two books ever printed in Arabic letters in the Arab world came out – the Psalms and the Gospels. It is the edition of the Gospels that interests us in the present context.

There exists some confusion about the character of the 1706 Bible edition. Georg Graf – most likely following Cyrille Charon (Karalevsky) – describes it as the Four Gospels, with the text of the Gospels in its “natural” order but with the readings in the services marked. According to Graf, another edition followed in 1708, with the text arranged according to the readings during the Church’s year, thus a mixture of the four Gospels. But the copy of the 1706 edition examined for this article is clearly of the type ascribed by Graf and Charon to the 1708 edition. It contains the text of the Bible portioned into readings for all the Sundays and Saturdays as well as for the feasts of the Church and must thus be classified as an Aprakos Gospel, meaning that the readings are arranged according to the ecclesiastical year, starting with Easter Sunday. Each reading is followed by a commentary by an unspecified author, introduced by the words qāla ‘l-mufassir (“the commentator says”). Al-Dabbās added an introduction (fātiḥat al-injīl al-sharīf) of five pages to which I will refer later. Georg Graf describes the text as a revised version of the “Egyptian Vulgate”, a view that can be supported by the classification of


39 This is also stated on fol. 4a of the 1706 edition, where the title of the Gospels is repeated, this time followed by the words: *murattaban tartīban kanda‘īsīyān* (“arranged in the ecclesiastical order”) as well as on fol. 5a, where it is stated that the book is “subdivided according to the course of the days of the year” (*muḥāṣṣalān ʿalā madār ayām al-sanāh*). On the partly contradictory descriptions of the (several?) 1706 and 1708 editions see Morozov, D. A., “Arabskoje Evangelie Daniila Apostola (K istorii pervoj arabskoj tipografii na Vostoke)”, *Arkhiv russkoj istorii* 2 (1992), 193–203.

40 Kitāb al-injīl al-sharīf, fols. 1b–3b.

41 Graf, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, 185, 188.
Bible families established by Hikmat Kachouh on the basis of two verses from the Gospel of John (1.1 and 1.18). Regarding these verses, the 1706 edition shows a complete correspondence with two manuscripts of the Egyptian Vulgate from the 16th and 17th century respectively. This means that al-Dabbās chose for his edition a form of the Bible text which in its phrasing was familiar to the readers of his time. He claims in his introduction to have revised the text “according to the Greek language sentence by sentence” and to have “corrected its syntax word by word” (ba‘da an ḥarratubu ʿalā al-lughah al-yūnānīyah bi-wa-aḏḏibi jumlab fa-jumlab wa-ašlabtu i‘rāhabu lafžab fa-lafżah). To what extent this revision led to any substantial changes to the text current in the 17th century remains to be established.

Several authors – amongst them the present speaker – have described the Aleppo Gospels of 1706 as meant for liturgical use. But a thorough reading of the introduction, which in rhymed prose (saj) praises the Bible at length as the central text of Christianity, reveals that al-Dabbās had something else in mind. Hidden in this encomium are some most interesting views of the editor concerning the question of who should read and possess the Book of Books. He believes that possessing the Gospels is “a duty for all believers” (wa-jibun ʿalā kulli min al-mu‘minin) as “it contains ample truths for all ranks of people, be they scholars or illiterates” (li-ṭa‘ammunibi ma‘āniyan kāfiyatan li-kulli rūtab min al-nās, ʿulamā‘ kāni am ummīyīn), married or single, priests or monks (muzawwajan kunta am d‘zaban, ikhlākiyān am rāhiban). People should have the Gospels in their homes as “a preventive weapon and a sharp sword” (silāḥ māni‘ wa-muḥannad qāṭī). And, “to facilitate its possession”, al-Dabbās “set about printing it” (wa-li-kayy yusabha ʿalaika insilāḥu wa-yabha‘a lađaiya iqṭinā‘ubu fa-sharā‘uṭu ḥīnā‘idhin bi-ta‘ībīh).

One can only speculate about the reasons for al-Dabbās’ obvious aim to make the Bible a book read by all strata of people, an approach that contradicted not

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43 Kitāb al-injīl al-sharīf, fol. 3b.

44 For some readers al-Dabbās created with his printed edition a textual authority that was regarded superior to handwritten manuscripts (cf. Walbiner, Carsten, “Some Observations on the Perception and Understanding of Printing amongst the Arab Greek Orthodox [Melkites] in the Seventeenth Century”, in: Printing and Publishing in the Middle East. Papers from the Second Symposium on the History of Printing and Publishing in the Languages and Countries of the Middle East, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 2–4 November, 2005, Philip Sadgrove, ed., Oxford: Univ. Press 2008, 65–76, here 72). However, this opinion was not universally held (see ibid., 74).


46 Kitāb al-injīl al-sharīf, fol. 2a.

47 Ibid., fol. 3a.

48 Ibid., fol. 3b.

49 Ibid., fol. 3b.
only Orthodox conceptions but the reality in early modern Syria. The idea sounds very Protestant, and such an impact cannot be excluded totally as al-Dabbās had come in contact with Protestant thinking – although perhaps unconsciously – while in the Balkans.50

There is another striking feature of al-Dabbās’ introductory words to his edition of the Bible. More than once he uses expressions which have a very strong Muslim connotation. So he speaks of the revelation in the Gospels as tanzīl,51 a term normally used for God’s sending down of the Qurʾān. The Bible is called by al-Dabbās a muṣḥaf sharīf,52 in Muslim circles a very common designation for the Qurʾān. And the recitation of the Bible, normally called qirā’ah, is described by al-Dabbās as tilāwah,53 a term describing the recitation of the Qurʾān.54

What has been said above proves that the 17th and early 18th centuries saw a number of remarkable approaches of Orthodox men of learning to the Bible. Although developed in close contact and exchange with non-Arab traditions, these different ideas and projects must be described as indigenous in inspiration and realisation. Unfortunately, the schism of 1724 in the Melkite Church, which resulted in a great waste of potential, prevented the Orthodox for many generations from following the lead taken by Meletius Karmah, Macarius b. al-Zaʿīm and Athanasius al-Dabbās and approaching the Bible with new questions and concepts.

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51 Kitāb al-injīl al-sharīf, fol. 2a.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., fol. 3a.
54 Accordingly, none of the three terms quoted above are listed in Georg Graf’s Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini (Louvain: Durbecq 1954 [CSCO, 147]).