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Johannine Comma in the Smith-Van Dyck Arabic Bible: Affirming the Trinity in the Middle East

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This study aims to analyse the translation of 1 John 5:6–8 in the Smith-Van Dyck Arabic Bible published in 1865. The analysis of the translation results aims to capture theological discourse, especially in the doctrine of the Trinity, that appears in the translation in relation to the theological understanding of the Middle Eastern church. To that end, the researcher uses analysis of translation results from four aspects of the text, namely vocabulary, syntax (grammar), cohesion and text structure. After analysing the text, the researcher will present the interpretation of the text through a combination of what is in the text and what is in the interpreter based on the sources he has, which are called members' resources by Norman Fairclough. The results of this study indicate that Smith-Van Dyck Arabic Bible (SVD) translators have a clear position and purpose in this Bible translation process. Firstly, SVD translators prioritise formal equivalence in translation and prioritise literal translation techniques. In Bible translation, this translation model shows the translator's orientation that focuses on the source language so that as much as possible its form and content are maintained in the target language. Secondly, the translation orientation that focuses on the source language is also intended to maintain the theological meaning contained in the verses as contained in the source language so that it can be understood by Arabic-speaking Bible readers with the same theological understanding.

Contribution: This research adds to post-colonial discourse by demonstrating how Arabic Bible translations are not neutral, but rather become arenas for negotiations of power and identity. Through these findings, the research enriches discussions on how Arabic biblical texts bear colonial traces while simultaneously providing space for the formation of independent theological identities in the post-colonial Arab world.

Keywords: Smith-Van Dyck Bible; textual analysis; doctrine of the Trinity; Middle Eastern church; interpretation.

Introduction

The history of Christianity has close links with the Middle East region. Christianity was born in this region, where Jesus and His Apostles lived amid Middle Eastern culture. In fact, this area has been recorded as the first area where the Gospel was taught on the Day of Pentecost as stated in Acts 2:8–11.

In the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, discussions about the person of Jesus between his humanity and divinity in the concept of the Trinity became the core of the discussions in both councils. On the other hand, the theme is a central theme in the teachings of Christian faith. This indicates that differences in interpretation and meaning will give birth to important consequences in Christian faith (Bullivant 2015). Therefore, the researcher chose this theme to find the representation of the relationship between the Western church and the Middle Eastern church in the Smith-Van Dyck Arabic Bible, which was first published in 1865.

In this version of the translation, several fundamental differences were found, both linguistically and theologically. Among these differences are the differences in theological discourse that emerged after 1865 when compared to previous translations. Moreover, it was born during the Spiritual Awakening in the 19th century AD, when the missionary movement from Europe and America had reached its peak throughout the world, including in this region. One example is as highlighted by Yahya et al. in the translation of the Lord's Prayer in this version of the Bible that

uses different word choices from various previous Arabic Bible publications (Yahya, Afandi & Burdah 2023). In addition to this research, another study conducted by Hanna highlights how the Smith-Van Dyck Arabic Bible (SVD) Bible gave birth to new knowledge production that formed new identity formations by comparing the results of Al-Shubawy's translation in 1300 (Hanna 2018). In addition to the two above-mentioned studies, discussions around the Arabic Bible focus on philological issues (Kashouh 2012; Zaki 2020, 2021), identity issues (Grafton 2011, 2014, 2015) and its relation to Muslim society (Griffith 2013; Hjälm 2016, 2018)

From the various above-stated studies, the theological issues contained in the Arabic Bible have not been touched upon by many researchers of this issue. Therefore, this study tries to look at the most visible aspect of the differences between cultures, namely language (Richards & O'Brien 2012). Differences in idiomatic phrases, differences in grammar, differences in word meanings and cultural differences are challenges in Bible translation (Luthy 2021). The author uses two verses as a representation of theological issues, namely 1 John 5:6–8. The selection of this verse follows the opinion of Zakaria Botros, a priest from the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt who believes that the verse is one of the main arguments about the concept of the trinity in the New Testament (Botros 2010). In the process of analysing the translation results and translation techniques of the SVD, the researcher compared the translation results of the SVD with other Arabic Bibles against the original Greek text called *textus receptus*. After that, the author will look at the interpretations that come from the choice of words. This study aims to analyse these differences and capture theological discourse, especially in the doctrine of the trinity that appears in the translation in relation to the theological understanding of the Middle Eastern church.

Research methods and design

To achieve the above-stated objectives, the researcher analysed the textual results of the translation of 1 John 5:6–8. The textual analysis in question is the analysis of the translation results from four aspects of the text, namely vocabulary, syntax, cohesion and text structure (Fairclough 1992). However, because the text to be analysed is a translated text, the researcher will first analyse the translation techniques used with the 18 translation techniques offered by Molina and Albir (2002) and the equivalence of the translation results offered by Nida (1964). Since the focus of this research is translation, the researcher also selected verses that have the most significant translation form with the Arabic Bible translation before the SVD edition, namely *al-'Ahd al-Jadid Qibtiy-'Araby* [Coptic-Arabic New Testament].

After analysing the text, the researcher will present the interpretation of the text. The interpretation referred to by Fairclough is an interpretation produced through a combination of what is in the text and what is in the interpreter based on the sources he has, which are called members' resources (Fairclough 1989). With this principle,

the researcher will present this section in several steps. Firstly, the researcher will start from identifying features in the text that are considered to have cues in the interpretation of the text (intertextual context). In the process, the researcher conducted an intertextual study of the SVD Bible text with the Bible from the Coptic Orthodox Church, *al-'Ahd al- Jadid Qibtiy-'Araby* as sample of the local church of the Middle Eastern Christian community to find differences in translation. Secondly, the researcher draws the results of the analysis into a broader social context, namely the context of the native churches of the Middle East in their theological beliefs in their encounters with American missionaries (situational context). From these two steps, it is hoped that the researcher can find a broad picture related to the issue being studied.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Darussalam Gontor Ethics Committee (No. 569/UNIDA/R-b/II/1444).

Results and discussion

1 John 5:6–8 is one of the sources of the trinity teaching that mentions all three persons of the trinity explicitly and simultaneously, besides Matthew 28:19 (Botros 2010). This is what makes theologians and biblical experts such as Zakaria Botros (Botros 2010), Ben Witherington (Witherington III 2011), Brandon Crowe (Crowe 2016), Thomas Torrance (Torrance 2016) and Raymond Brown (Brown 1988) claim it as one of the important verses that mention all three persons of the Trinity together.

This verse begins with the demonstrative word (*ism ishārah*), which is followed by the third-person singular pronoun [*ḍamīr*], '*huwa*' 'He', which refers to Jesus (Dhaif 2013). The use of the noun is to provide focus that verse 6 will focus on '*huwa*' [him]. However, the translator places the subject '*Yasu' al-masīh*' after the verb '*atā*' 'come' and the adverb '*bi ma'in wa damin*' 'with water and blood'. This is intended to provide specialisation on work that can only be done by one subject, namely '*Yasu' al-masīh*' (Barton & Muddiman 2001). The use of demonstrative words and third person pronouns follows the Greek text, which begins with the phrase 'οὗτός ἐστιν' 'this is he'. In addition, in the Greek text, the subject 'Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χριστός' 'Jesus Christ' is indeed mentioned after the verb 'ἐλθών' 'come' and the description 'δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος' 'through water and blood', thus showing a literal translation technique because it maintains the structure of the source sentence.

In the same verse, the translator also translates the second part with particles and nouns only, without any accompanying predicate. If you look at the particle and noun '*bil ma'i wa al-dami*' [with water and blood], then it can be seen that the genitive marker [*kasrah*] refers to the first sentence in this verse and has an adverbial function from the verb '*atā*'. However, in this part, the words '*al-mā'i*' and '*al-dami*' are expressed in the form of definite nouns [*ma'rifah*], different

from the first part that is in the form of indefinite nouns [*nakirah*] so that the reader can understand that the noun is the same noun as mentioned at the beginning of this verse. This section shows the technique of literal translation, where the translator follows the Greek text that does not use definite markers or the initial article in the words 'ὕδατος' and 'αἵματος', then in the next section the translator uses the definite markers 'τῷ ὕδατι' and 'τῷ αἵματι' (Margianto 2004).

At the end of verse 6, the translator begins with the noun '*al-rūḥ*' 'the Spirit' preceded by the connecting particle '*wa*'. In this section, the translator uses the noun '*al-rūḥ*' in the definite form with '*alif*' and '*lam*' so as to show that the '*rūḥ*' referred to is the Holy Spirit, as in the Greek text using the word 'τὸ πνεῦμα' 'the Spirit' with a definite marker. In the translation, the technique used is the usual equivalent. The predicate attached to the subject is '*yashhadu*' 'witnessing', a present and future tense verb. In the SVD, the translator uses this verb to translate 'μαρτυροῦν' 'bearing witness' in the textus receptus as the usual equivalent in Arabic (Al-Sayyid & Thalasinos 1990; Khalaf 1979). The translation results also show the common equivalences used by the translator.

In verse 7, the translator begins with the particle '*fa inna*', which gives the meaning of emphasis to the words that appear after it and there is continuity with the previous verse. The particle was chosen by the translator to translate the particle 'ὅτι' in the Greek text. However, in the Arabic text, the translator can be seen adding the particle '*fa*' at the beginning of the verse, which is not found in the source text. This shows the existence of a linguistic amplification technique at the beginning of this verse. Furthermore, the translator gives the subject for '*inna*' in the form of a conjunction [*ism mauṣūl*] '*alladhīna*', which indicates the subject of the second- or third-person plural pronoun. The explanation of the subject is clarified by the verb used, which indicates the present and future tense verb '*yashhadūna*' 'they bear witness', which refers to the subject that is the third person plural pronoun '*hum*'. As is common in Arabic, the use of pronouns in a sentence is when the subject or object referred to is known and the placement of *ḍamīr* like this is called a form of deviation in Arabic sentences (Dhaif 2013). In this verse, the subject referred to as '*hum*' is mentioned at the end of the clause, namely '*al-Āb, al-kalimah, al-rūḥ al-qudus*' 'Father, Word, Holy Spirit'. This structure has a slight difference with the source text, where this verse begins with the word 'τρεῖς' 'three' before the verb 'μαρτυροῦντες' 'to bear witness', while in the SVD the word '*thalathah*' 'three' is placed at the end of the clause and after the verb '*yashhadūna*'. This shift in structure shows the use of transposition techniques.

However, the placement of the three subjects at the end of the clause in the SVD is in line with the sentence structure in the textus receptus, thus indicating a literal translation. This placement also provides a specification that the three subjects will carry out the work of '*yasyhadūna fi al-samā'i*' 'bearing witness in heaven' (in the future tense). Because it uses the

future tense verb, the work will be carried out in the future. In addition, the translator also consistently uses '*al-samā'*' 'the heaven' as the equivalent of 'οὐρανῷ' and '*al-rūḥ al-qudus*' as the equivalent of 'τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα', which consists of an adjective and a substantive, as the usual equivalent found in the previous verses. In this verse, the translator uses the technique of linguistic amplification by adding '*fa*', the common equivalent in the words '*al-samā'*' and '*al-rūḥ al-qudus*', and the technique of transposition and literal translation in the sentence structure.

In verse 8, the verse begins with the connecting particle '*wa*', which shows the equality of work with verse 7, where the particle 'καί' is also used in the Greek text. In addition, verse 8 also has exactly the same structure as verse 7, with the difference in context that '*yashhadūna*' in this verse is carried out on earth ['*fi al-arḍ*']. Although both refer to the third-person plural pronoun, the subjects mentioned in this verse are '*al-rūḥ, al-mā'u, al-damu*' 'Spirit, water, blood'. At the end of this verse, the translator writes '*wa al-thalathatu hum fi al-wāḥid*' 'and the three are one' using the predicate in the form of *shibh al-jumlah* [semi-sentence] (Al-Makarim 2007), consisting of the genitive particle [*jarr*] '*fi*' and the genitive noun [*majrūr*] '*al-wāḥid*'. The form of this clause is the same as the clause structure in the Greek text, namely 'οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἕν εἰσιν' 'the three are one'. In this clause, the SVD translator uses the same clause as the source text and shows the use of literal translation techniques. From the results of the translation, it was found that the dominant orientation in this verse is formal equivalence.

Interpretation of translation results on the concept of the Triune God

As evident from the preceding explanation, there is a significant change in the translation of 1 John 5:7 in the SVD. The context of 1 John 5:6–8 is the emphasis of the doctrine of the Trinity and Jesus is part of the Trinity. At the time of its writing, there was a heresy that said that Jesus was an ordinary human being to whom 'Christ' came during his baptism. Furthermore, when Jesus was crucified, 'Christ' left Jesus, which is understood from Jesus' words when he was crucified in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 (Bryant 2008; Witherington III 2011). Those who believed this were known as the Ebionites, who believed that Jesus was an ordinary human being, the son of Joseph and Mary, who became the Messiah after being baptised because the Holy Spirit descended upon him (Purdaryanto & Siahaan 2020). Therefore, John rejects this deviant teaching with these three verses.

The existence of verse 7, which is not recognised by the Coptic Orthodox churches that are the targets of missionaries, is not without reason. Bible translators understand that the concept of the Trinity has many interpretations that have become heresies in the history of Christianity, especially in the Middle East. In the early days, the belief in the Trinity in Christianity had syncretism with the understanding of

divinity from Pagan groups and Mesopotamian traditions, which were based on polytheism. For example, the people of Arabia had a basic pattern of divinity in the form of a triad consisting of *Al-lah* [the Highest God], *Al-lat* [the Highest Goddess] and *Ba'al* [the Son of God]. In worship, they called 'Our God, Our Goddess, and the Son of Both, Be'el Shamim' (Trimingham 1979). This pattern then influenced the understanding of the Trinity of Arab Christian society by placing the Father as the Supreme God, Mary as the Supreme Goddess and Christ as the Son, who is the biological descendant of both (Parrinder 1996; Trimingham 1979).

Another belief that also emerged in Ancient Egyptian civilisation was the Goddess Isis who was also worshiped and considered the Mother of God because she gave birth to Horus who was the Sun God, the Protector God, the God of War and the Ruler of all Egypt. This also influenced Mary's position as the 'divine mother' in the Christian concept of divinity in the region (Butler 2005; Higgins 2012). This belief pattern was later known as the Collyridians sect, which placed Mary in the person of God in the Trinity. Mun'im Sirry and Gabriel Said Reynolds stated that the sect was a Christian group in Arabia that was criticised by the Qur'an in Qur'an Surah 5:73 (Reynolds 2019; Sirry 2017). This belief pattern later emerged in the theology taught by Bardaisan (154–222) of Edessa. Based on information from Efem, an Asian theologian, Bardaisan taught that the Son was born from the biological relationship of the Father with the Holy Spirit (Mother of Life) (Ruck 2011). In addition, Aphraates of Edessa (280–245) also stated that humans have God as Father and the Holy Spirit as Mother, which is based on the Gospel of the Hebrews and Origen's (185–253) interpretation of the Gospel (Parrinder 1996).

Therefore, Nestorius (386–451), a priest from Antioch who later became Bishop of Constantinople, made an offer to avoid misunderstandings about Mary. He proposed to reject the title *Theotokos* [Θεοτόκος] 'Mother of God', which was given to Mary to separate the Christian community from the belief patterns circulating in the Middle East at that time. Instead, he gave the title *Christotokos* [Χριστοτόκος] 'Mother of Jesus', which showed that what was conceived by Mary was a human person. The effect of this statement is the understanding that Jesus is a human who has two persons, namely the person of God and the person of Man, and Mary is the mother of the human person and not the mother of the Eternal Word (Edwards 2009). This certainly invited rejection from various parties, including St. Cyril of Alexandria (380–444) who said that he had indirectly denied the divinity of Jesus. At the Council of Ephesus in 431, Nestorius was condemned as a heretic and dismissed from Constantinople (Ruck 2011).

The debate surrounding the concept of the Trinity also arose from the thoughts of Arius of Alexandria (250–336). He argued that Jesus was a creature and not equal to God because He was the first-born and highest-ranking creation as stated in Colossians 1:15 (Purdaryanto & Siahaan 2020).

He quoted John 14:8, which states that the Father is greater than Jesus, so Jesus has a lower degree than the Father. The followers of this idea are known as Arians (Pranoto 2019). The implication of this understanding is the belief in the divine and human nature of Jesus, which later became known as the Monophysite movement. In 381, the Council of Constantinople was held, which confirmed the human nature of Jesus [*vere homo*] (Edwards 2009). This made Athanasius (296–373), Bishop of Alexandria, strongly oppose Arius' statement in his book '*De incarnatione*' [On the Incarnation], which confirmed that in the person of Jesus there is the nature of God and man. Athanasius' statement was supported in the Council of Nicaea in 325 and Arius was condemned as a heretic. Athanasius' formulation of the Trinity later became the initial formulation of the Trinity as it is known today after being perfected by Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389) (McGrath 2012).

The various controversies surrounding the concept of the Trinity are dominated by deviant thoughts and understanding of this concept or what is known as the pseudo-Trinity (Johnson 2000). The many controversies led Walter Bauer to conclude that Christianity was basically born from various individual understandings of Christian doctrine or from heterodoxy to orthodoxy. He gave the thesis that Christianity that exists today is one of the various forms of understanding of Christianity that was born in the early centuries and then accepted by the majority. These minority understandings were then labelled as 'heresy' (Bauer 1996). These schools of thought were also born in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Antioch and Edessa (in addition to Rome, Asia Minor and Macedonia). This conclusion certainly invited various rejections from theologians. Likewise in this translation process, the various above-mentioned translation results are in order to provide a correct conception of the Trinity with the three Persons mentioned directly in 1 John 5:7.

The result of the translation showed that the SVD translator has a clear position and purpose in this Bible translation process. Firstly, the SVD translator prioritises formal equivalence in translation and prioritises literal translation techniques. In Bible translation, this translation model shows the translator's orientation that focuses on the source language so that as much as possible the form and content in it are maintained in the target language (Nida 1964). Secondly, the orientation of the translation that focuses on the source language is also intended to maintain the theological meaning contained in the verses as contained in the source language so that it can be understood by Arabic-speaking Bible readers with the same theological understanding. From the various above-stated explanations, it can be seen how the Bible published by Rome still follows the pattern of the Coptic translation of the Bible and does not refer to the Greek text in the translation of the New Testament. This is what then makes the SVD translation faithful to the pure form in the Greek text and not trapped in the results of previous Arabic Bible translations, both from the Coptic church and from the Roman Catholic church.

In addition, based on the techniques and methods used, the translation ideology in the translation of the SVD Bible can be seen. From the various above-stated explanations, it was found that the dominant technique used in translating these verses was the literal translation technique, and the orientation of equivalence was dominated by formal equivalence, so the ideology that emerged in this translation was the foreignising ideology. This ideology emphasises the conformity of the translation results with the source text (Venuti 2008), so that in Schleiermacher's language, the writer simply remains silent and the reader moves towards him (Venuti 2013). This ideology is also widely used in translating sacred texts and canonical texts to obtain messages and ideas that are on the same frequency as the messages and ideas in the source text. Translation ideology arises from various translation techniques and methods used in the translation process. However, the choice of words and word structures (lexico-grammatical) is also an indicator of the ideological motivation of the translator and the translation. This is because these texts reproduce ideology through specific vocabulary, sentence structure patterns (active-passive), linguistic particles (adverbs, negations, conditions, pronouns and so on), cohesion patterns between sentences and discourses and the structure of information and thematics presented. From here, it can be concluded that the order of discourse (Fairclough 1992) from this biblical text is the enlightenment of Christian theology in the Middle Eastern church, which is considered to have deviated theologically. American Board Commissioner for Foreign Mission (ABCFM), the mission institution that sent Dr. Smith and Dr. Van Dyck, who was born in this era of revival, believes that it is the responsibility of American youth to teach them the correct and biblical theological understanding. Up to this point, the dominant motivation and order of discourse that emerged from the SVD Bible translation was the motivation of the theological movement driven by the spirit of the mission institution that sent it.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that the SVD translators have a clear position and purpose in the process of translating the Bible. Firstly, the SVD translators prioritise formal equivalence in translation and prioritise literal translation techniques. In Bible translation, this translation model shows the orientation of the translator who focuses on the source language so that as much as possible the form and content in it are maintained in the target language. Secondly, the translation orientation that focuses on the source language is also intended to maintain the theological meaning contained in the verses as contained in the source language so that it can be understood by Arabic-speaking Bible readers with the same theological understanding. From the various above-stated explanations, it can be seen how the Bible published by Rome still follows the pattern of the Coptic translation of the Bible and does not refer to the Greek text in the translation of the New Testament. This is what then makes the SVD translation faithful to the pure form in the Greek text and not trapped in the results of previous Arabic Bible translations, both from the Coptic church and the Roman Catholic church.

The results of the study also show that American missionary institutions and missionaries from Protestant churches see churches in the Middle East as having conceptions that are often different from the views of churches in Europe and America, especially in theological matters such as the doctrine of the Trinity. However, finding the ideology that operates in the translated text is not simple. Therefore, the analysis carried out does not stop at textual analysis alone but needs to be supplemented with the way the translator expresses the translation, the process of text production and its relevance to the readers who receive it. Therefore, the discussion of ideology in the translation of the SVD Bible needs to be expanded with an analysis of social practices or other analyses related to the social conditions of the society that consumes it to make the dominant ideology more visible and comprehensive.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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