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Translating *paradoseis*: 2 Thessalonians 2:15, the Smith–Van Dyck Arabic Bible and Protestant hermeneutics in the 19th century Greater Syria

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Authors:
Yuangga K. Yahya[1]
Farhah Farhah[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Comparative Study of Religions, Faculty of Ushuluddin, University of Darussalam Gontor, Ponorogo, Indonesia

Corresponding author:
Yuangga Kurnia Yahya,
yuangga4@unida.gontor.ac.id

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This study examines the rendering of 2 Thessalonians 2:15 in the Smith–Van Dyck Arabic Bible, produced by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in nineteenth-century Greater Syria. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis alongside historical and exegetical approaches, it investigates the theological significance of translating paradoseis as *al-taʿālīm* [teachings] rather than the more literal Arabic equivalent *al-taqālīd* [traditions]. While paradosis in Pauline theology denotes the authoritative apostolic tradition received from Christ and transmitted to the churches, and most major Protestant Bible translations retain the rendering 'traditions', the study argues that the Smith–Van Dyck translators' lexical preference reflects an interpretive choice historically consistent with the Protestant understanding that apostolic tradition is normatively preserved in Scripture. Rather than characterising the Smith–Van Dyck Bible as a wholly Protestant translation, the article demonstrates how a single translation decision may embody theological concerns shaped by missionary objectives and interconfessional debate. It argues that the theological significance of a translation emerges not from lexical equivalence alone but from the interaction between language, historical context and religious discourse.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study contributes to biblical studies, church history and mission studies by demonstrating how a single translation decision reflects theological interpretation within its historical context. By integrating biblical exegesis, translation studies, Critical Discourse Analysis and Middle Eastern history, it shows that translation choices in sacred texts are historically situated interpretive acts shaped by theological commitments and missionary contexts, while encouraging further interdisciplinary research on Bible translation, doctrinal interpretation and religious identity.

Keywords: Smith–Van Dyck Bible; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; *paradosis*; Pauline theology; Protestant hermeneutics.

Introduction

The doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* constitutes one of the defining theological principles of the Protestant Reformation. Emerging in the 16th century, this doctrine asserts that Scripture alone represents the ultimate authority for Christian faith and practice. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin argued that ecclesiastical traditions and institutional authority must remain subordinate to the Word of God (McGrath 2012:264). Within this framework, Scripture is understood not merely as a theological reference but as the normative standard governing Christian doctrine.

In contrast, both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions emphasise the inseparability of Scripture and tradition as sources of divine revelation. Catholic theology, particularly as articulated in *Dei Verbum*, maintains that Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition together constitute a unified deposit of faith entrusted to the Church (Konferensi Wali Gereja Indonesia 2011:11). Similarly, the Orthodox Church views Scripture as embedded within the broader life of the Church, where apostolic tradition – including liturgy, councils and patristic writings – plays an essential role in preserving and interpreting revelation (Rehatta 2022:8).

Protestant and Catholic interpreters alike recognise that *paradosis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 refers to the apostolic tradition transmitted by Paul. Their disagreement lies not in the authority of the apostolic tradition itself but in the way that tradition is preserved and normatively interpreted. Protestant theology generally understands the apostolic tradition as preserved in Scripture,

whereas Catholic and Orthodox theology affirms its transmission through both Scripture and Sacred Tradition within the life of the Church (Croy 2011; McGrath 2012).

A notable feature of the Smith–Van Dyck translation is its rendering of *paradoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 as *al-taʿālīm* [teachings] rather than *al-taqālīd* [traditions], the term commonly used in earlier Arabic translations associated with Eastern Christian traditions. This lexical difference raises important questions concerning the relationship between translation and theological orientation: (1) to what extent does the translation reflect the Protestant theological principle of *Sola Scriptura*? and (2) how does this linguistic choice function within the broader missionary context of the 19th century Greater Syria?

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that Bible translation cannot be understood solely as a linguistic activity but must also be analysed as a cultural and ideological practice. Studies of the Smith–Van Dyck Bible have shown that translation choices often reflect broader theological and institutional agendas such as Yahya, Afandi and Burdah (2023), Yahya, Rochma and Mahmudah (2024) and Rasyid, Yahya and Imamah (2025). Building upon this scholarship, the present study analyses the translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:15 through the framework of critical discourse analysis. Rather than seeking to characterise the Smith–Van Dyck Bible as a whole, this article focuses on a single translation decision within its historical and theological setting. It argues that the rendering of *paradoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 reflects an interpretive choice that is historically and theologically consistent with the Protestant missionary context in which the translation was produced. Accordingly, the study does not claim that every translation decision in the Smith–Van Dyck Bible appears historically consistent with Protestant hermeneutical priorities within the 19th century missionary context.

Research methods and design

This study employed Fairclough's (1992:71) critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, which conceptualises language use as a communicative event composed of three interconnected dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice and social practice.

The first dimension focuses on textual analysis. The translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:15 in the Smith–Van Dyck Bible is examined in relation to the Greek *Textus Receptus* and earlier Arabic translations. Because the primary objective of this study is to examine the translation strategy employed by the Smith–Van Dyck translators rather than to establish the earliest recoverable Greek text, the Greek source text used for comparison is the *Textus Receptus*. Historically, the Smith–Van Dyck translation was produced within the textual tradition that relied predominantly on the *Textus Receptus*, which also served as the basis for many Protestant vernacular translations during the 19th century. Accordingly, the use of the *Textus Receptus* enables this study to evaluate the translators' lexical and syntactic decisions within the historical textual tradition from which the translation emerged, rather than against later critical editions such as the Nestle-Aland or UBS Greek New Testament. Particular attention is given to vocabulary, grammatical structure and translation techniques. Translation strategies are analysed using the framework proposed by Molina and Albir (2002), while the concept of equivalence is informed by Nida's (1964:165) distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence.

The second dimension concerns discursive practice, which includes the processes of production, distribution and reception of texts. In this context, the study examines the production of the Smith–Van Dyck Bible by American Protestant missionaries and its dissemination among Arabic-speaking Christian communities.

The third dimension addresses social practice by situating the translation within the broader historical context of missionary competition and theological contestation in the 19th century Greater Syria. By integrating these three levels of analysis, the study seeks to demonstrate how translation functions as both a linguistic and ideological practice. Because this article is designed as a historical case study rather than a comprehensive evaluation of the Smith–Van Dyck Bible, the analysis is intentionally limited to a single text whose theological reception has long occupied a central place in Protestant–Catholic discussions concerning Scripture and tradition.

Findings and discussion

Textual analysis of 2 Thessalonians 2:15

About the issue outlined above, this study analyses 2 Thessalonians 2:15, which forms part of Paul's epistle. The Catholic Church understands this verse as a biblical foundation for the Apostles' exhortation to the faithful to hold firmly to the inherited teachings they received both orally and in written form (Konferensi Wali Gereja Indonesia 2011:10). Protestant churches, on the other hand, affirm that Scripture is the inspired Word of God and the normative authority for Christian faith and practice. While many evangelical traditions emphasise divine inspiration operating through individual biblical authors, contemporary Protestant

TABLE 1: Comparison of 2 Thessalonians 2:15 in the Greek *Textus Receptus* and Selected Arabic Bible Translations.

Textus Receptus	al-Kutub al-Muqaddasah 1811	al-'Ahd al-Jadid Qibtiy-'Araby	Smith–Van Dyck Bible
αρα ουν αδελφοι στηκετε και κρατειτε τας παραδοσεις ας εδιδαχθητε ειτε δια λογου ειτε δι επιστολης ημων	15فقفوا إذًا أَيُّهَا الإِخْوَةُ وَاَمسِكُوا التَّقْلِيْدَاتِ الَّتِي تَعَلَّمْتُمُوهَا، أما بِقَوْلِنَا وأما بِرِسَالِيلِنَا.	15فَاثْبُتُوا إِذًا أَيُّهَا الإِخْوَةُ وَتَمَسَّكُوا بِالتَّقَالِيْدِ الَّتِي تَعَلَّمْتُمُوهَا، سَوَاءٌ بِكَلاَمِنَا أَمْ بِرِسَالَتِنَا.	15فَاثْبُتُوا إِذًا أَيُّهَا الإِخْوَةُ وَتَمَسَّكُوا بِالتَّعَالِيمِ الَّتِي تَعَلَّمْتُمُوهَا، سَوَاءٌ كَانَ بِالْكَلاَمِ أَمْ بِرِسَالَتِنَا.

Note: The Greek text presented in Table 1 is taken from the *Textus Receptus* because it represents the textual tradition on which the Smith–Van Dyck translators principally relied during the 19th century, viewed on 01 April 2026 from https://www.textusreceptusbibles.com/Elzevir/53/2; and Sarah Hodgson et al. *Al-Kutub al-Muqaddasah, wa-hiya Kutub al-'Ahd al-'Atīq wa-al-'Ahd al-Jadīd*, Newcastle: Sarah Hodgson, 1811; The Bible Society of Egypt, *New Testament Coptic-Arabic*, Cairo: The Bible Society of Egypt, 2017; Eli Smith & Cornelius Van Dyck, *Smith–Van Dyck Bible*, Beirut: ABCFM, 1865.

biblical scholarship also recognises that several biblical books emerged through complex processes of composition, transmission and redaction involving communities of faith. Nevertheless, these literary processes do not diminish Scripture's theological authority, which remains grounded in divine inspiration rather than ecclesiastical tradition (Barton & Muddiman 2001; McGrath 2012; Soesilo 2014).

The Greek text of 2 Thessalonians 2:15 exhorts believers to 'stand firm and hold to the traditions [*paradoseis*] which you were taught, whether by word or by letter'. In earlier Arabic translations associated with Eastern Christian communities, this term is typically rendered as *al-taqālīd* [traditions]. The Smith–Van Dyck translation, however, uses the term *al-taʿālīm* [teachings] (see Table 1). This lexical choice significantly alters the semantic emphasis of the verse. While the term *taqlīd* implies inherited tradition or customary practice, the term *taʿlīm* refers to instruction or doctrinal teaching intended to communicate knowledge. Arabic lexical sources confirm that *taʿlīm* denotes 'structured teaching designed to convey authoritative knowledge' (Al-Yasū'I 2015:526).

From a translation perspective, this shift may be understood as a form of particularisation, in which a broader term is rendered using a more specific expression (Molina & Albir 2002). Rather than emphasising tradition as a continuing ecclesiastical authority, the translation foregrounds doctrinal instruction associated with apostolic teaching.

Other structural features of the translation also demonstrate a tendency towards formal equivalence. For example, the phrase *bi al-kalām* [by word] reflects the Greek expression *dia logou* without adding interpretive elements present in other Arabic translations. Such choices indicate an effort to preserve the structure of the source text while maintaining linguistic clarity in Arabic.

Taken together, these translation decisions should not be understood as implying that Protestant Bible translations generally avoid the term 'tradition'. On the contrary, many major Protestant translations – including the King James Version (KJV), English Standard Version (ESV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and New International Version (NIV) – translate *paradoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 as 'traditions'. From a lexical perspective, *paradosis* ordinarily denotes something handed over or transmitted and, in Pauline usage, often refers to apostolic instruction received from Christ and entrusted to the churches (cf. 1 Cor 11:2, 23). Consequently, the issue is not the lexical meaning of the word itself, but the theological significance attributed to that tradition.

The explanation above demonstrates that the lexical distinction found in the Smith–Van Dyck Bible is not representative of Protestant Bible translations generally. Instead, it raises the question of why this rendering emerged within the historical setting of the 19th century Protestant missions. It should first be recognised that the Greek term *paradosis* does not carry an inherently negative connotation in Pauline theology. Lexically, it denotes 'that which is handed over' or 'tradition' and, in Paul's letters, commonly refers to the apostolic teaching received from Christ and faithfully transmitted to the churches. This understanding is reinforced by Paul's use of the cognate verbs *paralambanō* [to receive] and *paradidōmi* [to hand over], particularly in 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 11:23, where the apostle presents himself as receiving the tradition from the Lord and transmitting it unchanged to the Christian community. As several Pauline scholars have observed, *paradosis* in these contexts refers to the authoritative apostolic tradition that constitutes the foundation of Christian faith rather than to later ecclesiastical customs or practices (Dunn 1998; Green 2000; Thiselton 2000).

Accordingly, the theological issue surrounding 2 Thessalonians 2:15 does not concern the legitimacy of apostolic tradition itself, because both Protestant and Catholic traditions acknowledge the authority of the apostolic message. Rather, the point of contention lies in how that apostolic tradition is preserved and exercised within the life of the Church. Protestant theology generally understands the apostolic tradition as normatively preserved in Scripture, whereas Catholic and Orthodox theology maintains that it is transmitted through both Scripture and Sacred Tradition under the teaching authority of the Church (Council Fathers 2017; Croy 2011; Konferensi Wali Gereja Indonesia 2011; McGrath 2012).

Against this theological background, the rendering of *paradoseis* as *al-taʿālīm* [teachings] in the Smith–Van Dyck Bible assumes particular historical significance. The translation should not be interpreted as representative of Protestant Bible translations in general, because many major Protestant versions – including the King James Version, English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible and New International Version – retain the rendering 'traditions'. Rather, within the specific missionary context of the 19th century Greater Syria, the lexical preference for *al-taʿālīm* appears to reflect an interpretive strategy that directed readers' attention to the content of apostolic instruction instead of the concept of ecclesiastical tradition. In doing so, the translation aligns with the broader Protestant hermeneutical emphasis that doctrinal authority ultimately derives from the apostolic witness preserved in Scripture.

The authority of Scripture as a discursive practice

From a linguistic perspective, the distinction between *al-taqālīd* and *al-taʿālīm* should not be understood merely as a difference in vocabulary. In contemporary and classical Arabic, *al-taqālīd* [التقاليد] generally denotes traditions, customs, or inherited practices transmitted across generations, while *al-taʿālīm* [التعاليم] refers primarily to teachings, instructions, or doctrinal content communicated by an authoritative teacher. Classical Arabic lexicons similarly derive *taʿālīm* from the root *ʿ-l-m*, emphasising instruction and imparted knowledge, whereas *taqālīd* derives from the root *q-l-d*, denoting something handed down, entrusted or inherited.

Although both terms involve transmission, they evoke different semantic domains: *taqālīd* foregrounds continuity with inherited tradition, whereas *taʿālīm* emphasises the content of instruction and teaching. This lexical distinction becomes theologically significant within the context of the 19th century Protestant–Catholic controversy, where the authority of ecclesiastical tradition constituted a central point of debate.

The translation of paradoseis as *al-taʿālīm* reflects the theological orientation of the Protestant missionaries responsible for producing the Smith–Van Dyck Bible. Within Protestant theology, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* affirms Scripture as the normative authority for Christian doctrine. Accordingly, the preference for *al-taʿālīm* may be understood as an interpretive choice that foregrounds apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture rather than ecclesiastical tradition. This article does not suggest that *al-taʿālīm* and *al-taqālīd* are lexical opposites, nor that the Smith–Van Dyck Bible in its totality constitutes a Protestant translation. Rather, it argues that this lexical preference acquires theological significance only within the historical context of the 19th century Protestant missions.

Accordingly, this article does not argue that the Smith–Van Dyck Bible in its totality constitutes a distinctly Protestant translation. Rather, it proposes that the rendering of *paradoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 represents an interpretive decision whose theological significance becomes apparent when considered within the historical context of the 19th century Protestant missions in Greater Syria. The argument, therefore, concerns the theological implications of this particular translation choice rather than the overall theological character of the Smith–Van Dyck Bible.

Within Fairclough's notion of discursive practice, translation is understood as a process of textual production and circulation through which particular theological meanings become normalised. The Smith–Van Dyck Bible was not produced in isolation but within the institutional network of the ABCFM, whose publishing, educational and missionary activities shaped the reception of biblical texts among Arabic-speaking Christians. Consequently, the rendering of *paradoseis* as *al-taʿālīm* should also be understood as part of a wider process through which Protestant interpretations of apostolic authority entered Arabic Christian discourse.

Theological significance of the translation choice

Contemporary translation studies recognise that Bible translation is an interpretive act shaped by historical and theological contexts (Molina & Albir 2002; Nida 1964). Accordingly, lexical variation may reveal broader theological orientations when interpreted within its historical setting. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Smith–Van Dyck Bible. Grafton (2015) demonstrates that the translation project emerged within the missionary programme of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), whose objective extended beyond linguistic accessibility to the promotion of Protestant theological convictions among Arabic-speaking Christians. Similarly, Erdman (1937) notes that the Arabic Bible became an important instrument in the theological encounter between Protestant missionaries and the long-established Catholic and Orthodox traditions in the Middle East. These studies suggest that lexical choices in the Smith–Van Dyck translation cannot be separated entirely from the theological environment in which the translation was produced.

Against this background, the present study does not argue that the rendering of *paradoseis* as *al-taʿālīm* is intrinsically or universally Protestant. Rather, it argues that this translation choice acquires theological significance when read within the historical context of the 19th century Protestant missions in Greater Syria. The preference for *al-taʿālīm* over the more literal equivalent *al-taqālīd* appears consistent with the broader Protestant hermeneutical emphasis that doctrinal authority rests upon apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture rather than upon ecclesiastical tradition. Accordingly, the theological significance lies not in the lexical item itself but in the interpretive framework within which the translation was produced and circulated.

This finding is also consistent with previous studies on the Smith–Van Dyck Bible, which demonstrate that translation choices frequently reflect theological orientation. Yahya et al. (2023) show how semantic adjustment in Matthew 6:12 reflects interpretive decisions beyond literal equivalence, while Rasyid et al. (2025) argue that the retention of the Johannine Comma in the Smith–Van Dyck Bible reinforces a distinctly Protestant understanding of Trinitarian doctrine. The present study extends this line of inquiry by demonstrating that similar theological considerations are also evident in the rendering of *paradoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

Catholic–Protestant contestation in Greater Syria

The translation must also be understood within the broader context of missionary activity in the Middle East. Protestant missionaries entering the region in the 19th century therefore encountered well-established ecclesiastical traditions. Bible translation became one of the central strategies through which Protestant missionaries sought to introduce their theological perspective. The Smith–Van Dyck Bible played a crucial role in this process. Millions of copies were printed and distributed throughout the Arabic-speaking world during the late 19th century and early 20th century (Erdman 1937:220). As a result, the translation became one of the most influential Arabic Bibles in modern history (Torrey 1919; Leavy 1993).

The significance of the translation therefore lay not only in its lexical choices but also in the institutional mechanisms through which those choices were disseminated. Schools, missionary presses and Bible societies ensured that the Smith–Van Dyck Bible became the principal Protestant Arabic Bible across much of the Eastern Mediterranean, allowing its interpretive framework to acquire lasting influence beyond the immediate missionary context. Through

this widespread distribution, Protestant missionaries promoted a model of religious authority centred on personal engagement with Scripture. This approach challenged traditional ecclesiastical structures in which biblical interpretation was mediated primarily through clergy and institutional authority.

The present findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that the Smith–Van Dyck Bible, in its entirety, was designed to advance Protestant theology through every translation decision. Such a conclusion would require a comprehensive examination of the translation as a whole. Rather, this study argues more modestly that the rendering of *paradoseis* in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 constitutes an interpretive choice that is historically consistent with the theological priorities of the 19th century Protestant missionaries operating in Greater Syria. This interpretation also resonates with previous studies on the Smith–Van Dyck Bible, which have identified theological patterns in the translation of Matthew 6:12 (Yahya et al. 2023) and the retention of the Johannine Comma (Rasyid et al. 2025). Taken together, these studies suggest that theological commitments occasionally informed translation decisions, although a comprehensive evaluation of the entire translation remains a task for future research.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the rendering of *paradoseis* as *al-taʿālīm* [teachings] in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 of the Smith–Van Dyck Arabic Bible represents an interpretive translation choice whose theological significance becomes apparent within the historical context of the 19th century Protestant missions in Greater Syria. While *paradosis* in Pauline theology refers to the authoritative apostolic tradition received from Christ and transmitted to the churches, the preference for *al-taʿālīm* directs readers' attention towards apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture. Rather than characterising the Smith–Van Dyck Bible as a wholly Protestant translation, this study argues more cautiously that this particular rendering is historically consistent with Protestant hermeneutical priorities in its original missionary setting.

The study contributes to biblical studies, church history and translation studies by demonstrating that the theological significance of a translation cannot be inferred from lexical variation alone but must be interpreted in relation to historical context, ecclesiastical debate and missionary discourse. Through the framework of critical discourse analysis, the article shows that Bible translation functions not only as a linguistic activity but also as an interpretive practice shaped by theological commitments and institutional contexts.

This study is limited to a single textual case and therefore does not seek to define the overall theological orientation of the Smith–Van Dyck Bible. Future research should examine a broader corpus of doctrinally significant passages and compare them with contemporary Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Arabic Bible translations to assess more comprehensively how theological commitments influenced Arabic Bible translation in the 19th century Middle East.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Yuangga K. Yahya: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Farhah Farhah: Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Validation. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Darussalam Gontor Ethics Committee (No. 66/UNIDA/E.1-j/PT/VI/1447).

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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