Lecture Eight
Texts and Translations—The Ancient East

Scope: Early translations of the Bible are of intrinsic interest for several reasons: They often are among the earliest surviving examples of the language; they provide fascinating glimpses into the way the Bible was understood by different linguistic populations; and they offer some of the best evidence for the way Christianity spread throughout the ancient world. In this presentation, two ancient Eastern versions are considered. The Syriac version of the Bible (Old and New Testament) provides evidence for the strength of the Christian movement on the eastern edges of the empire and has generated an extensive Christian literature in the same language. The Coptic language developed in Egypt from the 3rd century C.E. and is extant in versions of the Bible, as well as in the Gnostic literature that challenged the traditional canon.

Outline

I. The study of the early versions (translations) of the Christian Bible is useful in several ways.

- **A.** The base languages of the Bible remained Hebrew and Greek, but from earliest times, the Bible appeared in multiple languages.
- **B.** The Jewish Bible had only three ancient versions: the Greek (LXX), the Aramaic (Targums), and the 10th-century translation into idiomatic Arabic by Saadia Ben Joseph.
- **C.** The case of Christianity is quite different, and attention to its many ancient translations provides important knowledge.
  - **1.** We gain knowledge concerning the receptor language; sometimes, the translation of the Bible is the first time a language becomes written.
  - **2.** We gain knowledge of the spread of Christianity to different lands and peoples that lay outside the interest of imperial historians.
  - **3.** When the same compositions are rendered in distinct languages, we learn how the Bible was understood in different cultures.

II. The Syriac Scriptures form part of a complex development in early Christianity that is only partially known.

A. Syriac is a northwest Semitic language (with 22 consonants and no vowels) based on the East Aramaic dialect of Edessa and was the language for a substantial and ancient Christian population.

1. The New Testament relates how Christianity came to Antioch, a center of Hellenistic culture, but does not say how the good news spread to East Syria.

2. Although traditions connecting Christianity in Edessa (modern-day Urfa in Turkey) to apostolic times are legendary, churches existed there by the mid-2nd century.

3. Adiabene was another center (east of the Tigris) that was Christian by the early 2nd century; evangelization also took place in the countryside.

B. Syrian Christianity was noted both for its intensity and its divisiveness.

1. The noted ascetic Tatian (mid-2nd century) was Syrian, and it has been argued that such compositions as the Acts of Thomas stand for a wide understanding of Christianity as ascetical.

2. Theological disputes divided Syriac-speaking Christians in the 5th century into Nestorians (who gathered in East Syria under Persian influence) and Monophysites (in West Syria under Byzantine influence).

C. Such historical complexities are matched by the convoluted character of the Syriac translations of the Bible—East and West Syrians even developed, over time, distinct dialects because of the pronunciation of vowels and the systems of vowel markings.

1. The first portion of the New Testament translated into Syriac may have been the Diatessaron of Tatian, although the earliest manuscript of the composition, discovered at Dura-Europas, was in Greek.

2. In the 19th century, two manuscripts were discovered containing a Syriac version of the four Gospels in the sequence Matthew, Mark, John, Luke; that version has been designated the "Old Syriac."

3. The most important Syriac translation of the entire Bible was the Peshitta ("simple" or "widely current"), begun before the end of the 4th century and eventually to supplant the Diatessaron. The New Testament had 22 books (lacking 2

Peter, Jude, and 2 and 3 John), and the Old Testament was possibly the work of Jews, showing some influence of the Targums.

4. The Philoxenian/Harclean version is either one translation (carried out for Bishop Philoxenus in 508 and revised in 616 by Thomas Harkel [Harclea]) or two separate translations; in either case, the Harclean is the only edition extant and found in a very few manuscripts.
5. The Palestinian Syriac version is actually misnamed because it is really in the form of Aramaic used by Christians in Palestine but uses a Syriac script form. The date of the translation is between 300 and 600 C.E.

III. In similar fashion, Coptic translations of the Bible provide some of the earliest information concerning Christianity in ancient Egypt.

A. As in the case of Antioch in Syria, Christianity is best known in its Hellenistic guise in the city of Alexandria, which produced some of the greatest early Christian theology in such figures as Clement and Origen.

B. The native population of Egypt, however, especially in Upper Egypt, spoke the Coptic language. The term *Copt* derives from an Arabic corruption of the Greek designation *Aigyptoi* ("Egyptians").

1. Coptic was the last stage of the language of ancient Egypt, incorporating a number of Greek words, and in its written form (from the 3rd to the 10th centuries), had an alphabet that used the 24 Greek letters, plus 7 that expressed sounds in Coptic not made in Greek.
2. Upper Egypt was particularly important as a center of the monastic life, witnessed to by many Coptic "Lives of Saints" and "Sayings of the Fathers."
3. From the 5th century forward, the Egyptian church was isolated because of its adherence to the Monophysite heresy; it passed under Persian dominance in 616 and was conquered by the Arabs in 642.

C. The extensive spread of the New Testament among the Egyptian population is supported by translations of the New Testament into several dialects of Coptic. One scholarly reconstruction finds the following hypothetical sequence:

1. A preliminary stage (150–200) of oral translations from the Greek in liturgical settings (compare the Targums).
2. A pre-classical Sahidic stage (200–250), when several biblical books (e.g., Joshua) were translated into this Upper Egypt dialect, and the Gospel of John was translated into Bohairic (northern part of the Delta).
3. A classical Sahidic stage (3rd century) that saw the translation of the complete Bible.
4. A pre-classical Bohairic stage (4th to 6th centuries) that saw the transmission of the Sahidic into other Coptic dialects.
5. A classical Bohairic stage (6th to 7th centuries), when Christianity penetrated deeply into every part of Egypt, leading up to the conquest under the Arabs.

D. A large number of Gnostic Christian writings were also translated from Greek into Coptic or written in Coptic during the 3rd through 6th centuries; these were lost until the discovery of the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in 1945.

IV. In both Syriac and Coptic, an extensive Christian literature developed on the basis of and in concert with the production of the Bible in these languages.

A. Many liturgical and theological tractates in Coptic were translations from the Greek; among the few original Coptic works are the writings of Shenoute, a 4th-century abbot of Athribis.

B. Syriac Christian literature, by comparison, is vast, extending from the 3rd to the 13th centuries and including such outstanding 4th-century figures as Aphraates and Ephraem.

Supplementary Reading:

D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara, eds., *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*.

B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, pp. 3–152.

Questions to Consider:

1. How would the Old Testament or the words of Jesus seem to a Christian hearing them in a translation that was cognate to Hebrew and Aramaic?

2. How is our view of Christianity's ancient expansion truncated if we ignore the evidence of literature in languages other than the imperial Greek or Latin?