

# Versions of the New Testament: A Survey of (some) Recent Research

By

James Keith Elliott

*The University of Leeds, UK*

Politicians nowadays seem all-too-ready to appeal to the “Wisdom of Hindsight.” To paraphrase the opening to one of Robbie Burns’ poems<sup>1</sup>: “O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us”, life would be the sweeter, if I be really freed from blunders – if not “a foolish notion.” As the editor of the International Greek New Testament to Luke<sup>2</sup> in 1984 and 1987, I had accepted what the appointed language specialists had told me about “their” version. It was only later that I realised that much of the alleged versional support that I showed in that IGNTP *apparatus* and even singular and sub-singular versional readings could and should be avulsed. Many are purely inner-versional, relevant only if one’s aim is to look at that particular manuscript, its scribe and that version *in toto*; many concern definite articles, personal pronouns, particles, conjunctions and other “little” words; or are word-order variation or certain verbal tenses. None – or very few – ought to be in the *apparatus* to a *Greek* New Testament, which I then thought I was being expected to produce. The wisdom of hindsight may indeed have encouraged me to jettison many an abbreviation for those versions. So, today’s message (or “text”) is to have only very few and relevant versional variants in an *apparatus*

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<sup>1</sup> Robert BURNS (1759-1796), *To a Louse*.

<sup>2</sup> The American and British Committees of the International Greek New Testament Project (eds.), *The New Testament in Greek: The Gospel according to St. Luke*. Two volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, 1987).

*criticus* to a Greek New Testament. Possibly only those agreeing with the addition or subtraction of the words in Greek witnesses should be in a Greek New Testament.

Recent printed editions of a scholarly Greek New Testament usually include as footnotes on each page of their critical *apparatus* certain versions in addition to variants found in the chosen lists of Greek manuscripts and other Greek witnesses. Typically, the versions are manuscripts (and, occasionally, Fathers) in the ancient Christian languages (Latin, Coptic, Syriac) and often other translations into Ethiopic, Armenian and Georgian, together with these versions to be noted below, Old Church Slavonic (Slavic) and Christian Palestinian Aramaic (Syriac) followed by a brief note on the Gothic.

Nowadays though, one never sees readings to be found in Arabic, even though in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries Arabic was often included in the sumptuous polyglots produced in, say, Paris or London when it stood alongside Roman and Greek scripts as well texts such as Syriac and Ethiopic. Printers doubtless liked to show their typesetting skills as they fitted these scripts on to each of their double-page openings. Those days have long gone.

But in today's sparser world we still fortunately find scholars at work on the ancient versions that were copied and read by Christian believers. A journal like *Babelao*, concentrating, as it does, on oriental Christian languages deserves to see which versions merit attention. Below, I deal with only certain versions and I ignore references to those "popular" versions which are regularly in the *apparatus* to Greek testaments, i.e. Latin, Syriac and Coptic texts that have been regularly studied, especially in the past one hundred years. Hence the bracketed (some) in our title! Carla Falluomini's work on the Gothic is mentioned; so, too, are writings on the Slavic used by Russian orthodoxy. Many writings, inevitably, may now supersede Bruce Metzger's wide-ranging book of nearly half a century ago<sup>3</sup>.

### 1. *The Arabic Version*

First, we turn to the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament. This is a version clearly overlooked and neglected. At long last, I see that, following the pioneering studies by Professor Graf and by the "Sisters of Sinai" (= Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson), several scholars are at work on manuscripts in Arabic<sup>4</sup>. (I hope that ere long we shall find **Ar** (= variants in Arabic manuscripts) in the marginalia to our critical Greek testaments.) So: to the Arabic manuscripts that have for too long been missing from our Greek testaments. Again, it is modern westerners' attention to such manuscripts that is paramount. Most readers may correctly argue that this Arabic version of the New Testament came into being only after the Koran had made Arabic a literary language and after large parts of Christian Syria and Egypt had turned into an Arabic-speaking community who thereafter needed to read the scriptures in Arabic. Some portions of these writings were translated from Greek; other parts from Syriac or from (Bohairic) Coptic. With such *Vorlagen* one can easily appreciate the need for a careful study of these Arabic translations.

One particular research group is a Spanish team led by Juan Monferrer.<sup>5</sup> One can but hope that the new series into which their work has been placed will activate and stimulate its inclu-

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce METZGER, *Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origins, Transmission and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). See also the various entries in the *Anchor Dictionary of the Bible* VI.

<sup>4</sup> Metzger's book (*op. cit.*, pp. 257-267) treats the Arabic as only a "minor" version!

<sup>5</sup> Juan Pedro MONFERRER, Lourdes BONHOME PULIDO and Faiad BARBASH, *Codex Arabicus Escvrialensis MDCXXV* (Salamanca: Pontifical University Press with Madrid: Sindétesis, 2019) (= *A,A&G* 1).

sion in critical editions and in that rarefied atmosphere of oriental studies. The volume is the first in a series; it is called *Aramaico (sic)-Arabica et Graeca*. The book lacks photographs of the manuscript but provides (largely) a diplomatic edition of a 16<sup>th</sup>- century manuscript, housed today at the Royal Library of El Escorial and known there as Arabic 1625. It has been carefully edited with appropriate footnotes and a short scholarly introduction (in Spanish) dealing with the codicological and palaeographical details, including orthography, date etc. The manuscript contains Romans and Galatians and only 1 Corinthians from the Pauline Corpus; the seven Catholic Letters (with the Petrine letters included amid the Paulines!) and Acts, plus Revelation. From the Old Testament (LXX), is an Arabic translation of the Song of Songs.

Another academic study on the Arabic version is a revision of a thesis submitted by Sara Schulthess.<sup>6</sup> This is a dissertation submitted to Radboud University in Nijmegen but supervised in Lausanne by Claire Clivaz. In her discussion here Schulthess begins, as most dissertations do, by her presenting a brief *tour d'horizon* on previous research into this version before her three main sections: (a) a necessary listing and cataloguing of some 197 manuscripts containing Paul's letters in Arabic; then (b) moving on (as her sub-title shows) to one particularly useful Arabic manuscript containing 1 Corinthians; finally (c) she spends *c.*240 pages to analysing its text, with shrewd and perceptive observations. This is, I hope, a forerunner to a much needed commentary on this manuscript and ultimately, to the whole of the New Testament in a wide survey of Arabic witnesses.

Those works and earlier studies by Samir Arbache, a native Arabic speaker now at work at the Catholic University of Lille and Hikmat Kashouh, another native Arabic speaker, now living and teaching in the Lebanon. Both have published on Arabic manuscripts<sup>7</sup>; we hope their and the previously named scholars' work will encourage the Münster editors in Germany and other textual critics to examine this version anew, not least the Arabic Versions' origins (and datings) possibly from Coptic, the Diatessaron and (Old-) Syriac or Peshitta and later Byzantine or "Caesarean" readings from Greek sources and influences.

## 2. *The Ethiopic Versions*

A statue of Field Marshal the first Lord Napier of Magdala and Caryngton proudly occupies one of the plinths in London's Trafalgar Square. As part of Napier's spoils, brought to England after his successfully defeating Emperor Theodore (Tewodros II) of Ethiopia, were manuscripts and other artefacts. Thanks to Napier's efforts, scholars in the West became increasingly aware of Ethiopian manuscripts. Since his day a few academics, notably Edward Ullendorff, helped popularize this ancient independent African orthodox (Tewahedo) church – now, at last, finally freed from links to Alexandria and the Coptic Christian Patriarch based in Egypt. More recently, others have looked carefully at its unique miaphysite Christianity: Judith McKenzie and Francis Watson's study of the early Garima Gospels from Aksum<sup>8</sup> and Mary Anne Fitzgerald and Philip Marsden, *Ethiopia*, a book on the country, its churches and

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<sup>6</sup> Sara SCHULTHESS, *Les manuscrits arabes des lettres de Paul: État de la question et étude de cas (I Corinthiens dans le Vat. Ar. 13)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009) (= Biblica Arabica 6).

<sup>7</sup> Samir ARBACHE, *L'Évangile arabe selon saint Luc. Texte du VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, copié en 847. Édition et traduction* (Bruxelles: Safran, 2012). Hikmat KASHOUH, *The Arabic Versions of the New Testament: The Manuscripts and their Families* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2012) (= ANTF 42).

<sup>8</sup> Judith S. MCKENZIE and Francis WATSON, *The Garima Gospels: Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2016) (= Manar al-Athar Monographs 3).

practices<sup>9</sup>; these works were reviewed in the *TLS* in June 2017 and in *Novum Testamentum* in 2019 respectively and those books are worthy of our study. Just over twelve months ago the Victoria and Albert Museum in London held an exhibition of many artefacts, some brought to London by Napier's men.

Ethiopia (or Abyssinia) is an immense country not only in terms of land but also its huge population (c.102 millions), formed from numerous tribes and language-groups. It is its orthodox faith, its churches, and their theology and practices that merit the sub-title to Esler's book<sup>10</sup>. In several chapters he looks in specific detail at orthodoxy which, despite its inherent conservatism and restricted educational opportunities, has, nevertheless, produced intellectual and literary traditions, as well as much creativity in its art, music and architecture.

Unlike the lack of references to manuscripts in Arabic in the footnotes of editions of current New Testaments in Greek, most critical editions nowadays carry in their marginalia references to variants in "Et" (i.e. Ethiopian) manuscripts. These are the first encounters many have of the Ge'ez language (currently still used by the orthodox church there), its scribes and their texts from Ethiopia's huge canon of scripture. Possibly the renewed interest in Ethiopic manuscripts owes much to Francis Watson's work on two of the so-called Garima Gospels. Unlike most Ethiopian manuscripts written well after the introduction of printing editions elsewhere, these two, currently housed at Garima in Aksum province, may indeed be among the oldest Ethiopic manuscripts extant. An early date would make these witnesses quite unlike others; other (older) scholars until relatively recent times tend to say that all Ethiopian manuscripts are of recent confection, many coming from after printing was always generally used.

I now cite in part a paragraph from my 2017 review in the *Times Literary Supplement* re Watson's contributions to the book by McKenzie and himself:

*The Garima Gospels will revolutionize the history of this version of the Bible, by arguing for a date as early as c.350-650 A.D. for two of the codices. Most Ethiopian manuscripts are comparatively recent, typically dating from the fifteenth century onwards. If the editors' conclusions are correct — and they base their judgements on radiocarbon testing, as well as on art history and textual criticism — the implications would be momentous.*

Since 2017, I observe that Watson's proposed datings for the two Garima manuscripts have been accepted by academe. [Not that readings in manuscripts now dated by palaeographers to an early date, i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> of the Christian centuries are to be considered to be more important than later witnesses; it is (and, if not, should be) a canon of New Testament textual criticism that the age of a witness by itself is of little significance.<sup>11</sup>]

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Anne FITZGERALD with Philip MARSDEN, *Ethiopia: The Living Churches of an Ancient Kingdom* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Philip ESLER, *Ethiopian Christianity: History, Theology, Practice* (Waco: Baylor Press, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> From an Ethiopian viewpoint and with reference to the very wide canon of scriptures accepted by Ethiopian orthodox believers see G.A. MIKRE-SELLAÏSSIE, "The Bible and its Canon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church" in *The Bible Translator* January 1993, pp. 111-123. The edited Ethiopic versions and allied writings by Rochus Zuurmond are also of significance here. Concerning the age of a manuscript (a constant bugbear of mine!) see my monograph in the forthcoming *Stuttgart Theological Themes* volume on New Testament textual criticism in chapter 1.

### 3. *The Armenian Version(s)*

Turning now to the Armenian Version(s) we ought to note several major studies by Valentina Calzolari (-Bouvier), Charles Renoux and by Nira and Michael Stone. All of them are experts in the Armenian writings and especially the New Testament in Armenian.

Now onto the Georgian Versions but before doing so properly, one question must remain: Which is the older, the Armenian or the Georgian? There is local as well as scholastic interest in how to answer that query. Both languages seem to have been given (different and differing) alphabets about the same time, say the fifth- century, and both countries became Christian in advance of their languages becoming written. Tact may require my drawing Salome's veil over this problem...

### 4. *The Georgian Version(s)*<sup>12</sup>

A doughty researcher on the Georgian biblical text is the late Neville Birdsall. Prior to his death, Birdsall collected a number of his own studies into Georgian manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> Another key researcher is Bernard Outtier, whose enviable fluency in that language is all- too- evident in his many writings. All who wish to further their studies into this version ought to familiarize themselves with these studies. Along with many of their pioneering studies, a lack of modesty requires my mentioning one book in particular and this is in footnote 13.

### 5. *The Slavic Version*

Our main source is A.A. Alexeev who has published several works on this version written in Russian. For those unable to access his work because of their inability to read Russian, I would suggest one looks at the university *Proefschrift*, published (in English) by H.P.S. Bakker in 1996 in preparation for his *viva voce* examination: *The Old Slavic New Testament: A Transparent and Heuristic Approach*<sup>14</sup>.

### 6. *The Palestinian Christian Texts*

In conclusion, I note the “place” of the Palestinian Christian texts, which, again, like the Arabic, are usually absent from the scholars' desks and the *apparatus* of printed critical editions of the New Testament. Alain Desreumaux is the leading researcher here. I can but merely pay tribute to his sterling efforts and refer to his several *oeuvres* in this field. Any reader who is alert to this version needs to take its evidence carefully into account. This Palestinian

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<sup>12</sup> See Malchaz V. SONOULASHVILI, “The Translation of the Bible into Georgian” in *The Bible Translator* January 1990, pp. 132-4 with its bibliography. The contribution emphasises the difficulties modern scholarship has to specify which sources lie behind the Georgian translations of the Bible. Armenian and Syriac stand as key contenders. More recently, we find that Georgian scholarship looks very favourably at Greek sources such as its Koridethi Gospels codex (038) for its New Testament

<sup>13</sup> J. Neville BIRDSALL, *Collected Papers in Greek and Georgian Textual Criticism* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006) (= *Texts and Studies* III, 3). Following a conference held in Tbilisi (Tiflis) in 2007 Christian-B. Amphoux and I with Bernard Outtier edited a collection of the papers delivered there then, including some essays contributed by Georgian scholars: *Textual Research on the Psalms and Gospels* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) (= *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 142); there is also a tribute to the then late Neville Birdsall there (pp. xxii-xxv). He had died in 2005.

<sup>14</sup> We ought read also Christian HANNICK'S essay “The Old-Slavonic Version of the New Testament” in *The Bible Translator* of January 1974, pp. 144—6 and his notes for further reading too.

version (with manuscripts from the 6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries) deserves further investigations – both into its *Vorlagen* and, in particular, into its use of the (old) Syriac and the Diatessaron, as well as its possible links to Arabic and/or Coptic manuscripts.

### 7. *PS: The Gothic Version*

For the Gothic Version little more needs to be said since Carla FALLUOMINI's major study *The Gothic Version of the Gospels and Pauline Epistles* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2015) (= *ANTF* 46).

For this Version (and indeed for its other chapters on the Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian) I would also suggest one reads the authoritative essays contributed to the second edition of Bart D. EHRMAN and Michael M. HOLMES (eds.), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) (= *NTTSD* 42). Note also that chapters on the versions in Latin, Coptic and Syriac also exist here.

The new (4<sup>th</sup>) edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* edited by Andrew LOUTH for Oxford University Press (to be published in 2021) plans to carry an entry on the Christian Palestinian or Aramaic version (cf. Metzger, *op. cit* pp. 75-82 and *ADB* VI pp. 795-796).

We began this essay with a quotation from Burns; consistency requires my ending this contribution by citing from him again. A cynic may choose something from his *For a' that and a' that* but, intending, as I do, to encourage readers to investigate how early Christians read, translated or interpreted the scriptures, I finish with lines from his *The Cottar's Saturday Night*: "They never sought in vain that sought the Lord aright." Amen to that!

J. Keith Elliott  
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