

## A KIRMAŞANÎ TRANSLATION OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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In the area of sources for Eastern Christianity there are many excellent and available depositories for textual material in Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> A single paper cannot do justice to such a comprehensive subject,<sup>2</sup> but it is possible to indicate only a newly-found source, so I shall attempt to do this without treating any one part of the subject in detail. The paper deals first with the Kurdish translations of the Bible, as this is the natural starting point. Next comes a brief account of the manuscript of *Injîl*-a Kirmaşanî or Kirmanşahî<sup>3</sup> translation of the Gospel of John. The purpose of this paper is to present and describe rather than to criticize.

### I. KURDISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

The earliest known translations of the Bible into Kurdish language and its several dialects were made in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest Kurdish

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<sup>1</sup> For some useful discussions of Christian textual material in Kurdistan, see A. Grant, 'Die nestorianische Republik in Kurdistan', *Das Ausland*, 15 (1842), pp. 268-271; M. Chevalier, *Les montagnards chrétiens du Hakkari et du Kurdistan septentrional* (Paris: Departement de Géographie de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1985); H. Anschütz, *Die syrischen Christen im Tur 'Abdin: eine altchristliche Bevölkerungsgruppe zwischen Beharrung, Stagnation und Auflösung*, *Das östliche Christentum*, N.F. 34 (Würzburg, 1985); and P. G. Kreyenbroek, 'The Lawij of Mor Basilius Shim'un: A Kurdish Christian Text in Syriac Script', *The Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 1 (1995), pp. 29-35.

<sup>2</sup> On the history of Christianity in Kurdistan and the basic lines of this subject, see J. F. von Zwiédinek-Südenhorst, 'Historisch-geographische Notizen über den Nestorianer-District Hakkari; gesammelt auf einer Reise durch Kurdistan im Jahre 1872', *Mitteilungen der Geographischen Gesellschaft Wien*, 19 NF 9 (1872), pp. 82-87 and R. Blincoe, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from Kurdistan, a History of Mission World, 1668-1990* (Pasadena, CA: Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> On the Kirmaşanî or Kirmanşahî dialect of Kurdish, as the most important dialect of southern Kurdish, see I. K. Fattah, *Dialectes kurdes du sud: étude linguistique du dialecte kirmânshâhî-faylî* (PhD Thesis, University of Paris VII, 1988).

translation of the Gospel was based on an Arabic original. This translation sponsored by a Chaldean Catholic bishop, Shevriz, and revised by local Kurdish scholars, but it was never published.<sup>4</sup> A Kurmancî<sup>5</sup> Gospel version had been prepared in 1830 by Stepan, an Armenian preacher in Haine, in Turkey.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in 1865, the British and Foreign Bible Society sponsored the translation and publication of the Gospel of Matthew in Armenian characters, reportedly the first book ever published in the Kurdish language.<sup>7</sup> The other parts of the New Testament were translated by Tamo, an Armenian Kurdish deacon, and published by the American Bible Society in 1872. The Armenian pastors, Bedros Affendi, Bedros Amirkhanian, and Kavine Aflakadian, translated the New Testament and Psalms into Kurmancî, which were published in 1891.<sup>8</sup>

Mîrzâ Yahyâ Khân-i Kirmānshāhî translated the Gospel of John into Kirmaşanî dialect of Kurdish from a Persian translation in 1894.<sup>9</sup> Some years later W.St.Clair Tisdall of the Church Missionary Society in Işfahān revised Mîrzâ Yahyâ's translation of the Gospel of John and translated the other Gospels into Kirmaşanî.<sup>10</sup> A few years later another translation project was begun in Kurdistan by P.von Oertzen of the German Orient Mission who translated the New Testament into Mukrî dialect of Kurdish,<sup>11</sup> but only the Gospel of Mark was published in Arabic characters.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently a group in Sablax, the center of Iranian Mukrî Kurdistan, led by L.O. Fossum of the

<sup>4</sup> See *Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1805-1961) Report XXI, 1825, p. 62; Report XXIII, 1827, p. xlv.

<sup>5</sup> On the Kurmancî dialect which belongs to the northern group of Kurdish language, see J. Bedir Khan and R. Lescot, *Grammaire kurde (dialecte kurmandji)* (Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> See *Report of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Report LIII, 1857, p.cxli.

<sup>7</sup> For the accounts regarding the Gospel in Armenian characters and Kurdish language, see B. W. Stead, 'Kurdistan for Christ', *The Moslem World*, 10,3 (1920), p. 247.

<sup>8</sup> See K. J. Thomas, '[Translations of the Bible into] Kurdish', *Encyclopaedia Iranica IV* (1990), p. 214. Cf. also *Mizgînî. Peymana Nû (Încîl)* (Stockholm-Moscow: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See Stead, 'Kurdistan for Christ', pp. 247-248.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas, 'Kurdish', p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> Mukrî is a dialect of Sōranî which belongs to the central group of Kurdish language. See Ī. Kalbāsī, *Gūyish-i Kurdî-yi Mahābād* (Tehran: Pazhūhishgāh-i 'Ulūm-i Insānī, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> See J. N. Wright, 'Scriptures in Kurdish', *The Moslem World*, 10,4 (1920), pp. 402-403.

Inter-Synodical Evangelical Lutheran Orient Mission Society in America, translated the Gospels into Mukrî.<sup>13</sup> The American Bible Society published a new Kurdish translation of the Gospel of Matthew in Armenian characters in the same year.<sup>14</sup> The Gospel of Matthew and Mark were translated in 1922 and Luke in 1923 in general direction of A.N. Andrus of Mardin and H.H. Riggs of Constantinople, both employed by American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.<sup>15</sup>

A translation of the Gospel of Luke into Kurmancî dialect of Kurdish was begun in Beirut by Kamran Ali Bedir Khan, a Kurdish intellectual, and Thomas Bois, a Dominican priest. They published also a Kurmancî version of Proverbs.<sup>16</sup>

## II. GOSPEL OF JOHN IN KIRMAŞANÎ

### 1. *Manuscript*

To my knowledge the Kirmaşanî version of the Gospel of John has survived in one codex only, the Hamadân. To date there is no description of the manuscript, and the oral information of its owner, Hesên Mirad, a Kurdish peasant of Hamadân, in Iran, is our only source. He is a great lover of rare and artistically executed objects, particularly of fine and old manuscripts of the famous Kurdish, Persian and Arabic authors. Unfortunately, Hesên Mirad does not have any detailed descriptions of these manuscripts. This information about the special position of Kirmaşanî *Injîl* is based on the conclusions I have drawn after having investigated all the items of the collection and after meeting and talking with Hesên Mirad's grandson who is an educated person.

Although the provenance of the manuscript of Kirmaşanî Gospel is not obvious, yet Hesên Mirad's grandson mentions that Hesên Mirad had bought the manuscript of a Assyrian priest, in Urûmîyah. Since, in some of the extracts from his correspondence, kept in the family archives, there is mention of Hesên Mirad's travel to the Assyrian region of Urûmîyah,

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.402.

<sup>14</sup> See Stead, 'Kurdistan for Christ', p. 247ff.

<sup>15</sup> See M. Yusif, *Injîl* (Ankara: Cemiyet, 1943).

<sup>16</sup> See *Incîla Luqa* (Bonn: Kurdisch Institut, 1984).

it is probably acceptable to assume that the original depository of the manuscript is the collections of the Iranian north-western Christian community. My conclusions and assumptions, however, are mainly based on oral information.

The manuscript contains of two sections, completely different in type of script and in content, which have been bound together with two blank leaves between, in order to form a new codex. The second part of the codex is incomplete with a number of leaves missing from the beginning and the end of the text, most likely lost during binding. The first part contains translation of the Gospel of John (fols. 2r.-41v.). Unquestionably this part does not date from the tenth century, as has been observed by the owner of the manuscript. In fact, it must have been written much later, at the middle of the seventeenth century. The paper of the manuscript is of European manufacture (Amsterdam) which has a watermark. The watermark reads "H.F. Grunen" and the date of its manufacture is "1642" (watermark). The second part of the codex opens with the Kurdish poem entitled *Bahārīyyah*, which covers nine folios (fols. 44r.-53r.). It continues with religious poems of Ahl-i Haqq<sup>17</sup> (fols. 54r.-79v.) and the poems of local Kurdish poets (fols. 80r.-108v.). As a result of the incompleteness of this part of codex, some verses of the poems are missing.

The text of Kirmaşanî version of the Gospel of John probably grew through different redactions, but it is impossible to say at what date the first compilation was made. There are several references to the Safavid kings, suggesting a medieval-Islamic date, but it is not certain whether they are original or have been added to the work at some later stage. Neither the first colophon of the codex nor the second attempted to attribute the texts (both the Gospel of John and the Kurdish miscellaneous) to any particular author of the seventeenth century, but the second colophon cites the date 1075 of the *Hijra* (1654). In fact the reference of the second part of the codex is the only secure testimony we have concerning the date of this Kurdish version of the Gospel.

<sup>17</sup> Ahl-i Haqq is a Kurdish sect in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan. For details, see V. Minor-sky, 'Notes sur la secte des Ahle-Haqq', *Revue du Monde Musulman*, 40 (1920), pp. 19-97.

## 2. Contents

The Kirmaşanî Gospel of John was estimated by the owner of the manuscript, very approximately, to contain 15 main chapters, and these in a somewhat confused order, but the main body of the Kirmaşanî Gospel of John, as I considered, comprises two sections: the public ministry of Jesus (2,1-11,54) and the parting discourses and the passion (11,55-19,42).

The first section contains with some defective translated dialogues: the wedding at Cana, the interview with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman (4,1-42), the healing of the official's son (4,43-54), the healing at the pool, the feeding and the storm, the healing of the blind man, and the raising of Lazarus. Some stories, such as the Good Shepherd and the story of the woman taken in adultery (7,53-8:11), are missing.

The passion story begins with the anointing at Bethany and the entry into Jerusalem (12,1-19). It ends with the arrest, crucifixion, and burial (18-19).

Many sections of this translation seem to be worked out with great care, whereas others seem to put together materials of different kinds. Chapters and passages sometime appear to be in the wrong place. Probably the text was not translated all at once but over a longer period of time; he expounded the original sayings material and turned it into Kirmaşanî dialogues and speeches.

