Why the Sharif?

Introduction

In 1975 while living in North Africa and sharing his faith, Sheikh Abdullah discovered that people struggled to understand the Arabic Bible he had grown up with as a Christian Arab. These early encounters convinced him that the Arab majority population needed a translation that could communicate to them on a level none of the available translations could. The main Arabic translation then available, produced a century earlier by foreign missionaries in Lebanon, incorporated foreign (Syriac) words from the Christian liturgy and employed ill-fitting foreign grammatical constructions. It was not accessible to Muslim readers.

Sheikh Abdullah set about translate the Bible in the language of average Muslims. He translated Mark's Gospel that year and began to share it. Initial responses were positive and encouraging. The rest of the gospels were completed within a few years, and the full New Testament was published in 1990. The entire Bible followed in 2000. Today, more than 2 million Bibles, NTs, and portions of the Sharif Bible have been printed and distributed. As we approach the 50th anniversary (2025) of the translation of Mark's Gospel, the Sharif Bible's place at the table of respected Arabic translations is well-established and unquestioned by Bible Societies, respected Bible translators and linguists, and believers throughout the world.

As with any modern translation of the Bible, improvements continue to be made. Perfection is not possible, so the task of translating the Bible is an ongoing task, and the *International Sharif Bible Society* remains committed to making the Sharif Bible an increasingly effective translation of the Bible.

Not all the responses to the Sharif Bible have been positive. Some people have objected mildly, others more passionately. For anyone familiar with the history of Arabic Bible translation, negative responses are no surprise. Informed objections are always welcomed, however. In 2018, the *International Sharif Bible Society* published in Arabic *The Sharif Translation: An Explanation of the Translation Strategy and Goals of the Sharif Bible*. You can download this from our website. Being in Arabic, however, it left our English-speaking Church leaders, pastors, and Christian workers out of the conversation. We hope this summary of the relevant arguments and conclusions made in our 2018 work will help bring the conversation to a wider audience and address key objections we've encountered through the years.

Translation Principles We Believe In

First, though, let's consider the fundamental principles which have guided the work of translation for the Sharif Bible. These principles help explain why the Sharif adopts the terms and phrases it does.

1. The Scriptures are the inspired Word of God. "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2Tim 3:16). We agree with Christians through the centuries in affirming that God's inspiring presence in the Bible is unique and that is sets the Bible apart from all other literary works. The Scriptures, thus inspired, are alone able to address humanity's spiritual sickness and transform lives.
2. The Scriptures are also the work of human authors who address their audiences using their own language (grammar and vocabularies) and in the context of their own cultures. It follows that translating the Scriptures requires attention to the differences between ancient and modern cultures and religious worldviews, as well as the willingness to speak in the terms and idioms of one's audience.

3. We do not change the truth of Scripture to accommodate modern environments or contexts. Our task is to translate the Bible so that our audience (the majority population of today's Arab world) can understand its message clearly and hear God's truth addressing them. Attention to original contexts of the Bible is an essential part of translating the its message for our readers, but equally essential is attending to the language and context of our modern readers, for it is their language which must be used to restate the Bible's message.
4. We also do not attempt to translate in ways that avoid difficulties in the Bible's message in order to make genuine faith appear easier than it is. We "reject all secret doing and whatever brings shame, we do not deceive, nor do we distort the word of God, but we proclaim the truth clearly" (1Corinthians 4:2).
5. Finally, it is not the case, as some assume, that Arab Christians and Arab Muslims speak precisely the same Arabic. They possess a common Arabic in many respects, but there are crucial difference as well. Arabic translations which make perfect sense to the historical Arab Christian community will not communicate as clearly to Arab Muslim readers.

Why the Sharif?

The Sharif translation is intended for the majority population of the Arab world. Many traditional Arab Christians read the Sharif Bible regularly as well, but our target audience is the majority population – *their* world and *their* language.

When we have an expression in the original biblical text that can be translated into Arabic in several ways, we default to a translation that is clear and natural to the majority population, as far as possible, using terms already in use in their daily conversations.

In addition, local communities within Arabic speaking countries often have words and phrases unique to them. The Sharif Bible cannot accommodate exclusively local idioms if it hopes to communicate to the entire Arab world. So we look for words and expressions that are common and well-known to the general Arab population throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and the Gulf. We want Moroccans and Iraqis, who have very different local dialects, to have equal access to the Bible's message. This is not an easy task.

Simplicity and clarity are also important. We avoid using words and phrases that are known only to highly educated people. Our goal is to present God's message in a form that is indigenous and familiar and accessible to as many as possible. To this end, we use words and expressions that are familiar to and understood by the average Muslim. To achieve this, we use as simple a form of Modern Standard Arabic as possible, the level of Arabic one will find in an average Arabic newspaper, for example.

Let's consider a few examples. These examples are chosen because they all, to one degree or another, have been the occasion of criticisms leveled against the Sharif Bible.

Example 1: Describing Salvation

Take the Arabic word *khalās* (خلاص), the standard word for *salvation* among traditional Arab Christian communities. As a verb, it's used outside religious contexts to talk about ridding a place of something unwanted, like ridding a house of rats. It's also used of clearing imported goods by paying import taxes. In fact, a "clearing agent" is called a *mukhallas* (مخلّص) which is exactly the same word traditional Arab Christians use for "savior." The verb is also used to conclude or finish a project or task.

It's not difficult to see how these different usages suggest the notion of salvation shared by Christian Arabs communities. But this theological usage is not a common usage of the word among Muslims. Muslims use a different set of terms to describe salvation, terms quite rich in their own right. So the Sharif translation adopts terms and expressions Muslims are familiar with. These terms are understood by Christian Arabs as well. They're just not the preferred terms among Christian Arabs.

Closely related to this is the phrase "eternal life" central to Jesus' teaching and apostolic proclamation. In all pre-Sharif translations this phrase is translated into Arabic as *al-hayat al-abadiyya* (الحياة الأبيدية). It's not meaningless to Muslims, but it is unfamiliar enough to trip them up. An expression more familiar to Muslims is *hayat al-khulūd* ("the life of eternity" would be a good English equivalent). There's no theological controversy hidden in the choice between the two. It is simply a matter of finding expressions that communicate more effectively.

This raises an important question. Do Muslims and Christians have identical understandings of what "salvation" even is? If not, would not using a majority term miscommunicate to a Muslim reader? If we use a term already familiar to Muslim, won't we simply confirm the majority understanding? This concern seems to be behind many of the criticisms the Sharif Bible receives.

Obviously, Christians and Muslims do not share identical views on salvation. But neither do Calvinists, Arminians, and Orthodox Christians all share precisely the same understanding of salvation, even if they are more similar. More importantly, however, terms familiar to Muslims, such as *najāt* (نجاة, deliverance, rescue) and *inqāth* (إنقاذ, rescue, salvage, recover), are far better than *khalās* at getting Muslim readers to grasp the truth of Scripture regarding salvation. It is also not true, as is feared by some, that using a majority term will leave Muslim readers unchallenged, as if upon hearing the Sharif term, Muslim readers will assume that the Bible's view of salvation is no different from their own Islamic understanding.

The Sharif terms are inseparable from *the Christian story* in which they are embedded within the Bible, and so the meanings will be determined by all the features of that story as it's found in the Bible. Majority readers will be challenged by the Christian story to consider afresh how God saves and rescues people. But one needs to use the majority term to accomplish this.

Majority terms can be redeemed *within* the Christian story. All language can be redeemed and redefined this way, as the Church Fathers also demonstrated in the opening centuries of Church history. These Fathers adopted the common Greek terms of their day, with all their pagan and philosophical baggage, and made such terms an acceptable vehicle to worship and speak about the God and Father of Jesus.

Example 2: The use of *Allāh*

Consider a second example. This may not appear to be contentious, but it's worth noting that Muslims and Christians both use the Arabic word *Allāh* (الله) for God, though obviously they have quite different realities in mind. But the common usage illustrates a point, which is that both Muslim and Christian Arabs employ some of the same key terms at the heart of their faith traditions. In this case, both use *Allāh* without assuming the other means precisely what one's own group means. Christian Arabs don't refuse to use the word *Allāh* on the grounds that Muslims have a different understanding of who *Allāh* is. *Allāh* appears in all Arabic translations and is used in worship and prayer by all Arabic speaking

people.[1] It is not true, then, that if we use as a central term a word which Muslims also use as a key term, Muslims will invariably assume the term carries its Islamic meaning when used by Christians in the Bible. Again, the *larger story of Scripture* which uses *Allāh* does the work of explaining how God is being conceived differently than by majority readers. But the use of the same term is crucial.

Example 3: *Isa* or *Yasūah?*
Consider still another example, the name *Isa* (عيسى) as it is known to majority readers. Traditional Christian communities in the Arab world have for centuries used the Arabic *Yasūah* (يسوع) for Jesus' name. The Sharif adopts *Isa*, as well as majority names for other persons in both the Old and New Testaments, and majority names, where possible, for cities and regions.

It is difficult for traditional Arab Christians to embrace the name *Isa*. But this is a debate which only Arabic speaking Christians can even have, for the *Isa vs Yasūah* controversy cannot exist in other languages where Islam is predominant and Christians live and speak the indigenous language. If you open a Turkish New Testament, for example, you'll find *Isa* used for Jesus. The same is true in Farsi (Persian), as well as Azerbaijani, Bengali, Dari, Hausa (Nigeria), Malay, and Urdu. These are languages that have no separate Christian name for Jesus. Christians who speak these languages use the same word, *Isa*, to name Jesus. And nobody raises concern about these languages. It's only in Arabic that Christian communities have over time adopted a form of Jesus' name different than that used by Muslims. Concerning the historical details, we should note that *Yasūah* is derived from the Aramaic/Syriac for of Jesus' name (*Yashūa*), while *Isa* is derived from the Greek form of his name (*Isous*) which we have in the NT. Both forms predate Islam. It is false to suggest, then, as some do in criticizing the Sharif, that if we employ *Isa* for Jesus in our translation, the New Testament will essentially be promoting all that Muslims believe about Jesus instead of proclaiming the Jesus of the NT.

Example 4: "There is no God but God"
Let's take a fourth example. Like *Isa*, this phrase provokes an emotional response from most Christian Arabs, the Arabic phrase "There is no God but God" (لا إله إلا الله). Some expressions which the Sharif Bible uses are less controversial because they are not at the very center of how Muslims express their faith. But this phrase is central to Muslims since it comprises part of their fundamental creed which happens to include an additional affirmation of Muhammad as God's Apostle. But the words "There is no God but God" express a conviction at the heart of every proper monotheism: There is One God, and there is no other. This truth is central to Old Testament revelation. We find "There is no God but you," the Hebrew of which (אין אלהים זולתך, "There is no God except for you") is virtually identical to the Arabic "There is no God but God." See 2Sam 7:22 and 17:20 as well. We also find "There is no other [God] besides God" in Deut 4:35 and Isa 45:14. Again, virtually identical to the Muslim's language. Also in the New Testament, we find "There is no God but One" (1Cor 8:4) and "He is One and there is no other beside him" (Mk 12:32).

The fact that when Muslims confess "There is no God but God" they have an understanding of "God" which is different than the Trinitarian God confessed by Christians is no reason to urge that Arab Christians cannot utter the same words to express the Bible's own truth of the matter. The larger

[1] The word *Allāh* comes from the Aramaic that was borrowed into Arabic and used by Jews, Christians, and later by Muslims.

Christian story will define what the phrase "There is no God but God" means when Muslims read the words in the Bible.

Example 5: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"
Consider a fifth example, a beautiful phrase one will hear on many occasions, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (باسم الله الرحمان الرحيم). Versions of the phrase appear in the Sharif Bible (Ex 34:6; Ps 86:15; 103:8; Lk 1:78; Jam 5:11). The Bible portrays God as supremely merciful and compassionate. And yet most Arab Christians will avoid this particular phrase because it is so dear to Muslims. But this wasn't always the case. The expression is found in manuscripts dating back to pre-Islamic times, showing that it's older than Islam. In addition, we know that Syrian Christians used the phrase, and it can be found gracing the pages of early Arab Christian writers and in early Arabic translations of the Scriptures. Christians concerned to share their faith and their Scriptures with Muslims have no more to fear from sharing this phrase than they have to fear sharing the word *Allāh* (God) with Muslims.

Example 6: "Son of Man"
The Sharif Bible adopts a unique way of translating Jesus' favorite way of identifying himself, as "the Son the Man." Jesus spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, in which the phrase would have meant "son of a human," perhaps a bit awkward sounding in English, but not in Aramaic. It's clear in several passages of the Gospels and Acts that Jesus meant the human person that Daniel described in Dan 7:13 and that Jesus is claiming to be that person. The phrase used (*bar enash*, "son of a human") is indefinite, and indeed it is normally indefinite, because it is used descriptively rather than referentially, much as we use the word *human*, which is how Jews themselves understood the phrase in their translation of Dan 7:13 into Arabic as "young man" (شابّ). In time, Daniel's portrayal of this human being came to be understood as a description of the coming Messiah (Dan 2:44; 7:13-14), the one God would raise up to rule all nations.

Many Christians today, however, understand the phrase "Son of Man" in contrast to "Son of God," so that "Son of Man" refers to Jesus' incarnate *human nature* while "Son of God" refers to his *divine nature*. This is a mistake made by earlier generations. Yes, Jesus is fully human and divine, and the distinction between his two natures is our shared historical faith. But the phrase "Son of Man" does not itself speak directly of this, as is commonly thought. It refers to the exaltation of a human being to mediate God's rule over all nations. So the Sharif Bible translates the phrase not as "Son of Man," which in Arabic communicates nothing of its 1st century Messianic meaning, but rather as "the one who became man" (الذي صار بشرًا), which is more suggestive of its original context, suggesting Jesus' God-given destiny to fulfill Daniel's vision of a human being raised to rule over all.

Example 7: "Peace be upon you"
This example may seem insignificant if you are not an Arabic speaker, but it describes what is for some a weakness of the Sharif Bible. Throughout the world, Muslims all greet one another with the Arabic phrase *assalamu ʿalaykum* (السلام عليكم, "Peace be upon you"). The phrase is also used by Muslims in their daily prayers, and they are enjoined to use the salutation, as can be observed in both the Quran and the Hadith. But many Arab Christians are uncomfortable with the phrase and its associations, so much so that an alternative expression "Peace be *unto* you" is used. Note the difference is merely the substitution of the preposition "unto" for "upon" in the greeting as spoken by Muslims. The most popular Arabic translation of the Bible, the Smith-Van Dyke-Bustani (late 1800s), adopts this alternative greeting, though not consistently. In any case, the change of "Peace be *upon* you" to "Peace be *unto*

you" is artificial at best. It does nothing to change the meaning, and it is a form of speech completely unknown to majority readers. The Sharif Bible adopts the standard, common greeting.

Example 8: "Priest(s)"
The Hebrew word *kohen* (כֹּהֵן), translated "priest" in English, refers to a person who stands before God in a mediatorial function on behalf of others. Israel's priests managed the nation's religious rituals and customs, taught the Torah, and interceded on behalf of the nation. This Hebrew word has a near equivalent form in Arabic, *kāhin* (كاهن) which is found in virtually all Arabic translations of the Bible. But for many Muslims *kāhin* means not simply "priest" but something much closer to *sorcerer*, a person who practices divination. There is another Arabic word (*habr*, حبر) which describes the priest's role without the negative connotations, and this is the word you'll find in the Sharif Bible. The negative *kāhin* is reserved in the Sharif for those biblical passages which speak of diviners and practitioners of sorcery.

Example 9: "The Church"
Still another more controversial example is the Sharif Bible's adoption of *umma* (أمّة) in some places for the Greek *ekklesia* ("church"; cf. Matt 16:18 "I will build my church"). In antiquity, the Greek term described the "citizenry," or the assembly of citizens, in the city-states of ancient Greece. In the gospels, Christ adopts the term to describe his "community," a "citizenry" not of this world, not bound by the world's ethnic, cultural, and political divisions. Unfortunately the traditional Arabic translations all use the word *kanisa* (كنيسة) to translate the *ekklesia*, and for Muslims *kanisa* simply refers to a church building. None of the original sense of Christ's use of *ekklesia* to descibe a "community" transcending ethnic, cultural, and political divisions is brough to mind by *kanisa*. But there is another Arabic word that does carry this meaning, the Arabic *umma* (أمّة), which describes the world-wide community of Muslims, a community of faith which transcends ethnic, cultural, and political divisions. It's a key term in the Muslim's identity. One doesn't hear Christian Arabs employing the word. But *umma* achieves as close a sense of the kind of community Christ spoke of as you will find in Arabic. True, Christ's *umma* is not the community or family of Islam centered on allegiance to Muhammad. But this is no reason the abandon the word *umma*. The Sharif Bible uses it for *ekklesia* when this word depicts the world-wide community of faith created by Christ and centered on allegiance to him as Lord.

Example 10: "Holy Spirit"
Arabic translations prior to the Sharif Bible translate "the Holy Spirit" as *arrūh al-qudus* (الروح القدس). It's a simple, straight-forward translation. Remember, there is no capitalization in Arabic, so capitalization can't be used to signify anything special about what the phrase refers to. Indeed, for the majority of Muslims *arrūh al-qudus* refers to the Angel Gabriel. This association has to be avoided, and so the Sharif translates "the Holy Spirit" as *arrūh al-quddūs* (الروح القدوس). The difference is that where *qudus* means simply "holy" and can apply to things or created being made holy or sanctified. But *al-quddūs* is superlative and can only refer to God. So the Sharif translates using *al-quddūs*. Muslims will know this is God's Spirit, or the Spirit of the Most Holy God and not that special angelic messenger Gabriel.

Conclusion
There are other features besides the above examples which make the Sharif Bible a better choice for majority readers. Apart from translation choices which have to do with speaking effectively to the non-Christian majority population in the Arabic-speaking world, the Sharif Bible also adopts simple and clear language, using words and expressions that are as close to peoples' everyday ways of speaking as

possible. It's impossible to demonstrate this advantage over other older Arabic translations since the contrasts are untranslatable.

In 1975, Sheikh Abdullah asked a Tunisian university professor with a post-graduate degree to read a passage from what was then known as the standard Arabic translation, the KJV of Arabic translations, the Smith-Van Dyke-Bustani Bible, the Bible that Sheikh Abdullah grew up with and loved. He was shocked, however, when his university professor friend struggled to read the passage and understood next to nothing. This experience was confirmed many times over, as reader after reader either struggled or failed to understand what they read. In contrast to this, the Sharif Bible is as simple and accessible a translation as one finds without compromising on our commitment to adequately and accurately communicate God's Word.

In closing, we note that critics of the Sharif Bible view this translation as a dangerously Islamacized text and therefore not faithful to the Christian Scriptures or the Gospel message. But this criticism is false, as examples make clear. To summarize and expand a bit, the Sharif Bible:

- Uses *Allāh* for *God*, as do Muslims,
- Translates Jesus' name as *Isa*, as Muslims know him,
- Sometimes translates the Bible's own affirmations of monotheism with "There is not God but God" (Deut 4:35; 2Sam 7:22; 17:20; Isa 45:14; Mk 12:32; 1Cor 8:4), as do Muslims,
- Renders the Bible's celebration of God's mercy and compassion (Ex 34:6; Ps 86:15; 103:8; Lk 1:78; Jam 5:11) by calling God "the Merciful, the Compassionate" (الرحمان الرحيم), as do Muslims,
- Translates John the Baptist's name as *Yahya* instead of *Yuhanna* (*Yuhanna* being the traditional translation of John's name; *Yahya* as he is known by Muslims),
- Translates "Peace be upon you" with *assalam alaykum* ("Peace be *upon* you") rather than *assalam lakum* ("Peace be *unto* you"),
- Translates "eccelsia" ("church") with *'umat al-massih* ("Christ's *Umma*," his called out community) when the word is referring to all believers, rather than with "kanisa" which is understood by Muslims to refer to church buildings only,
- Translates "priest" with *habr* instead of *kahin*,
- Translates "the Holy Spirit" as *arrūh al-quddūs* ("the Spirit of the Most Holy God") instead of *arrūh al-qudus* (which for Muslims refers to the angel Gabriel).

These examples give you an idea of the important choices we make to communicate God's Word to our audience. None of these usages compromises the Christian story as we have it in the Bible. No denial of Christ's full identity, nor the unique power of his saving work, nor the shared orthodox Christian convictions about the nature of God, nor the truth about grace and salvation, is implicit in the Sharif Bible's use of majority terms. We recommend the Sharif Bible without hesitation as a faithful translation of the Old and New Testaments, indeed, as the best terms in which to make the Bible available to Muslims who, we all agree, deserve the very best opportunity to understand it.