

Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala
University of Córdoba



A fragment of the Gospel of John preserved in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection

The Princeton Geniza Project (PGP) website reports the discovery of an Arabic fragment of the Gospel of John with the shelfmark TS Misc. 27.4.24b, which is currently preserved in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Collection, Cambridge University Library.

Information about the fragment, kindly provided by Samuel Bassaly and Peter Tarras, runs as follows:¹

“Arabic translation of the Gospel of John, written in beautiful Kūfī script. Dating: Ca. 9th century, based on handwriting. Includes John 19:25–27 and 35–37 (these ranges are approximate; only a few words from each verse are legible)”.

The PGP website does not offer images of the fragment, but Mrs Sarah Sykes (Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit) kindly provided me with recto and verso images of the fragment with the permission of Dr Ben Outhwaite, the Head of the Genizah Research Unit, to whom I wish to express my gratitude. Recto and verso images of the fragment appear at the end of this note reproduced with kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

The document, in fact, is composed of two fragments preserved on the same sheet, with paper support, that respectively contain fragmentary readings of John 19:24-29 (fol. 1^r) and 19:34-38 (fol. 1^v). Each fragment has eight incomplete lines due to breaks in the page on both the left and right margins, as well as on the top and bottom of the page. The sheet also exhibits seven holes in the lower part that affect the last three lines and two damp spots, one in the upper part and the other in the lower part, this being the largest one.

¹ <https://geniza.princeton.edu/en/documents/35301/>

Fragment transliteration and translation

We are giving below, line by line, the transliteration of the fragment, together with the English translation.

Translation	Fol. 1 ^r	lines
²⁴ [...the sol]diers the act and [...]	[...الشر]طه الصنيع و[...]	1
²⁵ [...Jesu]s, his mother, his aunt and Mar[y...]	[... ايشو]ع امه وخالته ومر[يم ...]	2
²⁵ [...Mary Magdale]ne. ²⁶ When Jesus saw	[... ومريم المجدلا]نيه ²⁶ فلما راى ايشوع	3
	[...]	
²⁶ [...] (whom) he loved, standing by, said to his mother: “oh [...]	[...] ²⁶ محبا واقفا قال لامه ايتها [...]	4
²⁷ [...] And therefore the disciple: “This is your mother” [...]	[...] ²⁷ فلذلك التلميد هذه امك [...]	5
²⁷ [...] the disciple in that hour. ²⁸ Afte[r ...]	[...] ²⁷ التلميد ساعته ²⁸ ومن بعد[د ...]	6
²⁸ [...th]at all things were con[summated...]	[...] ²⁸ ان الاشيا كلها كا[ملات ...]	7
²⁸ [...] thirst. ²⁹ And a ve[ssel] was [...]	[...] ²⁸ عطشا ²⁹ وكان ا[ناء ...]	8

Translation	Fol. 1 ^v	lines
³⁴ [...o]ne of the soldiers [...]	[... وا]حد الشرطه [...]	1
³⁴ [...blo]od and water. ³⁵ And he who witnessed [...]	[... د]م وما ³⁵ وشهدوه [...]	2
³⁵ [...] he knoweth that he hath testified [...]	[... ق]د علم وانه شهد [...]	3
³⁶ [...] that the scripture might be fulfilled, which [said...]	[...] ³⁶ ليكمل الكتاب الذي [قال ...]	4
³⁷ [...] another scripture, which [said...]	[...] ³⁷ الكتاب الاخر الذى [قال ...]	5
³⁷ [...] they pierced. ³⁸ After these [...]	[...] ³⁷ طعنوا ³⁸ ومن بعد هذه [...]	6
³⁸ [...o]f Ramath asked to Pilate [...]	[... م]ن الرامه فسال لفيلاطوس [...]	7
³⁸ [...] and kept that concealed for fear [of the Jews ...]	[...] ³⁸ وكان بكم ذلك حوفا [من اليهود ...]	8

Philological notes

The type of writing used in the fragment is Kūfī script, which could be dated to the 10th century, since the Kufic script exhibited in the 9th c. codices shows a less evolved writing system (Early Abbasid script).² In support of this dating hypothesis is the use of paper and not parchment, as well as the systematization of the diacritics of the consonants *fū*' and *qāf* exhibited in the text, a feature that is still fluctuating in 9th c. Mss.³ Thereby, the writing system shows the characteristic features of South Palestinian Melkite manuscripts, with frequent loss of diacritics, v. gr. /ḥ/ for /kh/. It should be noted that in fol. 1^r (line 4, v. 26) a second hand has added the indirect object ٱ (“whom he”), thus amending the translation.

The linguistic register used in the fragment is the so-called “Middle Arabic”, which exhibits interferences from Neo-Arabic like /d/ instead of /dh/, loss of *hamzab* and *shaddah*, among other dialectal realizations.⁴ Another interesting feature is the name for Jesus through the East-Syriac *Īsbū*' (v. 26, line 3) against *Yashū*' or *Yasū*'.⁵ And the same occurs with the name *Fīlātūs*, which comes from Syriac *Pīlātūs*.⁶

An important aspect of the preserved fragment is which may be the original text used for the translation. In our opinion, the Arabic translator seems to have used a Syriac text as *Vorlage*, which could perhaps be the Peshīttā, but this statement is not conclusive at all given the scarce length of the two fragmentary texts. In order to better appreciate this, we are giving below the preserved texts of the two fragments and their corresponding readings of the Peshīttā⁷, and the Greek text as well, in this case in the footnotes⁸.

² On this issue, see François Déroche, *The Abbasid Tradition: Qur'ans of the 8th to the 10th Centuries AD* (London: The Nour Foundation and Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Miriam L. Hjälms, “A Paleographical Study of Early Christian Arabic Manuscripts”, *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 17 (2020), pp. 37-77.

³ Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, “Once Again on the Earliest Christian Arabic Apology: Remarks on a Palaeographic Singularity”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 69:2 (2010), pp. 195-197.

⁴ Kees Versteegh, “Breaking the Rules without Wanting to: Hypercorrection in Middle Arabic Texts”, in *Investigating Arabic: Current Parameters in Analysis and Learning*, ed. Alaa Elgibali, Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics XLII (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 3-18.

⁵ J.P. Monferrer-Sala, “Algo más acerca de Īsā, el nombre de Jesús en el Islam”, *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 47 (1998), pp. 399-404; N. Robinson, “Jesus”, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), III; pp. 7-21; Gabriel S. Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*, Islamic History and Civilization 56 (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 74.

⁶ Cf. G.S. Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu*, pp. 73-74. It should be noted that the reading *Bilātūs* cannot be completely ruled out.

⁷ The two fragments of the Gospel of John (19:25-35, Dam^f Jh 1-2) preserved in Christian Palestinian Aramaic are not directly related to the Arabic version. Cf. *A Corpus of Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Volume IIA: The Christian Palestinian Aramaic New Testament from the Early Period Gospels*, ed. Christa Müller-Kessler and Michael Sokoloff (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1998), pp. 178-179.

Peshittā ⁹	Fol. 1 ^r	lines
24 ܘܚܝܒ ܚܝܒܗ ܐܘܚܝܒܗܘܢ ¹⁰	[...الش... طه الصنيع و...] ^{٢٤}	1
25 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹¹	[... ايشوع امه وخالته ومر...] ^{٢٥}	2
25 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹² ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ²⁶ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹³	[... ومريم المجدلانية ^{٢٦} فلما راى ^{٢٦} ايشوع [...]] ^{٢٥}	3
26 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁴	[...] ^{٢٦} محبا واقفا قال لامه ايتها [...]] ^{٢٦}	4
27 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁵	[...] ^{٢٧} فلذلك التلميد هذه امك [...]] ^{٢٧}	5
27 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁶ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ²⁸ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁵	[...] ^{٢٧} التلميد ساعته ^{٢٨} ومن بعد ^{٢٨} د [...]] ^{٢٧}	6
28 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁷	[...] ^{٢٨} اى الاشيا كلها كا ^{٢٨} ملات [...]] ^{٢٨}	7
28 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁸	[...] ^{٢٨} عطشا ^{٢٩} وكان ^{٢٩} ا ^{٢٩} ناء [...]] ^{٢٨}	8
Peshittā ¹⁸	Fol. 1 ^v	lines
34 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ¹⁹	[...] ^{٣٤} وا ^{٣٤} حد الشرطه [...]] ^{٣٤}	1
34 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ²⁰	[...] ^{٣٤} د ^{٣٤} م وما ^{٣٥} وشهدوه [...]] ^{٣٤}	2
35 ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ܘܡܥܡܘܢ ²¹	[...] ^{٣٥} ق ^{٣٥} د علم ^{٣٥} وانه شهد [...]] ^{٣٥}	3

⁸ *Novum Testamentum graece*. Begründet von Eberhard und Erwin Nestle, ed. Barbara and Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013, 28th revised edition, 2nd corrected printing), pp. 369-370.

⁹ Cf. P.E. Pusey and G. H. Gwilliam, *Tetraeuangelium Sanctum: The Fourfold Holy Gospel in the Peshitta Syriac Version*. As revised in accordance with the readings of ancient manuscripts and early editions. With an Introduction by Andreas Juckel (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003, repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 590.

¹⁰ στρατιῶται ταῦτα ἐποίησαν

¹¹ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἢ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀδελφὴ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ

¹² καὶ Μαρία ἢ Μαγδαληνὴ. Ἰησοῦς οὖν ἰδὼν

¹³ παρεστῶτα ὃν ἠγάπα, λέγει τῇ μητρὶ

¹⁴ τῷ μαθητῇ· Ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ σου

¹⁵ καὶ ἀπ' ἐκείνης τῆς ὥρας (...) ὁ μαθητῆς. Μετὰ

¹⁶ ἵνα τελειωθῇ ἡ γραφή

¹⁷ διψῶ. σκευὸς ἔκειτο

¹⁸ Cf. P.E. Pusey and G. H. Gwilliam, *Tetraeuangelium Sanctum*, p. 592.

¹⁹ εἷς τῶν στρατιωτῶν

²⁰ αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ. καὶ ὁ ἑωρακῶς μεμαρτύρηκεν

²¹ καὶ ἐκείνος οἶδεν ὅτι ἀληθῆ λέγει

²² ٢٦ ²³ ٢٧ ²⁴ ٢٧ ²⁵ ٢٨ ²⁶ ٢٨	³⁶ ٢٦ ³⁷ ٢٧ ³⁸ ٢٧ ³⁸ ٢٨ ³⁸ ٢٨	[...] ليكل الكتاب الذي [قال ...] [...] الكتاب الاحر الذي [قال ...] [...] طعنوا ^{٢٨} ومن بعد هذه [...] ...] [...] [م]ن الرامه فسال لفيلاطوس [...] ...] [...] وكان بكم ذلك خوفا [من اليهود ...]	4 5 6 7 8
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Translation variants exhibited by the Arabic version are against the Peshittā and the Greek text as well (e.g. *wa-kbālatubu*, “his aunt” ≠ *ἡ ἀδελφὴ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ*, “his mother’s sister”), but verses 36 and 37 (lines 4-5, fol. 1^v) are interesting in this respect, since the Arabic translation includes in each of them a relative pronoun that introduces the adjective clause *alladhī qāla* (“which says”, lit. “which said”), a reading exhibited by the Peshittā in both cases, compared to the Greek text that does not include it in either case, although in the second it gives a sentence with present active indicative λέγει (“says”):

ἵνα ἡ γραφὴ πληρωθῆ ἑτέρα γραφὴ λέγει	≠ ≈	٢٦ ٢٧	= =	[...] ليكل الكتاب الذي [قال ...] [...] الكتاب الاحر الذي [قال ...]
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Likewise, Arabic reading *min al-Rāmab fasāla li-Filātūs*²⁷ follows the word order offered by Syriac Peshittā (*d-men Ramthā b‘ā men Pīlātūs*), not that of the Greek text: *ērōtēsen ton Pilaton (...) apo Harimathaias*.

As a preliminary advance of conclusions we must say that the chances of having used more than one text are not remote, since as it occurs in other translations of both the Gospels and New Testament texts,²⁸ it would not be surprising if the Arabic version is the result of using Syriac and Greek texts at the same time, one as a base-text and another, or even others, for reviewing and/or comparing readings.

²² ἵνα ἡ γραφὴ πληρωθῆ

²³ ἑτέρα γραφὴ λέγει

²⁴ ἐξεκέντησαν. Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα

²⁵ ἠρώτησεν τὸν Πιλᾶτον (Ἰωσήφ [ὁ]) ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας

²⁶ κεκρυμμένος δὲ διὰ τὸν φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων

²⁷ i.e. *min al-Rāmab fa-sa‘ala li-Filātūs*.

²⁸ Cf. *Mt Sinai Arabic Codex 151, I. Pauline Epistles*, ed. Harvey Staal (Leuven: CorpusSCO, 1983), pp. 40 (n. 24), 45 (n. 14), 138 (n. 8), 145 (n. 8); Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, “An early Fragmentary Christian Palestinian Rendition of the Gospels into Arabic from Mār Sābā (MS Vat. Ar. 13, 9th c.)”, *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 1 (2013), pp. 71, 73, 95-96; J.P. Monferrer-Sala, “The Pauline Epistle to Philemon from Codex Vatican Arabic 13 (Ninth Century CE). Transcription and Study”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* LX:2 (2015), pp. 359, 368; J.P. Monferrer-Sala, “Translating the Gospels into Arabic from Syriac: Vatican Arabic 13 Restored Section, Strategies and Goals”, *Arabica* 62 (2015), pp. 437, 456.



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