

Judging a Book by Its Cover:

Overcoming Barriers to Bible Access in Muslim Contexts



On my first visit to the Muslim people group with whom I work, a *mullah*, or an Islamic religious leader, suddenly grabbed me and pulled me around the side of a house. He clenched both of my arms and put his long beard and serious face only a few inches from my nose. He spoke in a low voice, “I need you to get me a Bible in a language that I understand.”

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Here I am in the 21st century, and standing before me is an educated, well-traveled, multilingual religious leader who remains without access to the Word of God. I wish that I could say his case is an anomaly, but unfortunately it is all too common. Hundreds of millions of Muslims are going from the cradle to the grave without ever even seeing a single portion of the Bible.

Foundational to how we address this immense need is how one defines “Scripture access.”¹ The end goal of Bible translation is not a book on a shelf, but lives impacted as the Spirit of God uses His Word to bring people to faith in the Lord Jesus, and to equip them to serve God.

The foundation of God-fearing Bible translation work is a firm commitment to faithful and accurate translation. The love of God compels us to communicate the unchanging truth of the Scriptures in a way that is beautiful, clear and natural for each language group. The hope is for real people to meet, love and follow the living God. Thus, as Bible translators, we are working to overcome barriers that keep people from the Bible. Certainly, language itself is a major barrier, but communicating biblical truth is much more complicated than just words on a page.

From an early age, Muslims are both informed and misinformed about Christianity. Often they associate the whole of Western culture with Christianity, and they are taught that Christians are immoral, blasphemous and polytheistic. To many Muslims, Western politics and military hardware are the practical expressions of Christianity. In this context, they view the Bible as a symbol of cultural loyalty, a boundary marker between them, “the faithful,” and Christians, “the unbelievers.”

¹ Wayne Dye’s eight conditions are very instructive on this point. “The Eight Conditions of Scripture Engagement: Social and Cultural Factors Necessary for 1 “Vernacular Bible Translation to Achieve Maximum Effect.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. 26:2 Summer 2009, 89-98.

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Even owning or reading a Bible is a threat to the order of their society. Features external to the gospel message itself (script, layout, icons, symbols, front material, color of the cover, etc.) potentially present massive barriers for a Muslim person even to touch such a book. What is printed on the copyright page tells them whether this book belongs to “us” or to “them.” In many ways, these barriers are about the identity of the book, not its message.

In overcoming these barriers and others like them, we must find ways to present the Scriptures without the geopolitical baggage. This means providing the local Muslim background believers with Scripture materials that do not force them to answer for Western civilization, but instead make the message of the text itself the central issue.

For example, in many areas the color black is associated with sorcery, and the symbol of the cross represents Western culture, which they have grown up viewing as imperial and immoral. A black Bible with a cross on it evokes an instant emotion of fear and disgust, and it presents a barrier to people reading the Bible with an open heart. These perceived ill-intentions of the Bible often cause readers to misunderstand the text. If a book is deemed to come from foreign, blasphemous, immoral enemies, then not only will the reception of the text be hostile, but the interpretation of the text will also be twisted in that direction.

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The perceived source of Scripture material can also make a big difference in how it is accepted. Just about any Scripture product can be shared by expatriate missionaries with their group of close friends, coworkers and employees. The power of relationships does open doors and break down barriers. But what a person is willing to look at when

alone with a foreigner is often not the kind of material one can share back home with a father, an aunt or a cousin.

Expatriate Scripture distribution is great, but statistically it is only a drop in the bucket. We can do more by translating and presenting Scripture materials in ways that facilitate sharing from one local person to another. Many aspects of the message of the Bible will be a stumbling block to our Muslim audience, but when we can remove stumbling blocks external to the message, it allows the message of the gospel to be the central issue.

One helpful approach involves translating and presenting key Scripture portions, a method that has been around for decades.² Unreached Muslim people groups need a set of gospel-centered Bible stories today, not just a big dusty Bible in twenty years. Many Muslims are curious to know about the life of Jesus. Presenting well-chosen passages from both the Old and New Testaments can encourage that curiosity and open the door for people to meet the living Lord for the first time.

For example, Omar (a pseudonym) is a Muslim-background believer who has a whole Bible in his language. But because of its identity, style and presentation, he has never shared it with his family and friends. Yet when he received a beautifully printed book of Bible portions that had been put into a series of biographical stories (Adam through Jesus), he displayed it openly in his home and used it to talk about his faith. In another project, a local man traveled to several villages and read the book of Proverbs in the evenings with family groups. Based on how individuals responded, he was able to start conversations leading to the Lord Jesus.

The presentation of the Bible can project either honor or dishonor. In Muslim societies, important books are never printed cheaply, and certainly a Holy Book would always be printed with beauty and quality. Thus, if we can present the Scriptures (in any media) with local art forms, color and quality, then the Scriptures have a much better chance of being perceived as honorable, beautiful, trustworthy and authoritative.

The word choices and style of a translation can make the Scriptures either attractive or repulsive. Translators must consider not just their approach, like literal translation or paraphrasing, but also register, pragmatics, collocations, cultural frames and a host of other factors.

For example, when one Muslim-background believer was reading the New Testament in his own language, he told

² See: Norman Mundhenk, “Preparing Selections: Specialized Translations,” *Bible Translator* 24.4 (Oct. 1973): 401-419; and Rick Brown, “Selecting and Using Scripture Portions Effectively” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. 19:2 Summer 2002, 10-25.

my coworker, “I don’t think that the people who worked on this translation thought very highly of Jesus.” Of course, he was wrong; many of the people who worked on that translation had a very high view of Jesus! Nevertheless, the way the language was used in referring to Jesus came across stilted, monotone and disrespectful. Some minor adjustments to the style of the translation would have corrected this misunderstanding and accurately reflected the high view of Jesus as presented in the Gospels.

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We must acknowledge that the Muslim world is complex and far from monolithic. Each country, sect and people group brings a unique set of challenges. The kinds of translation products that will serve a diaspora community may not be the same as those needed by the people still in the homeland. The style and media for a minority Christian community may not be the style and media that allows the Muslim majority to access the Bible—even in the same language. This calls for a long-term commitment on behalf of the church to work through these complex logistical, social and linguistic challenges.

Meeting these challenges will require increased understanding and cooperation between all partners involved in the Bible translation movement. In the past, “Joe and Sue Translator” went out to the village, and the church trusted them and their sending agency to be the experts on that language and to produce a faithful translation. But in our information age, suddenly there is the potential for every translator’s word choices to be subject to instant international scrutiny.

This happens within a politically charged climate characterized by widespread fear of Islam. Even in the church, there can exist an atmosphere of disdain and hypersensitivity to anything bearing the slightest resemblance to Islamic art or idiom. We as the Church must be careful not to mistake missiologically nuanced and theologically robust contextualization for syncretism or compromise. While there are many examples of syncretism and compromise, we must avoid quick and emotional judgments based on misunderstanding and partial information, which have unjustly crippled the Lord’s weary faithful on the front lines of the mission field.

Throughout history, this kind of tension has always occurred when the gospel is translated for a new context.³ The church is often threatened by contextualizing the message through translation. This was the experience of Jerome, Luther, Wycliffe, Tyndale and others. They incurred the wrath of those defending “the gospel according to us” at the expense of opening the door of understanding to others.

To see a Bible translation in progress for every language that needs it, the Church must engage in unprecedented communication and cooperation with the Bible scholars and theologians doing Bible translation within the Muslim world. We as the translators need to joyfully submit to the scrutiny that comes from the larger global Church engaging in the process of Bible translation. The long-term benefits far outweigh the cost. And in turn, the appeal is for church leaders outside of any given Muslim context to humbly listen to members of these language communities and to the insights that dedicated mission practitioners have gleaned from years of study and living daily life with their Muslim friends, neighbors and coworkers.

Bible translation is much more than a once-for-all placement of proper Greek and Hebrew words in a grammatical order in a given language. Bible translation is a communication process that brings the meaning of the unchanging text of the holy Scriptures into the dynamic forms and expressions of real people who need a relationship with the living God. It is only by understanding each of our Muslim audiences that we will be able to serve them best. How we translate and present the Bible can make the difference between a dusty book and lives changed for eternity. 

³ Sanneh, Lamin O. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. 2nd ed. American Society of Missiology Series, no. 42. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009, pp. 40ff.