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COMMENT

Luther in Arabic

By MARK N. SWANSON

Recent years have seen considerable interest in the study of Western Protestant missions in the Arabic-speaking world, resulting in books about eighteenth-century Moravian encounters with the Copts;¹ the endeavors of the nineteenth-century American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions;² American Presbyterian work that led to the formation of the Evangelical Synod of the Nile;³ and specifically Lutheran projects, whether the German Lutheran work in Palestine that eventually led to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), or American Lutheran endeavors, including the Middle East Lutheran Mission (MELM) in Lebanon backed by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS).⁴ The Synod of the Nile and the ELCJHL will appear more than once in this essay, as will the seminaries with which they are related, namely and respectively, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC), an Egyptian Presbyterian school that has sometimes been pulled into wider regional and ecumenical roles, and the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut, which has been a regional, ecumenical school from its inception.

The specifically Lutheran presence in the Arabic-speaking world is tiny, although the ELCJHL plays a role in education, theological reflection, inter-religious relations, and global Lutheran affairs far greater than its size might indicate. I think it is fair to say that the specifically Arabic-language Lutheran library in particular, as well as the Reformation–tradition library in general, is still rather thin (in contrast, say, to the library of Catholic works in Arabic, whether in

manuscript collections⁵ or as published since the nineteenth century by Catholic presses in centers including Beirut, Jerusalem, and Mosul). The works may be few, but their stories are worth telling.

The Small Catechism

The first publication of Luther's *Small Catechism* in Arabic translation was undertaken at Halle in 1729 by Johann Heinrich Callenberg (1694–1760), a follower of August Herman Francke who was interested in evangelistic ministries to Jews and Muslims. An itinerant Syrian teacher of Arabic known as Salomon Negri Damasceni (= Sulaymān ibn Ya'qūb al-Shāmī al-Ṣāliḥānī, 1665–1727) made a pair of sojourns in Halle, during which he taught Arabic at Francke's school for orphans and attracted students like Callenberg.⁶ At some point Negri made—probably as a teaching tool—a translation of the *Small Catechism*, of which autograph copies from Halle dating to 1716 have been preserved.⁷ In 1729 (and in fact after Negri's death), Callenberg published Negri's translation: *Catechismus Luthers minor arabice quem olim sub ductu B. Sal. Negri Damasceni in hanc linguam transtulit et vulgavit H. Henr. Callenberg*.

I did not know of this translation during the years that I taught at ETSC (in the 1980s and 90s). Then, the one Arabic-language translation of the *Small Catechism* of which I was aware was a product of the LCMS work in Lebanon. For the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth in 1983, the MELM Center in Beirut published *A Brief Exposition of the Fundamentals of Christian Doctrine*, consisting of a (28-page) translation of the *Small Catechism* as well as a (141-page) commentary—which turned out to be a translation of *A Short Exposition of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* by Heinrich Christian Schwan (1819–1905), the third president of the LCMS. The volume is physically well-produced and was circulated quite widely.

At least two other translations are available today. The *Common Prayer Book* (*Kitāb al-ṣalāt al-'āmm*) of the ELCJHL (2nd ed. 2004) contains a translation of the catechism made by the Rev. Dr. Hermann Schneller and Mr. Elias Naṣrallah Ḥaddād (known for their ministry to orphans and underprivileged children, including the

founding of the Schneller School Bekaa at Khirbet Kanafar, Lebanon, in 1952). In 2002, the Division of Congregational Ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America published *The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and The Book of Fundamental Lutheran Doctrines*, translated by the Rev. Numan Smir (Nu'mān Samīr), the founding pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Amman, Jordan, and edited by the Rev. Bassam Abdallah. Here the Catechism (translated from the 1996 Augsburg Fortress English-language version by Timothy Wengert) is accompanied by an Arabic version of the much-translated booklet by Beth Ann Gaede and Margaret Marcrauder, *Lutheran Basics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

Other Works by Luther

A recent (2013) addition to the Arabic-language Luther library is a small volume entitled *Christian Freedom* (Beirut: Near East School of Theology, 2013). One of the translators is the current president of NEST, the Rev. Dr. George Sabra, who informs us that what he did was to revise and fill out an Arabic-language set of excerpts from Luther's *The Freedom of the Christian* that had appeared in Damascus in 1945 under the title *Freedom, by Dr. Martin Luther*, made by Dr. Mūrīs Sīkal. Sabra opines, correctly, that this is Morris Seale, who was professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at NEST between 1955 and 1977.⁸

Seale's story is a fascinating one. Of Russian Jewish background, Morris Sigel converted to Christianity at a young age, studied theology at Queen's College in Belfast, and became a missionary with the Irish Presbyterian Mission, working in Haifa, Damascus (where the Irish Mission had run schools since the mid-nineteenth century), and Beirut. At some point he simplified his surname Sigel to Seale (perhaps simply because of pronunciation; "Sigel" transliterated into Levantine Arabic looks as if it should be pronounced "cycle"). While Sigel/Seale published various works ranging from colloquial Arabic translations of the Bible to the interconnections between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, he clearly had a great admiration for Martin

Luther. In addition to *Freedom* mentioned above, he produced the Arabic-language books *The Hero: Dr. Martin Luther, the Hero of the Reformation in Europe* (Damascus: Irish Mission, 1951) and *The Life of Dr. Martin Luther in Classical Arabic, including a translation of "The Freedom of the Christian Man" [and] selections from Luther's "Lectures on Galatians"* (Beirut: National Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 1970). Although these volumes are exceedingly rare today,⁹ Seale's contributions to the Arabic Luther library are part of an extraordinary story of missionary scholarship.

Another of the great Luther treatises to receive attention in Arabic is *The Bondage of the Will*. This first came to my attention in a small book translated by Mr. Alfý Fadel (ETSC librarian and my regular morning coffee companion in the 1980s), with the title *Freedom of the Will between Yes and No: A Hot Debate between Luther and Erasmus. A Simplified and Abridged Summary of Luther's "The Bondage of the Will"* (Cairo: National Printing House in Fajjālah, 1996), which appeared in a series "Evangelical Heritage" published by the Middle East Evangelical Fellowship (al-Rābiṭah al-Injīliyyah fī l-Sharq al-Awsaṭ). This is a somewhat curious book, in four chapters: "What the Scriptures teach us" (with a summary of Luther's chapter 7—*sic*);¹⁰ "What Erasmus taught" (from chapter 4); "What Luther thought of Erasmus's teaching" (from chapter 5); and "Luther's commentary on Erasmus' treatment of texts that deny free will" (from chapter 6). This book was actually a translation of Clifford Pond, *Born Slaves: An easier-to-read and abridged version of The Bondage of the Will* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1984). Pond (1924–2015) was a missionary, administrator, and president of the (Calvinist) Grace Baptist Mission; his book appeared in a series of abridgements of "Great Christian Classics" that sought to uphold a strict Calvinist doctrine of God's free and sovereign grace against Arminian (and other) dilutions. Curiously, Clifford Pond's book was translated again, this time by Dr. Victor Samuel Badrūs under the title *The Bondage of the Will* (Cairo: Middle East Evangelical Fellowship, 2013), this time with a clear indication that it was a translation of Pond's *Born Slaves*. Again, it appears in the Fellowship's "Evangelical Heritage" series—apparently as a replacement for the previous volume.

It is worth mentioning that it is not only Arabic-speaking Calvinists who have found the Erasmus–Luther debate interesting. One very intriguing publication is a translation of Erasmus’ work (from English) done by a Muslim: Aḥmad Luṭfī, *Desiderius Erasmus: The Freedom of the Will* (Cairo: Sefsafa Publishing House, 2002). Here, the interest in the debate appears to be driven by specifically *Islamic* problematics concerning human agency and divine predetermination.

While I was searching for out-of-the-way printed materials, my colleague Dr. Wageeh Mikhail at ETSC pointed me to a rich website: “Luther in Arabic.”¹¹ This website was created in 2005 (and is still live, although it does not show signs of updating) by ELCJHL members around the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem; some of the works in it may have first been printed between 1999 and 2005. The website is offered, according to Dr. Raheb’s introduction, “out of a deep conviction that the message of Salvation by Grace through Jesus Christ is crucial, especially in the Middle East where some people still believe that they can earn their salvation by what they eat, dress or do.” This website offers biographical and historical information and includes Arabic translations of several writings: *The 95 Theses*;¹² *The Freedom of the Christian* (translator unnamed, issued in Bethlehem in 2000); *The Magnificat* (translated by Fahd Abū Ghazālah, published in 1999 as the first in a series of Luther’s works issued by Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem); *A Simple Way to Pray* (also translated by Fahd Abū Ghazālah, undated, but the second in the above-mentioned series); and *The Small Catechism* (the Schneller/Haddād translation, as well as the MELM-translated commentary of H.C. Schwan). There are also sections on Luther’s sayings “in the midst of his family,” his prayers, and his hymns. This is a small treasure trove that deserves attention and, perhaps, some loving curation.

For the sake of completeness, I should mention that I have also found a reference to an Arabic-language translation of Luther’s *On the Jews and Their Lies* by ‘Ajāj Nuwayhiḍ (d. 1982), published in Lebanon under the title *The Hypocrisy of the Jews* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1974). I have not seen a copy.

Books about Luther

During a trip to Cairo in June 2017, I stopped in at the main downtown bookstore related to the Synod of the Nile, the Dār al-Thaqāfah (literally, “The House of Culture”). With the run-up to the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, what books on Luther would be available? I came away with one small volume,¹³ J.A. Morrison, *The Life of Luther, the Leader of the Reformation*, translated by the Rev. Bāqī Ṣadaqah (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 2013), although I knew that this was a reprint of a much older volume; the ETSC library’s copy is the second printing from 1977. The original for this volume was first published in 1924: John Arch Morrison, *Martin Luther the Lion-Hearted Reformer* (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1924). Morrison (1893–1965) was a leader of the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) and a long-time president of Anderson College; he wrote the Luther book as an inspiration for young people.

Another book originally intended especially for young people is a volume published in 2007 by the MELM Center in Beirut, *The Evangelical Reformer Martin Luther*. This turns out to be a translation of Frederick Nohl’s *Martin Luther: Hero of Faith*, published with drawings by Richard Hook by Concordia Publishing House in 1962. Rather different in character is another book published in Beirut, where Ḥasīb Nimr made an Arabic translation of a work by a French Protestant theologian: Théobald Süß, *Luther* (Beirut: The Arab Institute for Studies and Publication, 1981).¹⁴ Purchasers expecting a biography may have been surprised by Süß’s essay on the Ockhamist and Platonist elements in Luther’s thinking.

The best of the Arabic books about Luther, in my opinion, is a volume composed in Arabic by the late (d. 1991) Egyptian Presbyterian pastor and teacher Ḥannā Jirjis al-Khuḍarī: *The Reformer Martin Luther, His Life and Teachings. A Theological, Dogmatic, Historical Study* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1983). Dr. Ḥannā was a pastor of the Synod of the Nile who (when I knew him in the 1980s) pastored a congregation in France but regularly visited Cairo and offered courses in historical theology at ETSC. His study of Martin Luther rests on a variety of sources, beginning with Roland Bainton’s *Here I Stand*;¹⁵ but Dr. Ḥannā was also able to take advantage of French-language

Luther scholarship, both Protestant and ecumenically-minded Catholic. Thus, works like George H. Tavard's *À la rencontre du Protestantisme* (1955) and Yves Congar's *Martin Luther: Sa foi, sa réforme. Études de théologie historique* (1983) make appearances in the book.

As should already be evident, many books published in the Middle East—even important textbooks like Dr. Ḥannā's study—are printed in limited quantities and go out of print quickly. It is probably worth mentioning, then, that for most of the past half-century the single most routinely accessible Arabic-language introduction to Luther is that in the Arabic translation of Will and Ariel Durant's *The Story of Civilization*. Will Durant's volume on the Reformation,¹⁶ first published in 1957, has been available in Arabic at least since 1969, when it was published by an Egyptian government-sponsored press.

The new era of electronic publication may change the landscape. The "Luther in Arabic" website has been described above. Scott H. Hendrix's *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction* (2010) has been translated into Arabic by Kawthar Maḥmūd Muḥammad and Hibah 'Abd al-'Azīz Ghānim as part of a project of the not-for-profit Hindāwī Foundation and is available for free download.¹⁷ Similarly, the Arabic version of *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* is freely available from the website of the Lutheran World Federation.¹⁸ For those who have access to it, there are a number of Luther-related items in the EBSCO eBook Arabic Collection.¹⁹

As one might expect, writings hostile to Luther also have appeared. Manuscript copies dating back to the seventeenth century have been preserved of a translation of polemical works by the Jesuits Leonhard Leys (1554–1623) and Martin van der Beeck (1561–1624), which together bear the rhyming Arabic title *al-Ṣubḥ al-mubīn / li-ḍalāl Lūtārūs wa-Kalwīn*, *The Dawn which casts light on the error of Luther and Calvin*.²⁰ Such polemics continued into the age of Arabic-language printing. In 1876 the Jesuit press in Beirut published an anti-Protestant work by Joseph van Ham (1813–1889), again with a rhyming title: *al-Kawkab al-waḍḍāḥ / fī tārikh al-Iṣlāḥ*, *The Elucidating star, on the history of the Reformation*.²¹ And in 1910, the Antonine Press in Baabda, Lebanon, issued *al-Jāsūs / 'alā bida' Lūthīr wa-Kalwīnūs*, *The Spy on the heresies of Luther and Calvin*.

Perhaps in the 1950s or 60s, a Coptic Orthodox writer named Nabīh Naṣr wrote *Luther the Deviser of Protestantism* (Cairo: New Commercial Press in al-Sakākīnī, n.d.).²² The author's argument is that Luther protested against much that deserved protest in the Catholic Church, and wished to reform it, but with his invective only managed to split the Church (in addition to falling into all manner of error). However, when Luther learned of the existence of Orthodoxy, he greatly admired it and wished he had known of it earlier. Protestants today, says the Coptic Orthodox author, should study this history, listen to Luther, and return to the Orthodox Church!

Luther among Muslim Thinkers

We find mentions of Luther, or of the Protestant Reformation in general, in the writings of late nineteenth-century Muslim thinkers who were seeking a Reformation within the Islamic world—specifically, a spiritual awakening that would contribute to the end of European colonial control of so much of that world.²³ Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1897) was explicit in his endorsement of Luther, seeing in him a champion of reason and freedom who helped lead people “from barbarism to civilization.”²⁴ Luther has continued to be a symbol that can be deployed within the Islamic world, for example, as a symbol of freedom from any clerical elite that would claim a monopoly on scriptural interpretation.

In Western Christian circles there has been a considerable amount of interest in recent years in the study of Luther and the Turks, or Luther and Islam.²⁵ A corresponding interest is documented in Muḥammad Abū Ḥaṭāb Khālīd, *Martin Luther and Islam* (Cairo: The Supreme Council for Culture, 2008), who surveys Western secondary literature on the topic, but then adds a survey of writings by Muslim scholars. Special weight is given to the writings of Professor Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966), who studied the connections between Islamic and European Christian thought and civilization and believed he could discern Islamic influence on the main lines of Reformation thought.

Conclusion

Luther has come into the Arabic-speaking world in a rather haphazard fashion. Apart from the “Luther in Arabic” website of 2005, now dormant, projects to make any substantial body of Luther’s writings available in Arabic have not produced much fruit. But perhaps this will change. In January 2018 there was a grand celebration at ETSC—complete with the singing of an Arabic setting by As’ad al-Rassī of *A Mighty Fortress*—to launch the first Arabic-language translation of Calvin’s *Institutes*, in a beautiful two-volume set published in Beirut: Jūn Kālvin, *Usus al-Dīn al-Masīḥī* (Beirut: Dār Manhal al-Ḥayāt, 2018). Dr. George Sabra of NEST was its general editor, working with a distinguished international and ecumenical team of translators. Perhaps a Luther anthology could be next? And perhaps publishers could follow the example of the Lutheran World Federation’s *From Conflict to Communion*, and make such materials available both in print and in freely-downloadable pdf?

I am grateful to many colleagues who have helped me track down materials and who have responded to various requests for help: David Grafton, Kholoud Khoury, Wageeh Mikhail, Paul Rorem, George Sabra, Eid Salah, Fouad Shaker and the staff of the ETSC Library, Nasralla Zakaria. Of course, mistakes and omissions are my own responsibility.

NOTES

1. Arthur Manukyan, *Konstantinopel und Kairo: Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine im Kontakt zum Ökumenischen Patriarchat und zur Koptischen Kirche. Interkonfessionelle und interkulturelle Begegnungen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2010).
2. John Hubers, *I Am a Pilgrim, a Traveler, a Stranger: Exploring the Life and Mind of the First American Missionary to the Middle East, the Rev. Pliny Fisk (1792–1825)* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016); Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
3. Heather Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
4. David Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

5. Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, Vol. 4, *Die Schriftsteller von der Mitte des 15. bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts. Syrer, Armenier, Kopten, Missionsliteratur, Profanliteratur* (Vatican City: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1951). (Hereafter, Graf, *Geschichte*.)

6. John-Paul A. Ghobrial, "The Life and Hard Times of Solomon Negri: An Arabic Teacher in Early Modern Europe," in *The Teaching and Learning of Arabic in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jan Loop, Alastair Hamilton, and Charles Burnett (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 310–31.

7. Ghobrial, 326, note 69.

8. Prof. Seale's later writings are well known. I read his *Muslim Theology* (1964) as a student of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary in 1983–1984, and was aware of his Arabic-language introduction to biblical Hebrew when I was teaching at ETSC.

9. I have not seen copies of any of these works.

10. The chapter divisions and numbering may reflect the translation by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, *Martin Luther on The Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525), Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam* (London: James Clarke, 1957).

11. "Luther in Arabic," at lutherinarabic.org.

12. Actually, what is offered is a somewhat abridged version of the *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518).

13. The number had increased by June of 2018, when I made a return visit and found two additional works on the Reformation (if not specifically about Luther): an Arabic translation of Glenn Sunshine, *A Brief Introduction to the Reformation* (2017); and a work by a Lebanese pastor, Suhayl Sa'ūd, entitled *1517: The Evangelical Reformation and its Influence in Aspects of Life* (Amman: Ophir, 2017), which looks at the Reformers' responses to a variety of currently relevant issues, including education, social justice, refugees, economic crisis, freedom of conscience and religion, faith and citizenship, and the role of women.

14. The original was: Théobald Süß, *Luther* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969); it appeared in a series on philosophers. I have not seen the Arabic translation, so I do not know how complete it is.

15. Another volume that may be familiar to English-speaking Lutherans, Elsie Singmaster's *Martin Luther: The Story of His Life* (Philadelphia: Board of Publications of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1939), also appears in the footnotes.

16. Will Durant, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin, 1300–1564* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

17. See the Foundation's website at <https://www.hindawi.org/english/>; Hendrix's book is available at <https://www.hindawi.org/books/46139170/> (accessed July 31, 2018).

18. On the website of the Lutheran World Federation, "From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017," and finding the Arabic tab under "Download as a PDF": https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dtpw-from_conflict_to_communion-arabic.pdf (accessed July 31, 2018).

19. The translations of the 95 theses, *A Simple Way to Pray*, and *The Magnificat* mentioned above are found here, as are works such as: Dā'ūd Ḥaddād, *The Reformation in Germany: Martin Luther*; and Yuḥannā Buḥūth (?), *Pamphlet on the Life of the Reformer Martin Luther*—which I have not seen.

20. Graf, *Geschichte*, 4:225 (no. 5).

21. For other works by van Ham, see Graf, *Geschichte*, 4:238.

22. The word "Deviser" in the title is *mubtadi'*, which can have the sense of one who devises *bid'ah* or heresy. The ETSC library's (rather fragile) copy of this volume bears no

date, but a biographical statement informs us that the author received a degree from the Coptic Orthodox Clerical College in 1948.

23. This is to be distinguished from the musings of Western journalists and pundits who look for an “Islamic Martin Luther” and propose various candidates. On the idea of “comparing Reformations,” see *An Islamic Reformation?* ed. Michaele Browers and Charles Kurzman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).

24. From the quotation in Bassam Tibi, *Islam's Predicament with Modernity: Religious Reform and Cultural Change* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2009), 199–200. For al-Afghānī, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, paperback ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), chapter 5 (esp. p. 122: “Islam needed a Luther”).

25. For one excellent example, see Gregory Miller, “Luther on the Turks and Islam,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 79–97.