PROTESTANT BIBLE TRANSLATION INTO MALTESE:
THE BOOK OF PSALMS 1919-1926

by
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Just before the First World War Protestants published the Gospel of St. Mark in Maltese prepared by Professor Themistocles Zammit with the help of Rev. G.A. Sim and Miss D. Jenkins.¹ At the same time the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. John, Acts of the Apostles, published in 1870/72, were re-issued. No initiative in this field was taken during the War. In the meantime Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi was working on his Catholic translation of the Gospels, which he finished in 1920. After the War Protestants were on the move again, with the translation of the Book of Psalms, which was finally published in 1926. In this short article we shall trace the history of this translation and assess its value.

THE FIRST STEPS

In November 1919, that is five years after the publication of St. Mark, Dr. R. Kilgur, the Editor-in-Chief of the British and Foreign Bible Society wrote to Rev. G.A. Sim, the minister of the Church of Scotland, asking him about the progress of the revision of the translation of St. Mark and to send him copies of the translation of the Gospels by Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi.² Sim in his turn told Dr. Kilgur that he did not recall anything about the subject after such upheavals brought by the War. However he sent him copies of Muscat Azzopardi’s translations up to the twelfth chapter of St. John.³ In February 1920 Sim informed the Editor that nobody in Malta had any idea of any proposed revision of St. Mark, and he mentioned again the work of Ġużè Muscat Azzopardi.⁴ Nothing concrete did result from this correspondence.

In November 1922 the review Evangelical Christendom, the official organ of the World Evangelical Alliance, announced that Mr. J. Falzon, an ex-Maltese priest working in Tunis, was preparing a Maltese translation of the Psalms, and that he intended to carry on with the Gospel of St. Luke. Dr. Kilgur (BFBS) asked Dr. Martin Gooch of the WEA to confirm this announcement and informed him that the BFBS were interested in this work, and that he would like to know on what text Mr. Falzon was working. He also sent him a copy of Rules for Translation of the BFBS.⁵
Dr. Gooch promised him to get him in contact with Mr. Falzon and furthermore encouraged Dr. Kilgur to get in hand the translation of the whole Bible: 'This would create a profound impression among the Maltese, arising as much from the attitude of local priests to the Bible, as from the growing desire of many Maltese to read the Scripture portions at present available.'

Such contact was established only four years later in February 1926, when Mr. Falzon sent to Mr. Gooch the translation of the Psalms in manuscript, St. Luke and the Epistle to the Hebrews.7 No correspondence did pass during this long interval of four years.8

In this same letter Mr. Falzon explained the principles on which he worked and the method he followed. First he based his translation on the Italian translation, with an eye on the English text and the Latin Vulgate: 'when the Italian passages were difficult to be rendered in the Maltese language'. Secondly, as far as possible, he made use of words and phrases easily understood by the common people: 'scrupulously avoiding words, which, although used by Maltese writers, they are however unintelligible to the Maltese people, that they need a note of explanation if used.' Thirdly 'as regards orthography there is a great liberty in the Maltese language, and so great liberty that sometimes the same word is written in two or three different manners, not only by different authors, but by the same work (sic.)'. Falzon explains his delay because 'I was expecting to have in hand the rules of the New Orthography. I am told that now is ready; but my translation is ready too.'9 He is referring to the Tagħna, which was published in 1924 by the Għaqda tal-Kittieba bil-Malti (The Society for Maltese Writers).

Mr. Gooch handed all this material - Book of Psalms, St. Luke and Hebrews - personally to Dr. Kilgur, telling him that Falzon was 'a careful scholar now residing in Tunis'.10 It was suggested first to publish the Psalms, to be followed by the rest; 2000 copies were to be printed. Falzon was to receive the payment of £1010 as soon as printing was finished, as in fact they did pay him. However, Dr. Kilgur, five weeks later Mr. Gooch asked him to pay him there and then, as Falzon was in need of money.11

In two months' time, that is, on September 1st, the first proofs of the Psalms were ready,12 and they were sent for correction to Mr. Falzon, on September 25th, after having been hurriedly gone through by Dr. Kilgur.13 Falzon returned them 'diligently corrected'.14 On the 13th of the same month Dr. Kilgur sent a remittance of £10,10,0 through Mr. Gooch to Falzon, informing him that the Bible Society had no intention to carry on with these translations: 'The demand even for these portions is after all very limited, and I am sure that our Committee would never think of completing the whole Bible in this dialect. After all, most of those who need it, have already Scriptures in languages which they understood.'15

It might be that Falzon did not impress them very much. He was but an amateur in the field, and certainly he had some ulterior motif, that is, to earn some much needed money. Moreover at this time Catholics - G. Muscat Azzopardi, A.M. Galea, J.P. Grima and P.P. Saydon - were active in Bible translation. Add to this there was official opposition to the distribution of Protestant translations amongst the Maltese.

EVALUATION OF THE TRANSLATION

Falzon openly and clearly declared that he translated from an Italian text; a comparative study shows quite clearly that this text was Diodati's Protestant translation published in 1641. He said also that he consulted the King James' (1611) and the Latin Vulgate, when the Italian text offered some difficulty.16 We may add that he had in his hands the Maltese translation of Camilleri (1845)17 which was followed by Taylor and other translators.18 As a basis for a comparative study of these translations I am selecting Psalms 2; 4; 22; 27; 31; 38 (Hebrew Text).19

Falzon followed Diodati as these examples amply show; his references to the Vulgate or the King James Version were rather scanty, if any, as one can see from these examples:

Psalm 2

D. v. 7 Io spiegherò il decreto;  
Il Signore mi ha detto: Tu sei il mio figliuolo;  
Oggi t'ho generato.

8 Chiedimi, ed io ti darò eredità le genti;  
Ed i confini della terra, per tua possessione.

Psalm 4

D. v. 3 Or sappiate che il Signore si ha eletto un pietsoso;  
Il Signore mi esaudirà quando io griderò a lei.

8 Io mi coricherò in pace, ed in pace ancora dormirò;  
Perciòché tu solo, Signore, mi fai abitare sinceramente.

F. 3 Cunu afu illi il Mulei ghazel ghahli dach li hu tuaiieb;  
Il Mulei jisma' meta jiena inseiiahu.
Psalm 22

D. v. 3

E pur sei il Santo,
Il Permanente, le lodi d’Israele.

Dicendo: Egli si rimette nel Signore;
liberalo dunque;
Riscuotilo, poiché egli lo gradisce.

F. 3

U inti il Kaddis,
Dac li ma jintemmx, il fohria t’Israel.

U jghied: Hu jitma fil Mulej;
Jehlsu immela; jehlsu, la ihobbu.

Psalm 27

D. v. 4

Io ho chiesto una cosa al Signore, quella procaccerò:
che io dimori nella casa del Signore tutti i giorni della mia vita,
per mirare la bellezza del Signore
E visitare il suo tempio.

Anzi pure ora il mio capo s’inalzerà sopra i miei nemici
che sono d’intorno a me;
ed io sacrificerò nel suo tabernacolo sacrificii con guibilo;
Io cantéro, e slegmegerò al Signore.

F. 4

Jien tlabt haiga lil Mulej, lilha nfittex:
Illi nghhammer f’dar il Mulej il jem colla ta hajti,
Biex nara gmel il Mulej, u nzur it-tempju tieghu.

U issa rasi tittafa fuk l’egheduaa tiegh us ma duari;
U jien nissagririca il ghaarix tieghu sacrificii bil ferh;
Jien ncanta u nfahhar il Mulej.

Psalm 31

D. v. 7

Io festeggerò, e mi rallegrerò della tua benignità;
Perciocché tu avrai veduta la mia afflizione,
Ed avrai presa conoscenza delle tribolazioni dell’anima mia;

Quanto grandi sono i tuoi beni
Che tu hai riposti a quelli che ti temono;
E che tu fai in presenza dei figliuoli degli uomini,
Inverso quelli che si confidano in te!

F. 7

Jiena nifrah u nohla bi tiubitech;
Ghax int tcun rajt id-dieka tieghi,
U tcun gharafit ta-tahbit ta ruhi.

19 X’cobor ta gid int lestejg ghal dauc li ghandhom il bezgha tieghe;
U li inti ghamel kuddiem ulied il bnedmin, ma dauc li jitimghu fich!

Psalm 38

D. v. 4

Perciocché le mie iniquità trapassano il mio capo;
Sono a guisa di grave peso,
sono pesanti più che io non posso portare.

19 I miei nemici vivono, e si fortificano;
e quelli che mi odiano s’ingrandiscano.

F. 4

Ghalixx dubietgi jghaddu il rasi; n’bossbom bhal tokol chbir;
Huma itkal milli niflah jien.

19 L’ghedeuua tieghi huma haijin, u jitkaueuu:
U dauc li jghoboduni ghal xejn b’xejn jicbru.

It is quite obvious that Falzon followed slavishly Diodati, so far as to print in italics Diodati’s insertions for clarity’s sake as in the Italian text.

FALZON AND CAMILLERI

Psalm 2

F. v. 8

Iltojni u jiena natich il g’nus b’wirtech,
U it-truf ta l’art b’chisba tieghabac.

12 Busu l’Iben, li jewwilla ma jghadabx
u tintiluf fit-triek,
Meta ghadbu ikun bil-kemm chibes.
Henjin dauc colla li jitimghu fih.

C. v. 8

Iltob minni, u naghikt gnus b’wirtek, u kisba tieghek it-truf ta l’art.

12 Busu l’Iben, li ewwilla ma jaghdabx, u tintiluf mit-triq,
meta ghadbu ikun bil-kemm kibes.
Henjin ikoll li jittieklu ghalih.

Psalm 4

F. v. 1

Meta jiena inseiia egubi, ja All a t’kudusiti:
Fid-dwejjak inti wassaitili kalbi;
Henn ghaliija, u isma talbi

6 Bosta jghied: Min jurina il gid;
Ja Mulei, arfa fukna daul ucccheh.
C. 1 X'hin insejjah weqibni, ja Alla ta' sedqi; 
    gid-dwejjaq farragn; henn ghaliija, u isma' talbi.
6 Bosra jghidu, Min jurina l-ğid? arfa' ghal fuqna dawl 
    wiċcek, ja Mulej.

Psalm 22
F. v. 6 Iżda jena dudu, u le bniedem; 
    ghajb il-bnedmin, u l'incasbar fost in-nies;
10 Jen mill giuf geit mixhut fukech; 
    Int Alla tieghi minn boton omni 
29 Is-smien colla ta' l'art jieclu u jatu kima: 
    Kuddiemu jimiterlu dauq colla li jinjlu fit trab, 
    u li ma jistghux jghexix izied.
C. v. 6 U jiena duda, u le bniedem; 
    ghajb il-bniedem, u ghaf in-nies
10 Ghali waqajt mill-guf: 
    minn boton omni Alla tieghi inti,
29 Jieclu u jaghrut qima s-smien kollha ta’ l-aru: 
    Quddiemu jimiterju dawk kollha 
    li jinjlu fit-trab, u min ruhu ma hix hağa.

Psalm 27
F. v. 4 Jen tlabt hagia lil Mulej, lilha nfitteks: 
    Illi nqhammar f'dar il-Mulej il jiem colla ta hajti, 
    Biex nara gmiel il Mulej, u nzur i-tempju tieghu.
6 Û issa rasi tirtafa fuq l'egheduaa tieghi ta ma duari; 
    U jen nissagtirica fl'gharirix tieghu sacrificili bil ferh; 
    Jena ncanta u nfahhar il Mulej.
C. 4 Haġa tlabt jien mill-Mulej, lilha nfitteks; 
    illi nqhammar f'dar il-Mulej jiem hajti kollha, 
    biex nilmah gmiel il-Mulej, u nzur daru.
6 Û issa tirtafa' rasi fuq l'ghedewwa tieghi ta madwar; u 
    nidbah f'gharirix dbihat tal-ferh; nghanni u nfahhar il- 
    Mulej.

Psalm 31
F. v. 2 Mejjel leja widintek; 
    fitteks aqiaghni: kunli blata qawwiya, 
    u dar il-harsien ghal hilsieni.
4 Ehlsini minn din ix-xibka bi bil-mohbi nasbuli 
    ghax inti l-qawwa tieghi.
16 Jiddi wiċcek fuq il-qaddej tieghc; 
    ehlsini bi hntientk.

Psalm 38
F. v. 2 Il ghalixel il vleegh tieghc niżlu fija, u idech uqghet fuki
5 Il gerhat tieghi nimu u inixxu, 
    Mhabba bluhiti.
7 Ghalixem gmbjija mimlija bil hruk; 
    u lamlma ma fieh l'ebda sahha.
C. v. 2 Ghalixem il-vleegh tieghc niżlu fija, u uqghet fuq idek.
5 Nitmu u therrew l-gerhat tieghi minn quddiem bluhiti.
7 Ghalixem kilwejja mimlija bil-hruq u ma fihx sahha lamlma.

Although Falzon translated Diodati's text, still he consulted the translation of Camilleri. At times he follows him word for word, changing only the order of words in some places. The words common to both are not current words but rather literary and semantic, e.g. rbati 2, 3; bbulu 2, 3; ksisba 2, 8; hatar bil-hadid 2, 9; ghadou 
2, 12; u rrid nghammar fis-sigur 4, 8; helsieni 22, 1; ghajb il-bned 
min 2, 6; igbajjini b'xofta 22, 7; minn boton omni 22, 10; ghajb il- 
bnedmin 22, 6; xdeki 22, 15; libbti 22, 18; buqarnjiet 22, 21; jitel 
mejlu 22, 29; nghammar f'dar il-Mulej 27, 4; moghadja wattja 27, 11; 
mejjel widintek, fitteks ehlsini 31, 2; ghajni, rabi, żaqqi 31, 9; 
qawwetni 38, 10.

But Falzon did not follow blindly Camilleri, from time to time he 
changed a word, the order of words, or separated the pronominal 
suffixes from the noun. Thus ghajnunti became il-ghajnunti tieghi
Psalm 27, 9. Hence the reading was rendered smoother and easier, 
as in the case of 31, 13-14; whereas the text of Camilleri is rather 
artificial, and heavy to read.

Orthography
As we have already seen Falzon felt himself free to establish 
his own orthographic principles; it is doubtful whether he would 
have adopted the system of the Society of Maltese Writers, if this 
work had been published before he started his own. It is obvious 
that he had no grounding in Maltese phonology or morphology; he 
had not the slightest idea of the principle of trilitersism. He created
his own alphabet, and adopted a basically Italian orthography based on a superficial phonetic system. For the letter ð (ch) he adopted c, a c with an apostrophe (') before another consonant and a simple c before i and e: tilbighedte', icciżjamiż, eserc'ti, tiskoc'c (Psalm 80, 19); ghàtce'na (Psalm 42, 2); princ'pijiet (Psalm 47, 9), the same he did with the consonant q: gerbat twegiba, weqgiba, jigi, gjo fjia (Psalm 42, 6) ta rilej, gadd, gideb. The inconsistency is obvious. The ġ is without a stroke on the b. H stands for both b and h; k is represented by cb or simple c before a consonant: ticcastigmix, xibchijiet, tulecb, taghcbom; and k stands for q; he did not distinguish between u and w; thus we have dawar, wicceb, kama, newel. The letter z stands for z and ż: żar, żemm, salwazzjoni, gruzja. This is the alphabet and orthographic system devised by Falzon, which he did not follow consistently; thus eserc'tu and eserc'tu. This inconsistency then is more marked with respect to morphology.

**Style**

Falzon's style is much better than that of Camilleri; it is more natural and thus readable. He stated: 'I have chosen those words and expressions which nowadays are clearly understood by the Maltese people.' Notwithstanding this statement he used relatively few Italian words, nor did he avoid such words as imbieta, biemed, bagg, gbaslug, batar, kies, nghammar (Psalm 23), ielblub (Psalm 42), gieget, smughi, blesien, sweqijsiet, ilmiijietek, meugijet, ġ-ert diebet (Psalm 46, 6), qawsijsiet (Psalm 46, 9), gwejda (Psalm 46, 10); fuggbu, ċdejkom (Psalm 47, 1). In these Psalms one finds only 29 Italian words in 111 verses.

Still the resultant text is easily read and understood; nor does it lack a certain degree of rhythm, as these few verses show:

Iżda jien, kiesni trux, ma nismax;  
ụ kiesni mutu li ma jifhax fommu,  
ụ jen bhala bnidem li ma jismax;  
ụ li ma ghandux l'ebda twegiba f'fommu.  
Ghalix fích, ja Mulej, jina nitma;  
Inti tismaghni, ja Mulej, Alla tieghi  
Salm 38, 13-15

Jiena nimtiedd fil paci, u fil paci ukoll norqod;  
ghalix int wahdec, ja Mulej,  
iggighalni nghammar fir-sigur  
Salm 4, 8

Cullmin jarani jidhaq bia:  
Jghajbni b'xofu, u iċiaklak ir-ras;  
U ġheid: Hu jitma fil Mulej;  
Jehlsu immel; jehlsu, la iħobbu.  
Salm 22, 7-8

Ghalix, cieb daru mieghi:  
Kabda niez hienza ghamluni fin-nofs;  
huma takkulti idejia u rīljejja.  
Salm 22, 16

Thus Falzon with help of his predecessor's work succeeded to give to his readers a readable and attractive translation.

This was the last protestant work in the field of Maltese Bible translation until 1974 when the Trinitarian Bible Society published the four gospels in four booklets.

**Documents**

I Letter from Mr. J. Falzon to Mr. Gooch  
19th February 1926

Dear Mr. Gooch,

I am enclosing hereby the last part of the Psalms, i.e. from PS 101 to Ps 150.

I should like, however, to inform the Editor of the British and Foreign Bible Society, that in translating the Psalms into Maltese I have followed the Italian version, as leading text; but consulting in the meantime the English and Latin version, especially when the Italian passages were difficult to be rendered in the Maltese language.

Moreover, I should like to emphasize upon the fact that in my translation I have chosen those words and expressions which, nowadays are clearly understood by the Maltese people; scrupulously avoiding words, which, although used by Maltese writers they are however so unintelligible to the Maltese people, that they need a note of explication if used. On that, I was constrained to use some Italianisms, instead of the proper but not intelligible, Maltese words. As, for instance, I preferred the word altar, which is understood by all, and which is exclusively used by all in the spoken language, instead of the proper Maltese word manbar, which is known by a very small number of cultured people.

The Editor should perhaps find some difficulty in giving to the press words signed by an apostrophe, as for instance: imghauq'a. If such be the case, never mind, he can omit such apostrophes, but
if not difficulty at all, it would be better to use them, because they render easier the reading.

The Editor must also be informed that as regards orthography, there is a great liberty in the Maltese language; and so great liberty that sometimes the same word is written in two or three different manners, not only by different authors, but by the same self author of same work. For instance, we write ad libitum – Dac or Dach – Ghal or Ghall – lil or lill – Gohtit or Ghottit – Xoghl or Xoghl – Mhabba or 'mhabba or also Imhabba – Iena or Jena and so on ... To overcome such inconvenience, a Maltese Society has been lately formed, which intends to give general rules for rendering unanimous the Maltese orthography; and this is the main reason why I have delayed so long to perform the translation of the Psalms. I was expecting to have in hand the rules of the New Orthography. I am told that now is ready; but now my translation is ready too.

With kind and sincere regards,

Yours in Christ,
(sgd.) John Falzon

II Letter from Mr. J. Falzon to Rev. Dr. R. Kilgur, D.D.
4th October 1926

Dear Sir,

I am glad to inform you that I have returned to you by this mail the marked proofs of the Psalms in Maltese diligently corrected, and the manuscript copy as well.

For full understanding of my corrections, I beg you to note the meaning of the following signs.

By this sign — I mean that letter is superfluous, take it off, or leave it away.

By this —> Turn up that letter.

By this — Divide in two words.

By this —> Join together.

The other signs are intended to change or to insert some letter. Where is marked with blue pencil (I) there must begin the verb. At any rate the mistakes are very few, and I congratulate myself with you for such property (sic.).

Corrections have been revised by me for a second time.

With my best regards.

Yours most faithfully,

(sgd.) John Falzon

1 G. Sant, Protestant Bible Translation: The Gospel of St. Mark. JMS 13 (1979) 80-120.
2 BFBS Archives – Correspondence 1919 – Letter 3/11/1919.
4 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1920 – Let. 6/2/1920.
5 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1922 – Let. 20/11/1922.
6 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1922 – Let. 20/11/1922.
7 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 19/2/1926.
8 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 18/5/1926.
9 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 19/2/1926.
10 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 17/5/1926; 18/5/1926 and Interview 25/6/1926.
11 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 30/7/1926.
12 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 1/9/1926.
13 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 25/9/1926.
14 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 4/10/1926.
15 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 13/10/1926.
16 BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1926 – Let. 19/2/1926.
17 Ktibeb tar-Tadlha ta’ Aldenija, Malta: fi l-stamperija ta’ M. Weiss, 1845. Translation by M.A. Camilleri; published anonymously.