

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.'⁶

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 explication 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 *Tagħrif*; 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 £M10 as soon as printing was finished, as in fact they did pay him. However, Dr. Kilgur, five weeks later Mr. Gooch asked them 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 amongs 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 *per* eredità le genti;
Ed i confini della terra, *per* tua possessione.

- F. 7 Jiena inxandar id-digriet;
Il-Mulei kalli: Inti ibni;
Il-lum jiena iggenerajtech.
8 Itlobni, u jiena natich il g'nus *b'* wirtech,
u it-truf ta' l-art *b'* chisba tigħac.

Psalm 4

- D. v. 3 Or sappiate che il Signore si ha eletto un pietoso;
Il Signore *mi* esaudirà quando io griderò a lei.
8 Io mi coricherò in pace, ed *in pace* ancora dormirò;
Perciocchè tu solo, Signore, mi fai abitare sinceramente.
- F. 3 Cunu afu illi il Mulei għazel għalih dach li hu tuaiieb:
Il Mulei jisma' meta jiena inseiiahlu.

- 8 Jiena nimitedd fil paci, u *fil paci* ucoll norkod;
Għaliex int uahdech, ja Mulei,
iggighalni nghammar fis-sigur.

Psalm 22

- D. v. 3 Epur sei il Santo,
Il Permanente, le lodi d'Israele.
8 *Dicendo*: Egli si rimette nel Signore;
liberalo dunque;
Riscuotilo, poichè egli lo gradisce.
- F. 3 U inti il Kaddis,
Dac li ma jintemmx, il fohria t'Israel.
8 *U jgheid*: Hu jitma fil Mulej;
Jehilsu immela; jehilsu, 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.
6 Anzi pure ora il mio capo s'inalzerà sopra i miei nemici
che sono d'intorno a me;
ed io sacrificherò nel suo tabernacolo sacrificii con
guibilo;
Io canterò, e salmeggerò al Signore.
- F. 4 Jien tlabt hagia lil Mulej, lilha nfittex:
Illi nghammar f'dar il Mulej il jem colla ta hajti,
Biex nara gmiel il Mulej, u nzur it-tempju tieghu.
6 U issa rasi tirtafa fuk l'egheduaa tieghi *ta* ma duari;
U jien nissagrifica fl'gharix tieghu sacrificii bil ferh;
Jiena ncanta u nfahhar il Mulej.

Psalm 31

- D. v. 7 Io festeggerò, e mi rallegrerò della tua benignità;
Perciocchè tu avrai veduta la mia afflizione,
Ed avrai presa conoscenza delle tribolazioni dell'anima
mia;
- 19 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 gharaft it-tahbit ta ruhi.
- 19 X'cobor ta gid int lestejt ghal dauc li ghandhom il bezgha
 tieghc;
 U li inti ghamel kuddiem ulied il bnedmin, ma dauc li
 jitimghu fich!

Psalm 38

- D. v. 4 Perciocchè 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 Ghaliex dnubieti jghaddu il rasi; *nboššom* bhal tokol
 cbir;
 Huma itkal milli niflah jien.
- 19 L'ghedeuua tieghi huma haijin, u jitkauueu:
 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 Itlobni u jiena natich il g'nus b'wirtech,
 U it-truf ta l'art b'chisba tieghac.
- 12 Busu l'Iben, li jewwilla ma jghadabx
 u tintilfu fit-triek,
 Meta ghadbu ikun bil-kemm chibes.
 Henjin dauc colla li jitimghu fih.
- C. v. 8 Itlob minni, u nagħtik gnus b'wirtek, u kisba tiegħek it-
 truf ta' l-art.
- 12 Busu 'l-Iben, li ewwilla ma jaghdabx, u tintilfu mit-triq,
 meta ghadbu ikun bil-kemm kibes.
 Henjin ilkoll li jittieklu ghalih.

Psalm 4

- F. v. 1 Meta jiena inseiiah uegibni, ja Alla ta kdusiti:
 Fid-dwejjak inti wassaitli *kalbi*;
 Henn ghalija, u isma talbi
- 6 Bosta jgheidu: Min jurina il gid?
 Ja Mulei, arfa fukna daul uiccech.

- C. 1 X'hin insejjah wegibni, ja Alla ta' sedqi:
 fid-dwejjaq farragn; henn ghalija, u isma' talbi.
 6 Bosta jghidu, Min jurina l-gid? arfa' ghal fuqna dawl
 wićcek, ja Mulej.

Psalm 22

- F. v. 6 Iżda jena dudu, u le bniedem;
 ghajb il bnedmin, u l'imcasbar fost in-nies;
 10 Jen mill giuf geit mixhut fukech;
 Int Alla tieghi minn boton ommi
 29 Is-smien colla ta' l'art jieclu u jatu kima:
 Kuddiemu jitmeilu dauc colla li jinzlu fit trab,
 u li ma jistghux jgheixu izied.
- C. v. 6 U jiena dudu, u le bniedem;
 ghajb il-bniedem, u għar in-nies
 10 Għalik waqajt mill-ġuf:
 minn boton ommi Alla tieghi inti.
 29 Jiekl u jaghtu qima s-smien kollha ta' l-art:
 Quddiemu jitmejl dawk kollha
 li jinzlu fit-trab, u min ruħu ma hix haġa.

Psalm 27

- F. v. 4 Jen tlabt haġa lil Mulej, lilha nfittex:
 Illi nġhammar f'dar il Mulej il jiem colla ta hajti,
 Biex nara gmiel il Mulej, u nzur it-tempju tieghu.
 6 U issa rasi tirtafa fuq l'egheduua tieghi ta ma duari;
 U jen nissagrifica fl'għarix tieghu sacrificii bil ferh;
 Jena ncanta u nfahhar il Mulej.
- C. 4 Haġa tlabt jien mill-Mulej, lilha nfittex;
 illi nġhammar f'dar il-Mulej jiem hajti kollha,
 biex nilmah gmiel il-Mulej, u nzur daru.
 6 U issa tirtafa' rasi fuq l-għedewwa tieghi ta' madwar: u
 nidbah f'għarixu dbihat tal-ferh; nġhanni u nfahhar il-
 Mulej.

Psalm 31

- F. v. 2 Mejjel lejja uidintech, fittex ehlišni;
 Cunli blata kauuija, u dar li tharisni ghal helsieni
 4 Aklghani min giox-xibca li nasbuli bil-mohbi;
 ghax inti il kauua tieghi.
 16 Jiddi wiccegh il kaddej tieghc;
 Salvani f'għieh hnientnech.

- C. v. 2 Mejjel leja widintek;
fittex aqlagħni: kunli blata qawwija,
u dar il-ħarsien għal hilsieni.
- 4 Eħlisni minn din ix-xibka li bil-moħbi nasbuli
għax inti l-qawwa tiegħi.
- 16 Jiddi wiċċek fuq il-qaddej tiegħek;
eħlisni bi ħnientek.

Psalm 38

- F. v. 2 *Il għaliex il vleggeg tiegħc nizlu fija, u idech uakgħet
fuki*
- 5 Il gerħat tiegħi nitmu u inixxu,
Mhabba bluhiti.
- 7 Għaliex gembeija mimlija bil hruk;
u laħmi ma fieħ l'ebda sahha.
- C. v. 2 *Għaliex il-vleġeġ tiegħek ni xlu fiha, u waqgħet fuqi idek.*
- 5 Nitmu u therrew l-gerħat tiegħi minn quddiem bluhiti.
- 7 Għaliex kilwejja mimlija bil-ħruq u ma fiħx sahha laħmi.

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 semitic, e.g. *rbati* 2, 3; *ħbula* 2, 3; *kisba* 2, 8; *ħatar bil-ħadiid* 2, 9; *għadbu* 2, 12; *u rrid ngħammar fis-sigur* 4, 8; *ħelsieni* 22, 1; *għajb il-bnedmin* 2, 6; *igħajjibni b'xoftu* 22, 7; *minn boton ommi* 22, 10; *għajb il-bnedmin* 22, 6; *xdieki* 22, 15; *libsti* 22, 18; *buqarnijiet* 22, 21; *jit-mejlu* 22, 29; *ngħammar f'dar il-Mulej* 27, 4; *mogħdija watja* 27, 11; *mejjel widintek*, *fittex eħlisni* 31, 2; *għajni, ruħi, zaqqi* 31, 9; *qawwietni* 38, 10.

But Falzon did not follow blindly Camilleri, from time to time he changed a word, the order of words, or separated the pronomial suffixes from the noun. Thus *għajnunti* became *il-għajnuna tiegħi* 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 trilaterism. He created

his own alphabet, and adopted a basically Italian orthography based on superficial phonetic system. For the letter *ç* (*ch*) he adopted *c'*, a *c* with an apostrophe (') before another consonant and a simple *c* before *i* and *e*: *titbigħedtc'*, *iccianfarnix*, *eserc'ti*, *tiskoc'c* (Psalm 80, 19); *ghatcc'na* (Psalm 42, 2); *princ'pijiet* (Psalm 47, 9), the same he did with the consonant *g*: *gerhat twe-giba*, *weg'gha*, *jigiu*, *gio fija* (Psalm 42, 6) *ta riglejħ*, *għid*, *gideb*. The inconsistency is obvious. The *għ* is without a stroke on the *h*. *H* stands for both *h* and *ħ*; *k* is represented by *ch* or simple *c* before a consonant: *ticcastiganix*, *xbichijiet*, *tulech*, *tagħchom*; and *k* stands for *q*; he did not distinguish between *u* and *w*; thus we have *dauuar*, *wiccech*, *kauua*, *neuuel*. The letter *z* stands for *z* and *ž*: *zur*, *žzomx*, *salvazzjoni*, *grazja*. This is the alphabet and orthographic system devised by Falzon, which he did not follow consistently; thus *eserc'tu* and *eserc̄tu*. 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'.²⁰ Notwithstanding this statement he used relatively few Italian words, nor did he avoid such words as *imbieta*, *ħiemed*, *ħaqg*, *għasluġ*, *ħatar*, *kies*, *nghammar* (Psalm 23), *ilebleb* (Psalm 42), *gliegel*, *smugħi*, *ħelsien*, *swieqijiet*, *ilmijietek*, *meu-gitek*, *l-art diebet* (Psalm 46, 6), *qawsijiet* (Psalm 46, 9), *gwejda* (Psalm 46, 10); *fuqħu*, *idejkom* (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:

Izda jien, kiesni trux, ma nismax;
 u kiesni mutu li ma jiftahx fommu,
 u jen bhala bnidem li ma jismax;
 u li ma ghandux l'ebda twegiba f'fommu.
 Ghaliex fich, ja Mulej, jina nitma:
 Inti tismaghni, ja Mulej, Alla tieghi
 Salm 38, 13-15

Jiena nimtedd fil paci, u fil paci ukoll norqod;
 ghaliex int wahdec, ja Mulej,
 iggighalni nghammar fi s-sigur
 Salm 4, 8

Cullmin jarani jidhaq bia:
Jghajjbni b'xoftu, u iciaklak ir-ras;
U jgheid: Hu jitma fil Mulej:
Jehilsu immela; jehilsu, la ihobbu.
Salm 22, 7-8

Ghaliex, clieb daru mieghi:
Kabda nies hziena ghamluni fin-nofs;
huma takkluli idejja u rig'lejja.
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: *imgħawg'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 – Gholi or Oghli – Xoghl or Xghol or Xoghol – 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 C. Sant, *Protestant Bible Translations: The Gospel of St. Mark*, JMS 13 (1979) 80-120.

² BFBS Archives – Correspondence 1919 – Letter 3/11/1919.

³ BFBS Arch. – Corr. 1920 – Let. 9/1/1920. G.M. Azzopardi published the Gospel of St. John in 1920.

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 *Ktieb tat-Talb ta' Alenija*, Malta: fli stamperija ta' M. Weiss, 1845. Translation by M. A. Camilleri; published anonymously.

¹⁸ K. Sant, *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti: 1810-1850*, Malta: University Press, 1975, pp. 31-32.

¹⁹ *Il Ctieb tas-Salmi*, Londra: BFBS 1926. Name of author is absent. G. Diodati, *La Sacra Bibbia*, Firenze 1894.