

## BOOK REVIEW

Carmel Bezzina, *Saydon. Biblista u Studjuż tal-Malti*, Pubblikazzjoni Preca, Malta 2006, ix-xx.393pp.

An interesting contribution indeed to the slowly growing 'Saydon Studies' and to Maltese linguistics in general. As the author candidly admits in the forward to the volume, the present publication owes its origin to his MA dissertation, written under the tutorship of Rev Professor Carmel Sant, himself a student and a close collaborator of the defunct scholar, and defended at the University of Malta in 1979. The writer then took other directions in his studies and research, and it was only later with the turn of this century that the author conceived of the idea of translating into Maltese and publishing his dissertation in book form after due reworking of the material gathered and studied, since several developments have taken place in Maltese studies (p.ix), and not only in Maltese studies one should add. The value of this book lies perhaps not only in its author's description and evaluation of Saydon's contributions to the different areas of study, but also in Bezzina's situating these contributions within the context of the evolution of research.

Carmel Bezzina covered all aspects of Professor Peter Paul Saydon's work in the areas of Maltese linguistics, literature, and Bible translation. As a literary genre, this volume has rather the characteristics of 'handbook' wherein the revered professor's life and work are narrated and evaluated from every angle.

The only aspect which is left 'suspended' is Saydon's contribution to professional biblical exegesis(p.294); Bezzina though offers already an initial evaluation of this aspect in chapter 13 where several recensions of Saydon's translations are mentioned(see also bibliography on p.387) and discussed in some detail. Probably, a critique of Saydon's share in exegetical debates has to start with Sant's reviews of the single books of Scripture as they were printed and such exegetical studies like "Gleanings: Philological notes on Romans" in *Melita Theologica* X/1(1957); "Philological and Textual Notes to the Translation of the Old Testament" in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XXIII(1961)249-257; and "The Maltese Translation of the Bible" in *Melita Theologica* XVI/1-2(1964)1-22. In this regard, it is a pity that the collection of such scientific research works has not included the work by Prof Carmel Sant, *Bible Translation and Language. Essays into the History of Bible Translation in Maltese*. Melita Theologica Supplementary Series, 2 Malta 1992.

Carmel Bezzina's volume consists of a Forward in which the author traces the genesis of the present volume, a Presentation by Professor Oliver Friggieri, six *taqsimiet*, sections, each made up of one or several chapters, sixteen chapters, an Epilogue, four 'chapters' of appendixes, and a comprehensive bibliography. In this short review we shall simply have a look at the contents of each *taqsimia* and then spend few words of general comment here and there on the contribution of the author in this work.

The first section (pp.3-52) is dedicated to an outline biography of Saydon (chapter One, pp.3-36), and to the professor's intellectual prowess (chapter Two, pp.39-52). In sections II (pp. 55-103) and III (pp.105-149), Bezzina reviews Saydon's participation in the hot debates raging in Malta during the twenties and the thirties concerning the 'Language Question'. Ever since 1931 (up to 1964) Saydon was Professor of Holy Scripture at the Faculty of Theology of the then Royal University of Malta, while during the short period of 1932 till 1933 he was also the President of the *Għaqda tal-Malti* (University Branch) and editor of *Lehen il-Malti* for the period 1931-1939. The three roles involved Saydon in controversies. The first was over issues of methodology in theological research and teaching with his colleagues of the Faculty, the other two concerning matters of Maltese linguistics. One merit of Saydon was that while the debates about the language were often tinged with expressed or hidden political agendas, he confined himself to strictly lines of scientific argumentation, and avoided to overstep the boundaries of petty party politics.

In section III Bezzina explains and discusses Saydon's views on the origins and linguistic composition of the Maltese language. The writer traces Saydon's theories as they evolved and as they had ultimately to be abandoned because they proved inadequate in face of emerging data and studies. It is a pity that Bezzina does not include, discuss, or at least mention more recent opinions and works like John Micallef's unpublished MA Dissertation in Comparative Philology, with the title 'The Sicilian Element in Maltese', that was defended at the London University as early as 1959, and the more recent major work of Professor Dionysius Agius that was recently published with the title *Siculo Arabic*, Kegan Paul International, 1996.

Section IV focuses on several papers by Saydon on Maltese phonetics, phonology, grammar, and lexicon. Saydon brought to the discussion of the various issues discussed his good grasp of both biblical Hebrew and Arabic, and some of his observations still hold ground even though Bezzina does not always register the validity of his positions.

One small detail. In one short note published in *Lehen il-Malti* 53-54(1934)24-25 entitled 'Irqaqat tal-Kitba' Saydon discussed the gemination of the so-called 'weak consonants' /j/ and /w/ in certain morphological contexts. This matter created huge strain on some grammarians of Maltese when politicians who thought themselves infallible even in areas they know nothing of, prescribed on what should be done with the use of these two consonants [Reference is being made to the letter sent by the late Professor Joseph Aquilina to the present reviewer and published in the journal of the Malta Bible Society, *Sijon* 9/1(1997)87-88]. Bezzina considers Saydon's theory on the maintenance of gemination of these consonants in some forms of verbs which have one of these consonants as second radical as simply Saydon's *fehma personali* and makes no evaluation of the revered linguist's proposal. Instead he reports in note 12 of p.180 that Professor Saydon counselled his readers to follow the grammar rulings of the *Għaqda* and not his private views. But for some reason the *Għaqda* never came with a proper linguistic discussion of this item, even after Professor Joseph Aquilina acknowledged in his dictionary [*Maltese –English Dictionary*, 1, Midsea Books, Malta 1987, 596 for the /j/ but not for the /w/] that Saydon has been "the one grammatically correct" in this discussion.

In 1996 the Malta Bible Society publishes the second edition of its *Il-Bibbja* under the general editorship of the present reviewer, and in the introduction to this edition acknowledged that in this and other linguistic matters the Society followed the linguistic analysis of Professors Saydon and Aquilina. For the time being even the *Kunsill Nazzjonali ta' l-Ilsien Malti* finds it difficult to deal with the issue linguistically: if a mother tongue speaker of Maltese 'feels' the presence of a second /w/ in *dawru* and would write *dawwru* just as he would 'feel' the presence of a second /s/ in *kissru*, why should prescriptive grammar hinder him from reproducing in writing the language he/she speaks while it justly obliges him/her to reproduce in writing consonants like /gh/ even in morphological contexts where it is mute as in the word *għamel*?

In section V Bezzina examines quite exhaustively Saydon's competence as a writer of Maltese literature. The chapter contains four chapters. In chapter 8 he exposes Saydon's ideas expressed in his lecture given at the British Institute in 1943 with the title "Maltese Literature and its Future in its Relation to National Character" which he later published in book form in 1946 under the same title. In the next three chapters Bezzina reviews the various genres of literature Saydon tried his hands at: narrative and descriptive pieces (chapter 9), his epigrams which Saydon employed as a tool for social critique (chapter 10), and his play on St Catherine

which he wrote for his Żurrieq compatriots as a pastoral endeavour. Bezzina is not so enthusiastic about the literary qualities of this play (chapter 11).

The author of this volume dedicates the final section VI (pp. 243-323) to Saydon as translator of the Bible. This section comprises five chapters: in chapter 12 Bezzina tries to describe the historical context in which Saydon put pen to paper (literally, since the final text of his translation was handwritten as the originals now prove, cf. Dun Anton Abela, “Inventarju tad-Dokumenti ta’ Mons P.P. Saydon” *pro manuscriptu*. Only a few introductions to one or two biblical books were actually typed). Important in this concern is Bezzina’s situating Saydon’s translation within the Maltese ‘translation tradition’ which could already count on a number of attempts as to move Saydon himself to write ‘a history of the Maltese Bible’ (cf. bibliography). This history was then adjourned by Prof Mgr Carmel Sant in several articles the greater part of which are cited in the bibliography; Professor Sant consulted the archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society and then of the United Bible Societies for the correspondence regarding the activities of Protestant missionaries working in and from Malta during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; this correspondence had not been available to Prof Saydon so that the history of Bible translation he wrote left space for improvement. The majority of this correspondence was reproduced in the volume published by the Faculty of Theology in 1992 as the second volume in the Melita Theologica Supplementary Series with the title *Bible Translation and Language. Essays into the History of Bible Translation in Maltese*; in this volume are included all of Sant’s articles narrating this history as well the studies of Prof Saydon concerning the same history. This volume merits at least to have been included in the bibliography.

For chapter 13 where Bezzina evaluates the accuracy of Saydon’s translation he understandingly relies on authorities, especially Professor Sant his mentor who could judge the value of Saydon’s translation strategies. But he fruitfully employed also the works of Saydon himself as he explained his strategies in such articles as “Philological and Textual Notes to the Maltese of the Old Testament” published in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* XXIII(1961)249-257 and the other better known article published in the 1964 *Melita Theologica* with the title “The Maltese Translation of the Bible.” But Bezzina mentions also the evaluation made by such biblical scholars as Alberto Vaccari who had been Saydon’s teacher at the Pontifical Biblical Institute during his formation period. In the following two chapters (14.15) Bezzina passes under scrutiny lexical and syntactical aspects of the Saydon translation and its literary and stylistic merits. In the final chapter (16)

Bezzina narrates in short the history of the Saydon translation's second edition which was presumably done on the basis of notes that the author himself prepared in view of this development. One finds this second redaction in the three-volume edition of 1977.1982.1990 with the title of *Bibbja Saydon* which had its own editorial board; but there may be some room for discussion whether the elegant 1995 edition published with the title *Il-Bibbja* to commemorate the centenary of Saydon's birth in 1895 actually constitutes the 'second edition'; this edition had a different editorial board which took liberties with the text of the translation which the original author did not take in the second edition, and which he would probably not have tolerated in view of the debate reported by Bezzina in note 16 of the chapter [Cf. Anthony Abela, "Two Professional Bible Translations of the Bible in Maltese in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" *Melita Theologica* XLVIII/2(1992)15-35].

The book ends with an epilogue (pp.325-332) which seems to have been written years after the 1979 dissertation where the author offers a *post-mortem* evaluation of Saydon, four sets of appendixes (etymological notes compiled from several of Saydon's works (I, pp.335-348); a list of archaic vocabulary employed by Saydon in his translation( II, pp.349-359); a list of derived vocabulary, that is, words that are not found in Maltese lexicography but which Saydon 'created' on the basis of roots of words commonly employed in the spoken language (III, pp.361-372); a list of Semitic syntactic structures (IV, pp. 373-379), and a well organised bibliography (pp.381-393). Missing in a book like this is an index (authors', for instance), or perhaps more than one. One should mention also that throughout the book many photos of Professor Saydon are reproduced.

What would one say of this volume of Carmel Bezzina? The present reviewer believes that the author should be thanked and congratulated for the immense task of compiling all this material and writing this monograph. Not to mention the work of translating his original dissertation into Maltese. Bezzina rendered a good service to Maltese and to the nascent Saydon Studies. The problem for the author was the chronological caesura between the time of writing the original dissertation (1979) and the time of publication of this volume (2006). This made the up to date of the work in all its aspects really difficult, especially in areas where the author could not be as proficient as in others. For instance: while for a narration of the story of the troublesome sixties in Maltese history Bezzina referred to the 2005 two volume *L-Istorja Kostituzzjonali u l-Isfond Storiku* of Joseph M. Pirotta (p. 8 note 20) [for the crisis in the thirties he could have added the book of Dominic Fenech, *Responsibility and Power in Inter-War Malta*, Book One, Endemic Democracy(1919-1930),

Publishers Enterprising Group, Malta 2005], for Bible translation theory he cites a few times Eugene A. Nida's *Bible Translating* (London 1961) and *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden 1964); however, he neglected the fact that Nida wrote two other classics of translation theory, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (together with Charles Tabor), Brill, Leiden 1969; and together with Jan de Waard *From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (United Bible Societies, New York 1986). Not to say that Nida founded a translation tradition (represented for instance by such Bible versions as the *Good New Bible* and the *Contemporary English Version* which are widely acclaimed and very influential) and theory called 'dynamic equivalence' or 'functional equivalence' [cf. Timothy Wilt (ed.), *Bible Translation, Frames of Reference*, St Jerome Publishing, Manchester UK 2003, for an evaluation] which Saydon did not follow at all. The present reviewer mentioned a few other cases, also in the linguistic field, where this *aggiornamento* could have been done, and hopes it will be done when a second edition will be prepared. For this volume contains so much good material that when time comes it merits to have a second edition which will serve better the current of Maltese Studies we are terming 'Saydon Studies'

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