A PLEA FOR THE USE OF VERSIONS OF SCRIPTURE AND OF OTHER LITERATURE IN THE VULGAR ARABIC

It is well-known to students of missions that the question of the use of Vernacular literature where a Classical language and literature are found, has raised a conflict of opinions in other lands besides those in which Arabic is spoken. This, I think, shows that equally earnest and competent persons may look at the question from different points of view, and, perhaps, form their judgment on an incomplete consideration of the facts. For this reason I have called my contribution a "Plea," and I have tried to state my point of view clearly, and to indicate some of the conditions and reasons that have influenced me in the judgment I have formed.

I wish, first, to make clear my position with regard to the Literary Arabic. I have a great admiration and love for it and its literature, and I would not that anything in this article should be understood as depreciatory in the least degree of this, the most perfect of Semitic tongues. I am also an advocate of its use up to the hilt of its possibilities, or, in other words, to the fullest extent that the capacity and knowledge of those among whom we labour will permit. This last phrase will indicate where I part company with the pedant and the purist.

Another point not to be lost sight of is that I write chiefly in view of the conditions that prevail in the Barbary States, especially Algeria.

I. Relation of Vulgar Arabic to the Literary language.

It is important that our conception of the relation that the modern dialects of Arabic hold to the literary language be as clear and exact as possible. The two forms are not to be considered as two different languages, but rather as the same language in different stages of its
history. Islam and the Koran have preserved to a large extent the unity of the language, but have hindered the literary cultivation of the spoken tongue.

Renan in his *Histoire des langues sémitiques*, Book IV., chapter ii., Section 7, has a long discussion on the relation which exists between the two forms. He says:—

"The Vulgar Arabic, in reality, is only the Literary Arabic stripped of its learned grammar and of its rich environment of vowels. All the final inflections, expressing either the cases of the substantives, or the moods of the verbs, are suppressed. In place of the delicate mechanism of the Literary syntax, the Vulgar Arabic has substituted others much more simple and more analytic. Prefixes and isolated words mark the shades of meaning, which the Literary Arabic expresses by the play of the final vowels; the tenses of the verb are determined by words joined to the imperfect form of the verb to give precision to the signification. With regard to the lexicology, the Vulgar Arabic has dropped out that superabundance of words which encumbered rather than enriched the Literary Arabic. The former knows only the current stock of the Semitic vocables, sometimes slightly turned from their original signification. Some foreign words, differing according to the different localities, Turkish for the most part, have alone vitiated the perfectly Semitic character of this tongue, which is spoken still in our day over a wide stretch of the earth's surface."

With regard to the final desinences he says:—

"We are thus led to regard the final desinences as an ancient peculiarity of the Arabic, which became regularised rather late and was always neglected by the greater part of the tribes . . . Thus, without attributing to the grammarians the invention of the mechanisms of the Literary Arabic, we recognise in these mechanisms a part of convention, in the sense that, of certain floating devices, vague in character, or applying only to certain words, the purists have made fixed and regularised proceedings. For the dictionary, in like manner, they have sanctioned the intrusion of a crowd of every origin that the people never employed, and which have made Arabic a sort of artificial language, after the manner of the academic Italian of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The distinction of literary and vulgar Arabic has no other origin. After a grammatical recast, the tongue of the people is always found different from that of the learned. Then only commences the distinction of a Vulgar dialect in opposition to the learned tongue. The development of the language is, in a manner, split, and continues ever after in two lines more and more divergent; the Vulgar speech succeeding the primitive speech by a process of corruption, and the learned tongue succeeding the same primitive source by a process of culture . . . This seems to us to be the point of conciliation between the two hypotheses which have been proposed to explain the relation between the Literary and the Vulgar Arabic."
The Literary is not, as some philologists would have it, a wholly artificial language; the Vulgar tongue, on the other hand, was not born entirely, as some have claimed, of the corruption of the literary language; but there existed an ancient language, richer and more synthetic than the Vulgar tongue, less regulated than the Literary form of the language, out of which the two forms have developed in opposite ways. We may compare the primitive Arabic to what the Latin language must have been before the grammatical labours which regularised it, about the time of the Scipios; the literary Arabic, to the Latin language as we find it in the monuments of the century of Augustus; and the vulgar Arabic to the simplified Latin spoken about the sixth century, and which resembled in many ways more the ancient Latin than that of Virgil or Cicero . . . There took place with the Arabs, in the first century after the Hegira, what has been seen every time that a great mass of diverse populations finds itself all at once subjected to a language too learned for it; the people, who only seek to make themselves mutually understood, make for themselves a tongue more simple, more analytic, less burdened with grammatical flexions. Arabic could not escape entirely the tendency which leads all languages towards a dissolution, caused by the incapacity in which the descendants find themselves to compress their thought into the synthetic forms of the language of their fathers; but what is important to maintain is, that the new dialect never came to the point of making itself considered as a distinct language. The Arabs do not regard the Literary and the Vulgar Arabic as two languages, but as two forms, one grammatical and the other non-grammatical, of the same language. There are besides, between the one and the other, so many intermediary degrees that one cannot say where the Vulgar Arabic begins and where the Literary Arabic ends.*

"In the conversational style, it is true the Vulgar tongue has sufficient uniformity; it is considered bad taste to employ the flexions of the Literary language; but in the written style, each, as he has more or less of literary knowledge, tries to approach as much as possible, both in the choice of words and in the observance of grammatical rules, to the Literary language; somewhat after the style of the Greeks of the Middle Ages who, as soon as they took the pen in hand, sought to conform themselves to the classical language; in the same manner also in France, in the tenth century, they had no idea that the popular speech was capable of being written."

The distinction made by the Arabs and mentioned by Renan, between two forms of Arabic, one spoken and non-grammatical, and the other written and grammatical, might lead some to suppose that the spoken language had no rules, which is not the case. It is only non-grammatical in that it does not observe the rules of the

*While agreeing with the general tenor of these remarks, I would not commit myself entirely to every position laid down.
literary language. The science of grammar properly understood does not make rules but finds out uniformities of usage, and states them. These are the rules of the grammar of any language, and the Vulgar Arabic has such uniformities or rules, according to which the speech of anyone is judged correct or not.

Professor Cherbonneau, who did much in the way of exploring the Algerian dialect of Arabic, wrote in the *Journal Asiatique* (1855), and in the *Revue Africaine* (1868), as follows:—

"The North African dialect is a language 'sui generis,' according to Ibn Khaldoun. I am now able to affirm that the style is uniform in the case alike of learned and unlearned. The mufti and the Kadhi do not speak better than the barber and the weaver; they all employ the same words and the same locutions; they all have the same pronunciation. This constitutes a regular, simple, and often picturesque language in which one is able to enunciate clearly one's ideas."

Professor Wright, in his *Comparative Grammar of Semitic Languages*, published after his death, shows, that although Arabic was the last of the Semitic languages to enter into historical prominence, yet it represents an earlier stage of Semitic than Hebrew or Aramaic, although at the same time more highly developed grammatically. He says:—

"At this particular period, too (i.e.—the period of its entering as a factor in general human history), the dialect of the Koreish, which had already acquired a certain supremacy over the rest, was fixed by the Koran as the future literary language of the whole nation. Had it not been for this circumstance, we might have known Arabic in the form of half a dozen languages, differing from one another almost as widely as the members of the Romance group or the modern languages of northern India. But its literature has in great measure prevented this and preserved the unity of the language, so that the dialectic divergences of what is called 'Vulgar Arabic' are by no means so great as we might have expected after all the struggles and vicissitudes of the last twelve centuries. From the mouth of the Tigris, throughout Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine, Arabia proper, Egypt and North Africa as far as Morocco, the language is essentially one and the same—sunk by gradual decay of its inflection to the level at which we become acquainted with Aramaic and Hebrew." (Italics my own.—P. S.).

This last phrase should be sufficient to do away with the idea that the Vulgar Arabic is beneath notice as being only a debased tongue. Arabic has but followed the same path traversed formerly by Hebrew and Aramaic;
and as a spoken tongue is now at that stage in its history represented in those two languages by the Biblical Hebrew and the Aramaic literature.

My own study has convinced me that the Vulgar Arabic used in North Africa to-day is not one whit poorer in lexicology or in syntax than the Biblical Hebrew. I consider that a good criterion of comparison would be a translation of the Psalms with their parallelism into the Vulgar Arabic. This I hope will soon be forthcoming. The Epistle to the Ephesians would furnish a sufficient test of the capacity of the Vulgar Arabic to render the New Testament Greek.

II. The View-point Presented.

In 1909, after the publication of the first edition of the Gospel of Luke in the Algerian dialect, I made some MS. notes on it, chiefly grammatical and philological. As preface I wrote:—

"It is hoped that these notes may help to do away with the reproach as being unfounded, that the Vulgar Arabic is poor in words and expressions, and, therefore, unworthy as a vehicle for the Word of God. It is claimed that an idiomatic translation into the spoken language has one immense advantage over the Literary versions, in that it is instinct with life, a part of the nature of the people that speak it, whereas the Literary Arabic must ever be, more or less, an artificial language, a tongue for learned discourse."

At the first Annual Meeting of the Mission in North Africa of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held at Algiers in April, 1910, I expressed my conviction on this point after eleven years of work in the country. After describing the educated Moslem and the literature available for reaching him, I said:—

"There is, however, a considerable class of half-educated people, that is, half-educated from the Moslem standpoint, who hardly understand at all, or but very imperfectly, the Literary Arabic. The Literary Arabic is practically only a literary vehicle, much as was Latin in the Middle Ages and since. It is not the living language of the people, any more than the English of the days of Chaucer is the living language of the English speaking peoples of to-day. The same problem has presented itself in other lands. There exist ancient ecclesiastical versions of the Bible in Russian and Armenian, as well as the Old and New Testaments in Greek, but the need has been felt of having the Scriptures in the living speech of these peoples. The case is the same with Arabic. Five years ago I became especially
interested in the work of translating the Scriptures into the Arabic of Algeria, and since then have worked at it with the co-operation of others. The Gospel of Luke has been published by the British and Foreign Bible Society, and in little over a year the first edition of 7,500 is exhausted. (Since this report, a second edition of 10,000 has been printed and is selling rapidly. The Gospel of John, in an edition of 10,000, is now exhausted. The Acts of the Apostles is in the press. The Psalms and some of the Pauline epistles are in preparation).

"By means of these translations . . . we believe that we shall steal a long march upon Islam, for its leaders will do nothing to educate the poor and ignorant. I have never heard of any Moslem teacher in this country laying himself out to teach the ignorant to read, unless he were paid for it. One day, we believe they will wake up to find these masses indoctrinated with Christianity, having a fuller knowledge of the religion of Jesus Christ than of the system of Mohammed. This is already the case with those who frequent our classes.

"We have also tried to form the nucleus of a hymn-book in the same modern speech. These hymns are being appreciated, and are sung not only in our classes and meetings but also in the homes, and one can even hear them in the streets."

The following extract is from my report read at the third Annual Meeting of the same Mission, held at Tunis, February, 1912:—

"Following somewhat the old Arab method of study, namely, that of learning a highly condensed summary of a subject, often in verse, which is learnt by heart and forms the basis of further instruction, I have put into Modern Arabic verse the 'Story of the Creation of the World and of Man, the Temptation and Fall, with the Promise of Redemption and its Accomplishment in Christ.' Those in our Hostels have learnt this by heart, and they also sing or chant it after the manner of the Meddahin or the Rawiyin." (Since then I have begun another series, entitled "The Divine Story." The first part contains some of the chief Prophecies as to the Coming of Christ and His Work, followed by the Announcement of the Angel to the Virgin Mary, the Magnificat and the Story of the Birth of Christ, all being in modern Arabic verse).

Under the heading, A Question of Policy, the report continues:—

"I would like to record my firm conviction, to be confirmed or confuted by future developments. I almost tremble at my temerity in daring to express it in this 'City of Learning.' I believe that when Christianity lays hold of the populations of Tunisia and Algeria, it will find its expression and vehicle not in the Classical but the Vulgar Arabic. I thank God that Islam as a doctrine is siut up in the former, but Christianity as a living religion will, I believe, appropriate the living tongue as its medium of expression, both in its worship and its
propagation. The New Testament was written in the Colloquial Greek of its time, and it, too, had its literary despisers. But the Classical Greek never became again the language of the people. The French language was not produced directly from the Classical Latin, but developed slowly out of the Low-Latin spoken in the Provinces and Gaul. I forbear further analogies, for the whole history of language development is on the same side. There is, and will be for a long time, a wide field for the Literary Arabic, but this will not stop the evolution of the language, and, without contradiction, the nearest way to the heart of a people is through its living speech. The majority cannot be sacrificed to the fastidious tastes of the few, nor can Christianity tie itself up to a language that is the privilege of the few, to a form of the Arabic that will never regain its hold of the people as a whole. The moral is plain. It is sure wisdom on our part to cultivate the Modern Spoken Arabic in a literary fashion, and redeem it from the unjust reproach of being a barbarous lingo."

In my report at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Mission, held at Constantine, May, 1913, I emphasized the same argument, as follows:—

"In one particular we decidedly conform at Constantine to the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. According to the fifteenth article of religion, 'It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the primitive Church to have public prayer in the Church, or to administer the sacraments in a tongue not understood by the people.' We have accordingly made it a rule in this service of worship, that all praise, prayer, and preaching, shall be in the speech of the people, and that the Scriptures shall be read or translated in the same tongue, which is also the mother-tongue of the most learned Arab teacher that may ever enter our doors. In this way the illiterate will suffer no loss, and the learned has but to forget for the time his acquired literary knowledge, and listen to the things of God expounded in the tongue he learnt from his mother's lips, and which he himself habitually uses except in learned disquisition."

The practice condemned by the original framers of the Article, cited above, is analogous to the point under discussion. The Roman Church conserves to this day the use of the Latin tongue in its services, because, forsooth, it has the sanction of centuries of use; the Moslem teacher does the same. For him it would be sacrilege to abase the language in which his sacred book was written, by condescending to write any form of that language which does not conform to the laws of that sacred tongue. It is a religious, an Islamic, reason that has hindered the Moslems from cultivating in literature throughout the centuries their spoken language. Is that reason a suffi-
ciently valid one for the Christian Church to follow the same example to-day? It seems to me that those who oppose translations of the Scriptures and the publication of other literature in the modern Arabic dialects, are following the policy of Rome in withholding the Word of Life from the people in their own tongue. This has been the great blot on the Roman Communion, and it will prove the most effectual barrier to the evangelisation of the masses in Arabic speaking lands. I am firmly convinced that a noble literature could be created in the Vulgar Arabic, chaste in form and expression. The spoken language needs to be further explored by missionaries and others. I imagine that some, were they to come to this study with sympathy, would be agreeably surprised by the vividness and richness of this Modern Speech.

I reproduce here an extract from the British Weekly of February 20th, 1913:—

"Of recent discoveries about the Bible none is more striking than the testimony as to the language of the New Testament, which has been unearthed during the last few years out of rubbish heaps of waste paper and broken pottery buried in the sands of Egypt, and dating back to the very beginning of the Christian era. What this new linguistic evidence demonstrates may be stated in the words of Dr. J. H. Moulton, the eminent scholar, who has done so much to make it available in English, 'The conclusion is that "Biblical" Greek was simply the vernacular of daily life... The Holy Ghost spoke absolutely in the language of the people, as we might surely have expected He would'. In other words, the New Testament was composed in the common, homely speech of those who first read its pages; it was written in the Vulgar tongue."

There can certainly be no incongruity, but rather a decided fittingness, in furnishing a like means through which the Holy Ghost may be able to speak to the masses in North Africa to-day. Opposition to this idea is understandable in a Moslem teacher, when we consider his standpoint, but what Christian reason can a missionary bring why the Word of God should not be given to the people in the tongue that they speak?

Is Arabic to be the only language to be not cultivated in literature in the successive forms it takes on in its evolution? There is a continuous evolution of all
language, and the tongues which exercise the greatest living influence to-day and possess an ever-growing literature, are just those that cultivate in literature the living form of the language, while not neglecting what the past has produced.

Where would the noble French literature be to-day if the mistaken idea of those of the tenth century, mentioned by Renan, had always prevailed? In the book of M. Lortsch, *The Bible in France*, one can see the great part that religious compositions and translations of parts of the Bible in prose and in verse played in forming the beginnings of French literature, until the sixteenth century, when the Reformation, following the Renaissance began to exercise a potent influence on the language. The following testimonies show the influence of Calvin on French prose composition:—

"Everything is new in his book (*Institutes*)," says M. Nisard, "the very matter, the method and the language." "He has given in the popular language on a theological subject the first example of a vast composition, thought out, ripe and well-arranged." (M. Marcou).

There is no need to cite the influence that the translations and writings of Wycliffe, Coverdale and Tindale and the Authorised Version, have had on the English language; nor that of Luther's translation and hymns on the German tongue. And if Christianity is ever going to lay hold of the Arabic speaking peoples, why should not translations of the Scriptures in the popular language and other literature exercise an analogous influence on the spoken Arabic dialects? In the providence of God all the countries of North Africa are now under the control of European governments, and they all aim at producing an awakening of the Moslem mind from an age-long torpor, and the introduction of modern life and civilisation. By the creation of a worthy literature, Christian in tone and character, the Christian Church should be able to give a new impulsion to Arab thought and life. This may seem utopian to some, but we have the beginnings of it to hand, in the possibility of translating the Scriptures idiomatically into the spoken tongue. For the basis of a Christian literature must be the Bible.
Having for some time urged these arguments and advocated this policy, I was much interested in reading the following extract in the July number of The Moslem World (1912), entitled, "Taking away the key of knowledge":—

"All missionaries who have struggled to attain to a working knowledge of the Arabic language themselves, have taught it in day schools, or have tried faithfully to circulate the Scriptures and other Arabic literature among the common people in Moslem lands, must have felt again and again how the Arabic speech itself is at once a vehicle and a barrier to evangelisation. It is a vehicle because of its widespread use, but a barrier because of its highly classical literature, and the style of Arabic used by those who write, not for the common people, but for the learned classes. Professor Macdonald deals with this question from the standpoint of the Arabic scholar, in trenchant fashion, in his recent book, 'Aspects of Islam' (pp. 320, 321).

Speaking of the barriers to the spread of education among the masses, and the uplift of Moslem nations, he uses these words, which we heartily endorse:

"Another necessity will be to teach in a language that the pupil can understand, and to cease to veil education in a literary dialect, which not one per cent. of the people can follow. This holds especially of Arabic speaking countries, where the difference between the Arabic spoken by all and the Arabic of literature is as great as that between modern and ancient Greek. Thus in Egypt the hopeless attempt is being made to screw all education up to this pseudo-classical standard. How hopeless is this attempt a single instance will show. One day in Cairo I was shown most courteously by the Principal of what is called the Kdis College over his institution. This is a professional school for the training of Kdis and legal officials generally on the native side, and it is hoped that its influence may in time lead to a reform of the Azhar from within. The Principal first described to me the curriculum of the college, and he told me that the language used throughout was literary Arabic. Nothing else was allowed in the class-rooms, and they expected in a year to be able to enforce the use of it among the students outside the class-rooms. Then I was taken to hear parts of the lectures. One on Canon law especially interested me. The lecturer knew his subject, and was making it plain to his class. But suddenly there dropped from his lips a phrase of the purest colloquial: Mush kide? said he, isn't that so? He would have written Laisa kadhalik? or something similar, but in speech the language of the street was too strong for him. And so it will always be. Dead languages can never be evoked into living use, however strong our spells or firm our purpose. They will only walk as ghosts among us, and blast and thwart our labours. Hear, then, the last word on Moslem education. It must learn to bring forth character,
and it must clothe itself in a speech understood of the people. It has trained the scholar and let the masses go. With a stiff intellectual snobbishness, it has never seen that the abiding victories of science are won in the primary school. And so even now it clings to a scholastic language that bars the gates of literature to ninety per cent. of the people. That bar it must learn to lift.'"

From *Aspects of Islam* I quote the following:

"Having mentioned this colloquial Arabic, permit me to diverge a moment and say that, for me, the great hope of the Arabic speaking races lies in the rise of an Arabic literature written in the language really spoken by these peoples. At present their older literature is as remote for them as Latin to an Italian or a Spaniard. And of such neo-Arabic literature a beginning has been made, although so far it is mostly limited to stories, jests and satirical verses. More serious subjects still array themselves in the language of the schools. Yet the beginning has been made, and all that is needed now is the appearing of a man of genius, a Dante or a Chaucer, who will follow up that beginning and write books of weight and genius in this colloquial dialect. When he comes, with him will come the new Arabic literature—a renaissance as tremendous as that of Europe."

Should anyone still object that to give the Bible and other religious literature in the Vulgar Arabic would degrade the Christian religion, I would offer the following supposition: If our Lord came to Egypt or to any of the other countries of North Africa, what language would He use in speaking to the common people? Naturally, the common speech. What He would deign to say in that tongue, I would not disdain to write.

But some may say that this proposal to give the Scriptures and other literature in the tongue of the people will tend to develop the different dialects and thus break up the unity of the Arabic speaking world.

In answer to this one may say: (1) That the learned will always seek to know their classical language and literature, and that the present literary unity is likely to continue as long as Islam stands.

(2) That as far as the common people are concerned the only unity that exists is the unity of speech, which is real despite the dialectic variations.

(3) Is the maintenance of the unity of the Arabic speaking world—that central portion of the Moslem world—a thing so greatly to be desired by the Christian Church, that she should hesitate to give the masses the
Word of God in their own tongue, for fear of breaking up that unity? I doubt much whether the different European States that govern so great a portion of the Arabic speaking world would regard a break-up of the said unity as a very great calamity. There is a political break-up already. I am firmly of opinion that if the Vulgar Arabic does not become the literary vehicle for the Barbary States, it will not be the Literary Arabic that will become such for the masses, but French, Italian and Spanish. There are at least a million Europeans in these States, and the number is rapidly increasing, as also the number of Mohammedan youths that are learning to speak and read French.

In Algeria the teaching in the Franco-Arab government schools is given in French. In the upper classes sufficient Arabic is taught to enable the scholars to read and write their own speech, but little more than that. Only in colleges for the training of Moslem functionaries for government service are Arabic grammar and literature taught along with French and French literature. The Arabic taught in the Franco-Arab schools is not sufficient to enable them to read the Koran, but it is sufficient to enable them to read any literature in the Modern Speech. Besides those who pass through the primary government schools, there is a large number who have begun in the Koranic schools but have not continued long enough to get a grasp of the literary language. To all such, literature in the Vulgar Arabic would be acceptable.

The conclusion, then, is, not that the use of the literary version of the Scriptures and literature in that form of the language is objected to; on the contrary, the fullest possible use of them is advocated. But, seeing that the hope of bringing up the masses to the educational level of the literary Arabic seems hopeless, here lies before us an unlimited field of hope for a literature in the Vulgar Arabic. Peculiarities of a purely local character could be neglected, and in contiguous countries a result might be reached that would prove satisfactory and stimulating.

The two literatures could exist side by side. Time would decide the fate of each. 

Percy Smith.