

BEYOND GREEK AND LATIN

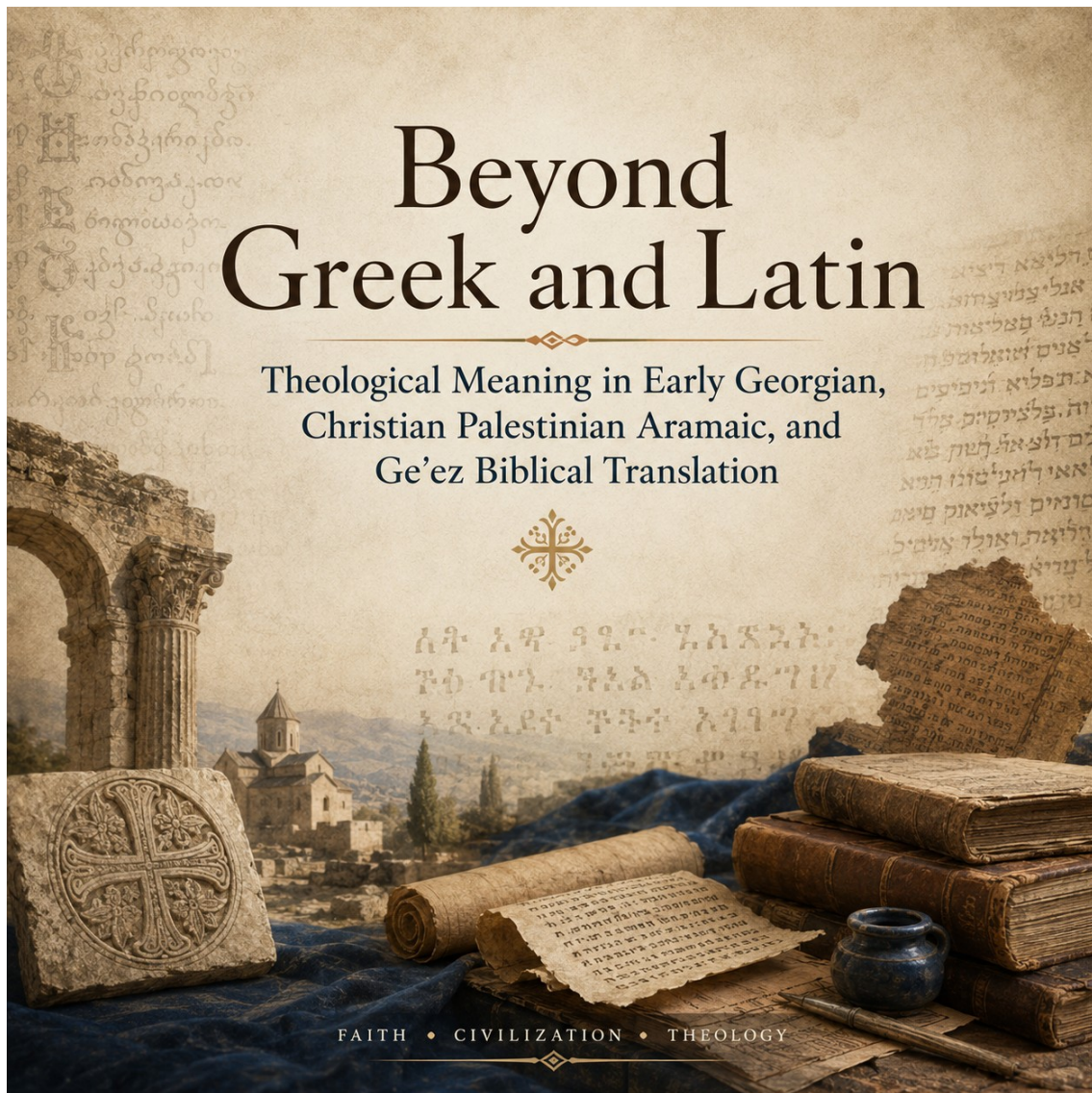
*Theological Meaning in Early Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic,
and Ge'ez Biblical Translation*

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Abstract

This article examines early Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez biblical translation as forms of theological interpretation rather than as secondary witnesses to Greek and Latin Christianity. Each tradition emerged within a distinct cultural and ecclesial environment, yet all three demonstrate that translation shaped Christian identity, doctrine, liturgy, textual memory, and the reception of scripture. The Georgian tradition reflects layered interaction among Greek, Armenian, Syriac, and Byzantine influences. Christian Palestinian Aramaic preserves the multilingual character of Palestinian Christianity and survives largely through fragmentary palimpsests. The Ge'ez tradition became the foundation of an enduring African Christian civilisation and preserved a distinctive biblical canon, including texts lost or marginalised elsewhere. The article argues that translation does not merely transfer meaning. It also interprets, selects, revises, and creates theological vocabulary. These traditions therefore belong at the centre of early Christian history because they reveal how scripture became local without surrendering its universal claim.

Keywords

Biblical translation; Georgian Christianity; Christian Palestinian Aramaic; Ge'ez; Ethiopic Bible; early Christianity; textual transmission; theological interpretation; multilingual Christianity; biblical canon; palimpsests; Christian liturgy; sacred language; translation theology; African Christianity

Introduction

The history of biblical translation is often narrated through a narrow sequence of dominant languages. Hebrew gives way to Greek, Greek stands beside Latin, and Latin eventually gives way to the vernacular languages of medieval and modern Europe. This account is familiar, but it leaves much of early Christianity outside the frame. Long before the Bible entered English, German, or French, Christian communities were reading scripture in Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez. These translations did more than carry biblical content into new linguistic settings. They shaped Christian identity, preserved textual traditions, and created theological worlds that cannot be reduced to copies of Greek or Latin Christianity.

Translation was never a neutral exchange of words. Every language brought its own grammar, conceptual range, cultural memory, and patterns of religious expression. Translators had to decide how divine names should sound, how Christological language should be rendered, how technical theological terms could be communicated, and how scriptural images would be heard within communities far removed from the social world of

the original text. Even where translators followed Greek manuscripts closely, their choices created new interpretive possibilities.

The earliest Georgian Christian literature emerged alongside the development of a Georgian script around the beginning of the fifth century. Biblical and liturgical translation stood near the centre of that literary birth. The earliest surviving Georgian biblical witnesses reveal a complicated history involving Greek, Armenian, and Syriac influence rather than a single, uncomplicated translation line. Georgian Christianity was therefore formed at a cultural crossroads linking the Caucasus, Iranic society, Armenia, Syria, Palestine, and the Byzantine world.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic occupied a different but equally significant environment. It was a western Aramaic language used by Christian communities in Palestine and neighbouring regions. Its surviving biblical material, much of it preserved in palimpsests, provides evidence from approximately the fifth through the eighth centuries. These fragments include distinct Gospel revisions and preserve readings important for the textual history of the Greek New Testament.

Ge'ez translation developed within the ancient Christian culture of Ethiopia and the Aksumite world. The Ethiopic biblical tradition was established in early Christian antiquity, conventionally associated with the fourth-century Christianisation of Aksum. Its scriptural corpus eventually preserved books and traditions absent from many Greek and Latin collections. The Ge'ez Bible therefore became not merely a translated text but the foundation of a distinct ecclesial memory, liturgy, and theological imagination.

These three traditions should not be treated as peripheral footnotes to a supposedly central Greek and Latin history. They reveal that early Christianity was multilingual from its foundations. Scripture did not travel outward from one fixed cultural centre into passive receiving communities. It moved through networks of monasteries, pilgrims, merchants, clergy, translators, and scribes. In every setting, local Christians participated actively in the preservation and interpretation of the biblical text.

This article argues that early Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez biblical translations functioned as forms of theology. Their significance lies not only in the ancient readings they preserve, but also in the ways they translated Christian identity into distinct linguistic and cultural environments. Translation created local vocabularies of holiness, authority, Christology, worship, and collective memory. It also preserved elements of early Christian textual history that later disappeared from dominant Greek and Latin transmission.

The comparison does not imply that the three traditions followed one pattern. Georgian translation developed through shifting relationships with Armenian, Syriac, Greek,

Palestinian, and Byzantine Christianity. Christian Palestinian Aramaic emerged within the multilingual sacred geography of Palestine. Ge'ez translation became embedded within an African Christian civilisation whose biblical canon and interpretive heritage developed along distinctive lines.

Their shared importance lies in what they reveal about the nature of Christian transmission. Scripture was not preserved by remaining linguistically unchanged. It endured because communities repeatedly made it speak.

The study of these versions therefore raises a larger theological question. When a biblical text crosses from one language into another, what remains constant, and what is newly created? The answer cannot be reduced to accuracy or error. Translation preserves meaning, but it also selects, interprets, expands, and sometimes redirects it. The history of scripture beyond Greek and Latin is therefore also a history of Christianity learning how to become local without ceasing to claim universality.

Translation as Theological Interpretation

Biblical translation is sometimes described as though translators faced a simple choice between accuracy and inaccuracy. Ancient translation was rarely so straightforward. A translator worked between languages that did not divide reality in identical ways. Terms concerning spirit, soul, glory, covenant, righteousness, lordship, sacrifice, holiness, and divine sonship carried histories that could not always be transferred through one exact equivalent.

Every decision therefore involved interpretation.

A translator might preserve the structure of a Greek sentence even when it sounded unfamiliar in the receiving language. Another might reshape the sentence so that it could be understood naturally in worship. A difficult theological term might be transliterated, translated with an existing religious word, or rendered through a phrase. Each method protected one dimension of meaning while risking another.

This was especially important when scripture entered cultures possessing their own political vocabulary, social organisation, sacred geography, and literary habits. Words connected with kingship, household authority, purity, community, or sacrifice could evoke local associations beyond those intended by a Greek source. Translation did not merely transport theology into a new language. It placed theology within a new field of meaning.

Theological interpretation also occurred through revision. Early biblical versions were not necessarily produced once and then preserved unchanged. Georgian biblical literature, for example, reflects multiple textual layers and later revisions. Some early Georgian materials

show Syriac and Armenian influence, while other forms reveal stronger dependence upon Greek. Later Georgian translators and revisers increasingly aligned texts with Byzantine Greek exemplars. These shifts were connected not only with linguistic refinement but also with changing ecclesial and theological relationships.

This means that a translated Bible could record more than one stage of a community's history. An early rendering might reflect contact with neighbouring churches. A later revision might reveal a new confessional alignment. Changes in vocabulary could indicate movement towards a different liturgical tradition, Christological formula, or textual authority.

The manuscript itself thus became a record of theological negotiation.

Translation history should therefore not be imagined as a straight line from an original text to a finished version. It was often a layered process involving translation, correction, comparison, liturgical use, scribal adaptation, and renewed translation. The resulting text belonged to a living community rather than to a single translator.

Georgian Christianity at a Linguistic Crossroads

The early Georgian biblical tradition developed within one of the most culturally complex regions of the Christian world. Georgia stood between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and interacted with Armenian, Syriac, Greek, Iranian, and Palestinian Christian networks. Christianity had gained official acceptance there by the fifth century, while Georgian Christian literary activity emerged within the same broad period.

This location made Georgian Christianity neither simply Byzantine nor simply eastern. Its literature bears evidence of overlapping influences.

The earliest Georgian biblical translations have often been discussed in relation to Armenian. Some linguistic features suggest Armenian mediation, and early Georgian ecclesiastical language contains Armenian forms and patterns. Yet this does not mean that every Georgian text was translated directly from an Armenian original. Scholars have also identified Syriac influence, sometimes transmitted through Armenian channels, alongside substantial Greek dependence. The precise relationship among these sources remains complex and, in some cases, unresolved.

That complexity matters because it challenges the assumption that a biblical version must possess one pure lineage.

A Georgian Gospel could preserve Greek textual foundations while also carrying Armenian syntax or Syriac interpretive traditions. Such a text was not necessarily corrupt or

secondary in a dismissive sense. It reflected the multilingual environment in which Georgian Christianity learned to read scripture.

Translation through an intermediary could also produce theological effects. A Greek term first interpreted in Syriac or Armenian and then rendered into Georgian had already passed through one or more conceptual worlds. The Georgian translator inherited not only words but earlier acts of interpretation.

This created the possibility of layered theology.

A phrase might preserve a Greek doctrinal structure while expressing it through vocabulary shaped by Armenian ecclesial usage. A scriptural title for Christ might acquire associations from Syriac hymnody. A biblical image could enter Georgian through a neighbouring liturgical tradition and become part of local worship before later revisers brought it closer to Byzantine usage.

The Georgian case therefore demonstrates that translation was often communal and transregional. Texts travelled with monks, clerics, pilgrims, teachers, and manuscripts. A version could be revised when new exemplars became available or when theological alliances changed.

The seventh-century movement of the Georgian Church towards Chalcedonian Byzantium intensified direct Greek influence, although earlier Syro-Armenian elements did not disappear immediately. Later Georgian literary centres, especially those connected with Athos and other monastic networks, produced extensive revisions and retranslations from Greek.

These developments were not merely philological improvements. They expressed a changing sense of ecclesial belonging.

To revise a biblical or liturgical text according to Greek was to place Georgian Christianity more firmly within the Byzantine theological world. Translation became a means by which the Church narrated its own location within Christianity.

Scripture and the Formation of Georgian Literary Identity

The importance of biblical translation in Georgia extended beyond doctrine. It contributed to the formation of a written Christian culture.

When scripture entered Georgian, it helped establish a vocabulary capable of expressing creation, prophecy, incarnation, salvation, judgement, worship, and holiness. Biblical language provided patterns for preaching, hagiography, hymnography, liturgy, and historical memory.

The translation of scripture therefore participated in the development of Georgian literary identity.

This did not mean that Georgian culture was merely reshaped from outside. Translation also allowed local Christians to appropriate the biblical narrative as their own. Biblical places remained geographically distant, but biblical speech became local. Prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints could be heard in the language of Georgian worshippers.

A translated scripture changes the relationship between community and text. The Bible no longer belongs only to foreign clergy, imperial centres, or specialist readers. It can enter prayer, memory, public reading, and local teaching.

The language itself gains sacred prestige.

Once scripture is read in a language, that language becomes capable of bearing revelation. Its vocabulary acquires theological depth. Its rhythms become associated with worship. Its script becomes a vessel of sacred memory.

This development was particularly significant in cultures building or consolidating literary traditions. The translation of the Bible could provide models of narrative, poetry, wisdom, legal discourse, genealogy, and prophecy. It could also create the expectation that other Christian works should become available in the local language.

Biblical translation therefore generated further translation.

Homilies, saints' lives, theological treatises, liturgical books, and monastic texts followed. Georgian Christianity became part of wider Christian intellectual exchange while developing a literary tradition recognisably its own.

The local and universal did not cancel one another. Georgian Christians entered the transregional Christian world precisely by making its texts Georgian.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic and the Sacred Geography of Palestine

Christian Palestinian Aramaic developed within a different linguistic setting. It was a western Aramaic language used by Christian communities in Palestine and adjoining areas during late antiquity and the early medieval period.

Its importance lies partly in its proximity to the linguistic world of Jesus and the earliest Palestinian Christianity. Yet it should not be confused directly with the exact form of Aramaic spoken by Jesus. Languages change, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic belongs to a later historical stage.

Its value is instead found in the way Palestinian Christians received Greek scripture through a local Aramaic language.

This created a striking linguistic movement. The traditions of Jesus, many of which had first circulated in an Aramaic-speaking environment, were written and transmitted chiefly through Greek. They were then translated from Greek into a later Palestinian Aramaic form for Christian communities living within or near the geography associated with the biblical story.

The movement was not a simple return to an original language. It was a new act of reception.

The surviving Christian Palestinian Aramaic biblical material is fragmentary. Much of it has been recovered from palimpsests—manuscripts whose earlier writing was erased or covered so that the writing material could be reused. Critical editions of Gospel fragments show that several textual revisions or forms circulated between approximately the fifth and eighth centuries. These materials are important because they can preserve evidence concerning the Greek texts from which they were translated.

The physical condition of the manuscripts is itself historically meaningful.

A palimpsest is a text that has survived beneath another text. Its earlier writing became hidden but not entirely lost. Modern imaging and manuscript analysis can recover letters that were no longer visible to ordinary readers.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic therefore survives as a language of partial recovery.

Its fragmentary state reminds us that the history of Christianity was shaped not only by what communities wrote, but also by what later institutions chose to copy, preserve, overwrite, or neglect.

Dominant languages possessed larger networks of reproduction. Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and later Arabic benefited from substantial literary institutions. Smaller language traditions were more vulnerable. When communities declined, migrated, changed language, or lost monastic centres, their texts could disappear rapidly.

The scarcity of surviving Christian Palestinian Aramaic manuscripts should therefore not be taken as proof that the language lacked religious significance. It may instead reflect the fragility of the communities that used it.

Hearing Scripture in a Palestinian Aramaic Voice

The translation of the Bible into Christian Palestinian Aramaic had a theological importance beyond textual criticism.

It allowed Christian communities in Palestine to hear scripture in a regional Semitic language while remaining connected to the Greek textual tradition. The Bible could be proclaimed within a linguistic environment related to the land's older speech traditions but shaped by centuries of Christian, Jewish, Greek, and wider eastern interaction.

This would have affected the experience of scripture.

Names, place references, Semitic expressions, and biblical images could sound different when heard in Aramaic rather than Greek. The language could create a sense of proximity between the worshipping community and the sacred geography surrounding it.

A Gospel read in Palestine was already embedded in place. Villages, roads, deserts, mountains, and holy sites carried accumulated memory. When that Gospel was heard in a local Aramaic language, linguistic and geographical memory could reinforce one another.

Yet this closeness should not be romanticised. Christian Palestinian Aramaic Christianity was not an untouched continuation of first-century Galilee. It belonged to a later Church shaped by pilgrimage, monasticism, doctrinal controversy, imperial politics, and the liturgical development of the holy places.

Its translation tradition therefore joined remembered origins with later ecclesial identity.

This combination made Christian Palestinian Aramaic especially significant. It was both local and translated, Semitic and Christian, Palestinian and connected to Greek scripture.

Its existence challenges the idea that Palestinian Christianity became entirely Greek-speaking after the earliest period. Greek remained enormously important, but local Christian communities continued to inhabit other languages.

The sacred geography of Christianity was multilingual.

Palimpsests and the Theology of Survival

The palimpsest can also serve as a theological metaphor, although historical analysis must not be replaced by symbolism.

An erased text is never wholly erased.

Traces remain beneath the visible surface. Later writing depends physically upon the earlier manuscript even while covering it. The page carries more than one history at the same time.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic manuscripts embody this layered survival. A later community reused valuable parchment, perhaps without intending to preserve the earlier

text. Yet the act of overwriting unintentionally protected fragments that might otherwise have disappeared.

This complicates simple stories of preservation and destruction.

A manuscript can survive because it was valued, but it can also survive because it was reused.

A language can disappear from public worship while remaining hidden in the fibres of a page.

A forgotten translation can become newly important centuries later because technology allows scholars to recover its undertext.

The theological history of Christianity has often privileged texts preserved continuously by dominant churches. Palimpsests reveal another archive: the archive of communities whose writings survived accidentally.

These materials encourage humility. The surviving record is not identical with the full history of Christianity. It is only the portion that material conditions allowed to remain.

The lost may once have been common.

The fragment may once have belonged to a complete book.

The marginal may have been central to the people who used it.

Ge'ez and the Christianisation of Aksum

The Ge'ez biblical tradition developed within the kingdom of Aksum, one of the most important political and commercial powers of late antiquity. Aksum stood within networks connecting the Red Sea, Arabia, the Nile Valley, the eastern Mediterranean, and the interior of Africa. Christianity entered this world not as an isolated foreign religion but through routes already shaped by diplomacy, trade, migration, and imperial competition.

The conversion of the Aksumite court during the fourth century created new conditions for Christian institutional development. Yet the growth of Ge'ez scripture should not be reduced to royal conversion alone. Translation required communities capable of teaching, copying, reading, and interpreting texts. It required clergy, scribes, liturgical practice, and sustained contact with other Christian centres.

The emergence of a Ge'ez Bible therefore reflects both political transformation and ecclesial labour.

Ge'ez offered Ethiopian Christians a language in which scripture could become locally authoritative. Greek remained important in the wider eastern Christian world, and Syriac

or other intermediary influences may have played roles in specific stages of transmission. Yet once biblical literature entered Ge'ez, it became part of an African Christian tradition with its own rhythms, textual habits, and theological memory.

The significance of this development is difficult to overstate.

A translated Bible gave Ethiopian Christianity a stable linguistic centre. It allowed scripture to shape worship, monastic instruction, royal ideology, saints' lives, theological reflection, and historical writing. It also contributed to the preservation of a wider biblical collection than that known in many western traditions.

This broader scriptural inheritance would become one of the defining features of Ethiopian Christianity.

Translation and the Shape of the Ethiopic Canon

The Ge'ez biblical tradition is especially important because it preserved texts that were lost, marginalised, or excluded elsewhere. The Ethiopic scriptural collection includes works such as 1 Enoch and Jubilees, both of which became deeply significant for understanding Second Temple Jewish thought and early Christian interpretation.

Their survival in Ge'ez demonstrates that canon formation was not identical across the Christian world.

Greek and Latin Christianity eventually developed influential canonical boundaries, but those boundaries did not erase other ecclesial traditions. Ethiopian Christianity received and preserved a scriptural world whose shape differed from that of later western Bibles.

This difference is not merely a matter of counting books. A broader canon creates a broader theological memory.

A community that reads Enoch, Jubilees, and related traditions alongside more widely recognised biblical books inhabits a different interpretive environment. Angelology, sacred history, calendrical order, cosmic rebellion, judgement, covenant, and priestly identity can appear with different emphases.

Texts illuminate one another.

A passage in Genesis may be heard through Jubilees.

Language about heavenly beings may resonate with Enochic tradition.

The history of sin may be placed within a larger account of cosmic disorder.

The Ge'ez Bible therefore preserved not simply additional literature, but alternative configurations of biblical meaning.

This makes the Ethiopic tradition indispensable for the study of early Judaism and Christianity. Some ancient works are known substantially or completely because Ethiopian Christians copied them. Their scribal continuity protected materials that dominant Mediterranean traditions no longer transmitted.

The history of the biblical canon must therefore be written from more than one ecclesial centre.

Ge'ez as a Language of Sacred Continuity

Once Ge'ez became established as a sacred literary language, its role continued even after it ceased to function as the ordinary spoken language of the wider population.

This pattern has parallels elsewhere. Latin continued in western Christian worship after vernacular languages became dominant. Classical Armenian, Church Slavonic, Coptic, and Syriac also developed enduring liturgical authority.

A sacred language can preserve continuity across social change.

Its stability allows communities separated by generations to hear familiar scriptural forms. Its vocabulary accumulates doctrinal and liturgical weight. Its phrases become inseparable from prayer, ritual, and communal memory.

Yet sacred continuity also creates distance.

A language preserved in worship may gradually become less accessible to ordinary hearers. Interpretation then depends more heavily upon clergy, teachers, translation into later vernaculars, and communal explanation.

This tension does not make sacred languages obsolete. It shows that translation is never finished.

The first translation makes scripture local.

Later translation may be needed to keep it intelligible.

The Ge'ez tradition therefore belongs to both preservation and renewal. It protected ancient texts while also generating the need for further mediation into languages spoken by later Ethiopian and Eritrean Christian communities.

The history of translation becomes cyclical rather than linear.

Scripture is translated, becomes sacred, acquires authority, and then itself becomes the source from which later translations are made.

African Christianity Beyond Mediterranean Dependence

The study of Ge'ez scripture also corrects a common distortion in Christian history. African Christianity is often discussed mainly through Egypt, North Africa, or the influence of European missions. The Aksumite and Ethiopian traditions reveal a different history: an ancient African Christianity that developed its own literary, liturgical, canonical, and political forms.

This Christianity was connected to the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds, but it was not reducible to them.

Translation into Ge'ez allowed Ethiopian Christians to receive the wider Christian inheritance without remaining linguistically subordinate to Greek-speaking centres. The result was neither cultural isolation nor simple imitation.

It was appropriation.

Christianity became Ethiopian through language, memory, ritual, and textual preservation.

This process complicates the language of “expansion.” Christianity did not merely expand into Africa as though Africa were an empty receiving space. African Christians interpreted, preserved, and reshaped the tradition. They became custodians of texts that other regions lost.

The movement of scripture was therefore reciprocal.

Texts arrived through transregional networks.

They were translated and preserved locally.

Centuries later, scholars from other parts of the world depended upon Ethiopian manuscripts to recover lost dimensions of ancient Jewish and Christian literature.

The so-called periphery became an archive for the centre.

Three Traditions, Three Models of Christian Localisation

Early Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez biblical translation reveal three distinct models of Christian localisation.

The Georgian tradition developed at a cultural crossroads. Its translations reflect movement among Armenian, Syriac, Greek, and Byzantine influences. Its history shows how a Christian community negotiated multiple neighbouring traditions while developing a literary identity of its own.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic represents localisation within sacred geography. It allowed Palestinian Christians to hear Greek scripture in a regional Aramaic language connected to the linguistic environment of the land, even as the tradition belonged to a later and deeply multilingual Christianity.

The Ge'ez tradition represents the integration of scripture into a durable African Christian civilisation. Translation became the foundation for a distinctive canon, sacred language, liturgy, and ecclesial memory.

These models should not be collapsed into one theory.

Georgian translation demonstrates layered mediation.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic demonstrates local reception within a multilingual holy land.

Ge'ez demonstrates long-term canonical and civilisational formation.

Together, however, they challenge the idea that Christianity's early history can be adequately mapped through Greek and Latin alone.

The Christian world was held together not by one language, but by continuous acts of translation.

Christological Vocabulary Across Languages

Christological translation was among the most difficult theological tasks faced by early translators.

Terms such as Logos, Kyrios, Christos, Monogenēs, Theotokos, nature, person, substance, and incarnation carried complex meanings within Greek theological debate. Some were biblical terms later given technical precision. Others became central during doctrinal controversy.

A receiving language might not possess a direct equivalent.

Translators then faced several possibilities.

They could borrow the Greek term.

They could choose a local word with approximate meaning.

They could create a new compound.

They could use a phrase instead of one word.

Each choice affected reception.

Borrowing preserved connection with Greek theological vocabulary but could leave the term opaque.

A familiar local word improved intelligibility but might introduce meanings absent from the source.

A newly created term could become precise over time but might initially require explanation.

Christological vocabulary also changed through controversy. A word that seemed adequate in an early biblical translation might later be judged ambiguous after councils and theological disputes had sharpened distinctions.

Revision could then become doctrinally necessary.

This is particularly relevant to Georgian tradition, where changing relations with Armenian and Byzantine Christianity affected the preferred language of Christology.

Translation could mark confessional alignment.

A vocabulary associated with one ecclesial community might later be replaced by terms judged safer within another doctrinal framework.

The translated text therefore carried the history of theological conflict inside its wording.

In Ge'ez, Christological language also became embedded within local liturgy and theology. Once established, particular translations shaped how biblical claims about Christ were heard within Ethiopian Christian worship.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic, though more fragmentarily preserved, shows the same broader principle. Even a translation closely dependent upon Greek required decisions about titles, divine identity, and the relationship between scriptural language and local speech.

Christology was never merely transferred.

It was rearticulated.

Divine Names and the Limits of Equivalence

Divine names present another central problem.

A translator must decide whether to transliterate a sacred name, replace it with a title, preserve a traditional equivalent, or adapt it to local linguistic conventions.

These choices affect how transcendence, intimacy, lordship, and covenant are heard.

The translation of “Lord,” for example, can carry political associations. In a society shaped by monarchy or imperial rule, the title may connect divine sovereignty with known structures of authority. That can strengthen the force of biblical language, but it can also risk identifying God too closely with earthly rulers.

Words for “God” may also possess pre-Christian histories.

A translator using an existing religious term does not place Christian meaning into an empty container. The word already carries associations. Over time, Christian usage may transform those associations, but the process is gradual.

Translation therefore involves both continuity and contest.

A familiar term allows comprehension.

Its inherited meanings must then be reshaped.

Theological vocabulary grows through repeated use.

A word becomes Christian not only because a translator selects it, but because generations pray, preach, debate, and write with it.

Translation, Liturgy, and the Formation of Doctrine

Biblical translations were often heard before they were privately read.

This matters because liturgy shaped interpretation.

A phrase repeated annually at a feast acquired meaning through music, ritual, place, and communal memory. A Gospel reading proclaimed during Holy Week did not function merely as information. It became part of a dramatic and embodied remembrance.

Translation therefore entered doctrine through worship.

A particular rendering could become familiar because it was sung.

A title for Christ could gain emotional and theological weight because it appeared in a recurring hymn.

A biblical image could become central because it was linked to baptism, Eucharist, fasting, burial, or pilgrimage.

This liturgical setting helps explain why later revisions could be difficult. Translators did not work only with manuscripts. They worked with communities attached to known forms of sacred speech.

Changing a translation could feel like changing prayer itself.

The history of biblical versions must therefore attend to reception. A linguistically precise revision may not immediately replace an older form if the older form has become embedded in worship.

Textual authority is not created by accuracy alone.

It is also created by memory.

Manuscripts as Material Theology

Theology existed not only in words but also in manuscripts as physical objects.

The choice of parchment or paper, the quality of script, decoration, binding, marginal notation, and placement within churches or monasteries all contributed to the authority of scripture.

A Gospel book used in liturgy was not simply a container of text. It could be processed, kissed, elevated, illuminated, and placed upon an altar.

Its material treatment communicated theology.

The book represented the presence of the proclaimed Word.

This is relevant to all three traditions.

Georgian manuscripts preserve evidence of changing scribal schools and transregional contact.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic survives through fragile and overwritten material remains.

Ge'ez manuscripts became central to a long tradition of liturgical and monastic culture.

The study of translation should therefore include the physical history of the translated book.

A text copied repeatedly within a monastery occupied a different social world from a fragment reused in a palimpsest.

A richly decorated Gospel book possessed a different public role from a working manuscript used for instruction.

Material form reveals who used scripture, how it circulated, and what authority communities assigned to it.

What Is Lost When Scholarship Privileges Greek and Latin

The dominance of Greek and Latin in scholarship has understandable historical reasons. Vast bodies of Christian literature survive in both languages. Major councils, influential theologians, and later ecclesiastical traditions depended heavily upon them.

Yet this dominance becomes distorting when it is treated as completeness.

A Greek-and-Latin framework can make other traditions appear derivative, secondary, or merely useful for reconstructing lost Greek readings.

This reduces translated communities to witnesses for someone else's text.

Georgian becomes valuable only when it helps establish a Greek original.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic becomes valuable only when it preserves an unusual Gospel reading.

Ge'ez becomes valuable only when it transmits a work lost elsewhere.

Such uses are legitimate, but they are incomplete.

Each tradition must also be studied as a theological world in its own right.

The translated text shaped local worship.

It created sacred vocabulary.

It formed communal memory.

It influenced canon, doctrine, and identity.

A version is not only evidence for what stood behind it. It is evidence for the community that lived through it.

The question should therefore not be limited to, "What Greek text does this translation preserve?"

We must also ask, "What kind of Christianity did this translation make possible?"

Translation as Cultural Negotiation

Translation did not occur outside politics. Languages were connected to kingdoms, churches, monasteries, trade routes, and rival centres of authority. A community's choice of source text could therefore reveal more than literary preference.

To translate from Greek might express closeness to Byzantine Christianity.

To preserve forms shaped by Armenian or Syriac mediation might reflect older ecclesial networks.

To continue using Ge'ez after spoken language had changed could affirm continuity with an ancient Christian inheritance.

Language was never only a tool. It could also become a declaration of belonging.

This was especially important in regions positioned between powerful religious and political worlds. Georgian Christianity developed under pressure from neighbouring empires and churches. Its textual history therefore reflects more than the search for accurate wording. It reveals attempts to negotiate identity in a contested landscape.

A translation tradition could preserve earlier relationships even after formal alliances changed. Words and syntactical patterns remained after communities had moved towards different theological or political centres.

Texts carried historical memory longer than institutions sometimes wished.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic likewise existed within a region marked by Greek, Syriac, Jewish Aramaic, Samaritan, and later Arabic speech. Its biblical translations belonged to communities whose identity could not be described through one language alone.

The use of Christian Palestinian Aramaic allowed local believers to inhabit Christianity without surrendering regional linguistic memory. At the same time, dependence upon Greek scriptural sources connected them to wider ecclesial traditions.

Ge'ez developed differently, yet it too became a language of Christian self-definition. Its biblical and liturgical authority supported an ecclesial world that was connected to other Christian centres but not absorbed by them.

Translation therefore negotiated a double movement.

It opened communities towards wider Christianity.

It also protected their capacity to remain themselves.

The Translator as Theologian

Ancient translators were rarely named in the manner expected of modern authors. Their identities may be unknown, and their work often survives only through later manuscripts.

Yet anonymity should not conceal their intellectual significance.

The translator stood at the meeting point of languages, manuscripts, liturgy, doctrine, and community need. This required more than grammatical skill.

A translator had to decide what the source text meant.

The translator then had to decide how that meaning could live in another language.

This made translation a form of theological judgement.

The translator might encounter a Greek term with several possible meanings. Choosing one equivalent narrowed interpretation. Retaining ambiguity required another kind of decision. Explaining the term through a longer phrase expanded the text. Transliteration preserved sound but postponed understanding.

None of these choices was neutral.

Theological creativity appeared especially where the receiving language lacked established Christian vocabulary. Translators had to build that vocabulary through adaptation, borrowing, and repeated use.

Some words became technical terms.

Others remained flexible.

A phrase introduced to solve one translation problem could later become central to doctrinal debate.

This process reminds us that theology did not develop only in councils, treatises, and sermons. It also developed line by line in translation.

The translator was not simply carrying the conclusions of theologians. The translator was participating in the creation of the language through which future theology would be possible.

Accuracy, Fidelity, and the Myth of the Perfect Equivalent

Modern readers often judge ancient versions by asking whether they reproduce the source text exactly. The question is necessary, but it can become misleading.

Exact equivalence between languages is rarely possible.

A word may have several meanings in one language but only one obvious equivalent in another.

A grammatical construction may express emphasis that cannot be reproduced without changing word order.

A metaphor may be understandable in the source language but confusing in the receiving culture.

A title may contain political or religious associations that shift when translated.

The translator must therefore choose which kind of fidelity matters most.

Formal fidelity attempts to preserve structure and wording.

Semantic fidelity seeks to preserve sense.

Liturgical fidelity values suitability for proclamation and worship.

Doctrinal fidelity protects accepted theological meaning.

Cultural fidelity seeks intelligibility within the receiving community.

These forms of fidelity can support one another, but they can also conflict.

A literal translation may preserve grammar while obscuring meaning.

A smooth translation may improve comprehension while weakening a theological ambiguity present in the source.

A doctrinally cautious rendering may reduce the openness of the biblical wording.

An older liturgical form may remain beloved even when scholars regard it as less precise.

Ancient biblical translation must therefore be assessed within the purposes of the community that produced it.

The question is not whether translators achieved a perfect equivalent. No translation can do so.

The better question is which dimensions of the source they chose to preserve, and what theological consequences followed.

The Preservation of Alternative Readings

One of the most valuable features of ancient versions is their ability to preserve textual forms no longer visible in most surviving Greek manuscripts.

A translation may reflect a source manuscript older than the majority of extant witnesses.

It may preserve a regional reading.

It may record a harmonisation, expansion, omission, or interpretive tradition that later disappeared.

This makes Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez versions important for textual criticism.

Yet the use of versions must be careful.

A difference in translation does not always prove a different source text.

The translator may have paraphrased.

A word may have been interpreted freely.

A later scribe may have revised the translation.

The receiving language may not have permitted a direct equivalent.

Scholars must therefore distinguish between textual variation and translational technique.

Even with these difficulties, ancient versions widen the evidential base. They show that the biblical text circulated in more varied forms than later standardisation sometimes suggests.

This has theological significance.

The history of scripture was not a history of perfect uniformity.

Christian communities inherited texts through copying, translation, correction, and liturgical use. Stability existed, but it existed alongside variation.

The authority of scripture was therefore lived through textual plurality long before modern debates about manuscripts arose.

Translation and the Making of Orthodoxy

Translations could support doctrinal unity, but they could also expose doctrinal difference.

When theological controversy intensified, particular words became dangerous.

A translation produced before a controversy might contain terms later judged inadequate.

A phrase once considered harmless might be reinterpreted as supporting a rival Christology.

Revisers could then change the wording to align the text with accepted doctrine.

This process should not automatically be described as corruption. Communities often believed they were clarifying the intended meaning of scripture.

Yet revision also reveals how doctrine shaped the transmission of text.

A church does not read scripture outside theological history. It reads through inherited arguments, councils, liturgical formulas, and institutional commitments.

Georgian textual history is especially important here because revisions sometimes reflect movement between Armenian and Byzantine theological worlds.

A lexical change could signal more than linguistic improvement.

It could mark a shift in confessional identity.

The same principle applies more broadly. Translation helped create orthodoxy by stabilising certain terms and excluding others. Once a vocabulary became established in worship and teaching, it shaped the range of meanings available to future readers.

Orthodoxy was therefore not only defined through propositions. It was also embedded in language.

Theological Loss in Translation

Translation creates meaning, but it can also diminish it.

Wordplay may disappear.

Ambiguity may be narrowed.

Sound patterns may be lost.

Cultural references may become invisible.

A term carrying legal, social, and religious meanings in Greek may be reduced to one dimension in another language.

The problem is especially serious when one source word appears repeatedly across different books. A translator may use several local equivalents depending upon context. This can improve readability but weaken the reader's ability to recognise thematic connections.

The opposite can also occur. One receiving-language word may be used for several different source terms, creating an apparent unity that does not exist in Greek.

Translation therefore reorganises the conceptual map of scripture.

Some distinctions become sharper.

Others become blurred.

Some repeated themes disappear.

New verbal connections emerge.

These changes are not always mistakes. They are part of the unavoidable cost of making a text live in another language.

Theology must therefore approach translation with humility. No single version contains every dimension of the source. Comparison among languages can recover meanings that one translation alone cannot preserve.

Multilingual study is not an academic luxury. It reveals the fullness and limits of every translated Bible.

Theological Gain in Translation

Loss is only half the story.

Translation can also disclose meanings that remain less visible in the source language.

A local term may connect biblical teaching with social experience in a powerful way.

A new grammatical structure may clarify agency, relationship, or emphasis.

A phrase used in worship may give a scriptural image deeper emotional resonance.

Translation can make theology more concrete.

A community hearing scripture in its own language recognises itself within the biblical world. Commands, promises, laments, and prayers cease to sound entirely foreign.

The text becomes capable of addressing local suffering, political life, family structures, and communal memory.

Georgian Christians could hear scripture within the realities of the Caucasus.

Palestinian Aramaic-speaking Christians could hear it within the landscape of the holy places.

Ethiopian Christians could receive it within African patterns of kingship, monasticism, poetry, and sacred history.

These contexts did not merely distort scripture. They allowed scripture to become active.

Translation therefore produces theological gain when it makes biblical meaning inhabitable.

Multilingual Christianity and the Limits of Centralisation

The existence of these traditions resists a centralised account of Christian history.

There was no single linguistic centre from which all theology flowed unchanged.

Greek was enormously influential, but Greek Christianity itself was diverse.

Latin became dominant in the West, but it did not define the whole Christian world.

Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Ge'ez, and other languages formed theological traditions with their own authority.

Christian universality was therefore not linguistic sameness.

It depended upon the capacity of the faith to cross languages while remaining recognisably connected to shared scriptures, worship, and confession.

This universality was unstable.

Translation could unite communities, but it could also intensify difference.

A term accepted in one language might be misunderstood in another.

Councils conducted through Greek concepts could be received differently by churches working with other philosophical vocabularies.

Doctrinal agreement could be complicated by translation before genuine theological disagreement even began.

Some ancient controversies may therefore have involved both theology and language.

Communities did not always disagree because they believed entirely different things. They sometimes inherited different ways of saying them.

This does not eliminate real doctrinal conflict. It does require caution before treating every verbal difference as complete theological opposition.

Translation and Ecclesial Power

Control of translation could become a form of ecclesial power.

The community that authorised a version could shape doctrine, worship, and education.

The clergy who interpreted a sacred language could exercise authority over those who no longer understood it fully.

The monastery that possessed manuscripts could become a centre of regional influence.

The church that revised a translation could align local Christianity with a wider ecclesial body.

Translation was therefore never separate from questions of authority.

Who selected the source manuscript?

Who approved the vocabulary?

Who copied the text?

Who read it publicly?

Who was permitted to interpret it?

These questions mattered because biblical access was not equal.

Many Christians encountered scripture primarily through liturgy and preaching. They depended upon those who controlled the translated text.

This could support unity and teaching.

It could also preserve hierarchy.

The history of translation must therefore include both liberation and power. Vernacular scripture could bring the biblical word closer to communities, but the process remained shaped by institutions.

The Fragility of Minor Language Traditions

The survival of biblical traditions depends upon more than theological value.

It depends upon material resources, political stability, educational networks, and communities willing to copy texts.

Minor language traditions are especially vulnerable.

A conquest can destroy libraries.

A monastery can decline.

A language can be replaced.

A scribal school can disappear.

Parchment can be reused.

A liturgical tradition can shift to another language.

Once copying stops, even important texts can vanish within generations.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic demonstrates this fragility most clearly. Its surviving corpus is incomplete and often hidden beneath later writing.

Georgian and Ge'ez traditions survived more substantially because they developed enduring ecclesial and literary institutions.

Their preservation was not inevitable.

It depended upon centuries of copying.

This labour is easy to overlook. A text survives because countless scribes reproduced it, often without recognition. They repaired manuscripts, corrected errors, taught students, and carried books between communities.

The history of theology therefore rests partly upon anonymous material labour.

Recovering Silenced Christian Archives

Modern scholarship has begun to recover traditions long treated as marginal.

New manuscript discoveries, digital imaging, multispectral photography, improved cataloguing, and international collaboration have made previously inaccessible texts available.

This recovery changes the map of Christian history.

It reveals that what appears absent may only be unread.

A manuscript may remain uncatalogued.

A palimpsest may preserve an undertext.

A monastery collection may contain witnesses not yet critically edited.

A translation may have been dismissed because scholars lacked the linguistic training to study it.

The expansion of research beyond Greek and Latin therefore requires institutional commitment.

Scholars must learn less commonly taught languages.

Libraries must support preservation and digitisation.

Local churches and manuscript custodians must be treated as partners rather than merely as sources of data.

The study of these traditions should not reproduce older patterns in which western institutions remove texts from their communities and define their meaning from outside.

Recovery must include respect.

The manuscripts are scholarly evidence, but they are also part of living or inherited religious traditions.

A Theology of Linguistic Hospitality

The history of biblical translation can be understood as a history of linguistic hospitality.

A community receives a text from elsewhere.

It makes room for the text within its language.

At the same time, the text receives the language into Christian memory.

The relationship is mutual.

Scripture changes the language by giving it new theological vocabulary.

The language changes the reception of scripture by giving it local sound, rhythm, and association.

This mutuality offers a model for Christian universality.

Universality does not require the erasure of difference.

The gospel does not become universal by remaining in one privileged language. It becomes universal by entering many languages without reducing them to copies of one another.

The Pentecost narrative offers an important theological image here. The miracle is not that every hearer abandons a local language. The miracle is that divine speech becomes intelligible across linguistic difference.

Translation continues that movement.

It does not overcome plurality by eliminating it.

It makes plurality capable of communion.

The Ethics of Translation

Translation also carries ethical responsibility.

A translator can clarify or obscure.

A translation can empower a community or keep authority in the hands of specialists.

A version can respect cultural difference or impose foreign categories without explanation.

The ethics of translation therefore concern more than accuracy.

They concern the relationship between text and reader.

A responsible translation seeks faithfulness without contempt for the receiving language. It does not assume that local vocabulary is incapable of expressing theology. It also does not romanticise local meaning when precision is needed.

Translation requires patience.

It must listen to both source and community.

This is particularly relevant in modern missionary contexts, where translation has sometimes accompanied cultural domination. The ancient traditions considered here show

a more complex pattern. They reveal communities actively receiving, reshaping, and preserving Christian texts.

They were not passive targets of translation.

They became translators of Christianity.

Why These Traditions Matter Today

Early Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez biblical traditions matter for several reasons.

They preserve ancient textual evidence.

They reveal the multilingual structure of early Christianity.

They correct Eurocentric histories.

They show how translation participates in theology.

They demonstrate that canon, doctrine, liturgy, and identity develop differently across linguistic worlds.

They also challenge modern churches to reconsider what counts as central.

A tradition does not become theologically unimportant because fewer people study its language.

A manuscript does not become marginal because it survives outside the dominant academic canon.

A church does not become secondary because its biblical collection differs from western expectations.

These traditions remind us that Christian history is larger than the history most readers inherit.

The recovery of that larger history does not weaken Christianity's coherence. It reveals the complexity through which coherence was formed.

Conclusion

The history of early biblical translation cannot be adequately told through Greek and Latin alone.

Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez traditions reveal a Christian world formed through linguistic crossing. Each tradition received scripture within a different cultural setting, and each produced a distinct theological environment.

The Georgian tradition demonstrates the layered character of translation at a crossroads of Armenian, Syriac, Greek, and Byzantine influence. Its revisions record changing ecclesial relationships and the development of a local literary identity.

Christian Palestinian Aramaic reveals the multilingual Christianity of the holy land. Its fragmentary survival in palimpsests preserves both textual evidence and the memory of communities often hidden beneath dominant historical narratives.

The Ge'ez tradition shows how translation could become the foundation of an enduring African Christian civilisation. It preserved a distinctive canon, sustained a sacred literary language, and protected texts lost elsewhere.

Together, these traditions demonstrate that translation is not secondary to theology.

Translation is theology in motion.

It selects vocabulary, shapes doctrine, creates liturgical memory, negotiates cultural identity, and determines how scripture becomes local.

It also reveals the limits of every language. No translation preserves everything. Each gains and loses. Each opens some meanings while narrowing others.

The Christian claim to universality therefore depends not upon one sacred language, but upon repeated acts of faithful transmission.

Scripture survives because communities translate it.

Christianity becomes local because believers hear it in their own language.

The tradition remains universal because no single language can contain it completely.

Beyond Greek and Latin lies not a collection of minor footnotes, but a wider history of Christian thought. Georgian, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, and Ge'ez belong at the centre of that history because they show how the faith was preserved: not by remaining culturally still, but by crossing boundaries and learning to speak again.

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