United Bible Societies and the Macedonian Bible: Fifty Years of the Renewal of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric

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Fifty Years of the Renewal of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric

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Bible Societies are voluntary societies of various Christian denominations that are locally organized, and mostly of national and sometimes international character. There are several main functions allotted to Bible Societies: a) translation and revision of Biblical texts; b) printing; c) distribution and, d) animation of the Bible usage. It is presumed that with this decisive approach, the Holy Scripture would become available to every group of people in their mother tongue, something which has led to an increasing number of Bible translations and their distribution over the years.

The British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) played a crucial role in the printing of the Bible in modern Macedonian language, whereas the Macedonian Bible Society was responsible for its distribution and reissue.¹ The Macedonian Bible Society was established four years after the publication of the first complete translation of the Bible in modern Macedonian. Today, the association of the United Bible Societies is the most powerful publishing and distribution house of the Bible. Since its establishment, it has reissued translated copies of the Bible five times. Including the first two editions, the total number of the translated Bible editions amounts to

¹ Cf. Aco Girevski, Obedinetite bibliski združenija i Makedonskata Biblija (United Bible Societies and the Macedonian Bible), Kirilometodievistika 2/2004, 89-99 (in Macedonian).
seven editions (the same number of printed editions as that of the Russian and Slavic Elizabeth Bible). The establishment of the Macedonian Bible Society contributed to the wide distribution of the Macedonian Bible, thus creating the program for approaching Biblical truths for every individual, which in return is promising for its all-embracing study and application in general life.

1. British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) – the Publisher of the First Complete Translation of the Bible in Modern Macedonian Language

In order to successfully complete the Macedonian translation of the Bible, it was necessary to find a publisher who would bear the burden of printing and other related material costs. The translator of the Bible, Archbishop Gavril and his appointed associates, turned to the British and Foreign Bible Society and to several neighboring Bible societies. In that respect, they cooperated with the Bible society in Belgrade, with responsible people ready to help. This kind of position was not by chance if we keep in mind that the British and Foreign Bible Society is known as the most powerful and significant of all other national biblical societies, which only after its tenth anniversary, started establishing numerous associations capable of functioning at an international level, including the Dutch, American, Russian, and Serbian societies among

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2 For an extended study of the translation of the Macedonian Bible see the article: Makedonskiot Gavrilov prevod na Biblijata (Gavril’s Translation of the Bible in Macedonian), Kirilometodievistika, No. 1, 2003, pp. 85-98.
3 Established in 1804 in London by a group of people including John Owen, who was later appointed Secretary and the author of the first Statute of BFBS.
4 An office of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) was opened in Belgrade in 1918. In 1936 this office was responsible for printing the Stefanović’s translation of the New Testament, which has recently had two editions. The translation of the New Testament in Serbian by Professor Emilijan Charnić was printed in 1973. The translation was based on the Greek original text of the New Testament and was compiled from the critical text by A. Merk. According to Father Trajan Mitrevski, a Professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Skopje, this translation was the best Serbian translation. Whereas Vuk St. Karadžić in his translation of the New Testament favored the beauty of the language, and not so much the meaning of certain phrases as written in the original text, Dr. Dimitrije Stefanović was very much focused on the meaning of the text even though he did make some linguistic and textual oversights. In contrast to these authors, Dr. E. Charnić managed to complete a translation that to a great extent was “correct and beautiful in style, literary”. (Trajan Mitrevski, “Dva najnovi prevodi na Noviot Zavet od Svetoto
others, which would later be united in the distribution of the translation of the Bible into native languages “at an affordable price and in large numbers.”\textsuperscript{5} This year in 2017, we celebrate the twenty-second anniversary of the Macedonian Bible Society. Due to the increasing number of such societies, each society operates autonomously with its own program. Today, BFBS is an international network and the main pillar of the United Bible Societies (UBS) with their headquarters in London, England.\textsuperscript{6}

2. Bible Society of the Republic of Macedonia

Since 1994, the Macedonian Bible Society has been a member of the United Bible Societies (UBS). It is an ecumenical-national society that operates autonomously. It was established in order to make the “Bible closer to every home in the country and in the diaspora.”\textsuperscript{7} The Statute (Article 3) of the Macedonian Bible Society reads: “The Society shall be a non-profitable and voluntary association of citizens aiming at distribution of the Holy Scripture, without doctrinal annotations, at an affordable price for our people. The association shall try to fulfill the needs deriving from the Holy Scripture and to realize personal and common interests which are in accordance to the goals of the Society.” The Bible Society not only makes an effort

\textsuperscript{5} Petar Kuzmič, Vuk-Danićevo Holy Scripture and Bible Societies, (Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1983), 30-31 (in Croatian).

\textsuperscript{6} This is the Bible Society, Edition for Bible Societies in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, UBS, 1993.

\textsuperscript{7} Petko Zlateski, Značenjeto na Bibliijata za Makedoncite (The Importance of the Bible for the Macedonians), The Education and Upbringing of Macedonian Diaspora, Proceedings from the international scientific and professional conference, Society of Science and Art - Bitola, 1995, 297.
to distribute the Holy Scripture in its mother tongue, but it also provides every individual with a Bible in one of the “classical or living foreign languages.”

Following the historical path of Orthodoxy in the world of the Orthodox Slavs, especially on the basis of the experience of Stephen K. Batalden, a professor at Arizona State University in the United States, the translation of the Bible in modern languages actually began in the nineteenth century. Up until then, the Bible in the Old Slavic language (in its various editions) was the only source for the Orthodox Liturgy, for the lectures in the seminaries, and for an independent study of the Bible.

The Zagreb *Bible Encyclopedia* from 1980 states that in the last two centuries, the Macedonian Orthodox Church mainly used Russian and Church Slavic books; particularly in the sixteenth century when the Macedonians and the neighboring Slavic peoples received church books printed in Russian, which were used by local scribes for copying. The only printed translation of selected Gospel texts is the so-called “The Konikovo Gospel,” printed in Thessaloniki in 1852.

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3. Bible Society of the Republic of Macedonia and the Bible

In a way, we could say that the translation of the Bible triggered the establishment of the Bible Society in Macedonia. The Macedonian Bible Society, via its Secretary General Petko

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Zlateski, has openly expressed their opinion on the translation of the Bible in Macedonian language. The experts of the United Bible Societies first assessed the first complete printed translation of the Bible in Macedonian, helped to distribute and reproduce it as necessary, and then, accepted the initiative for the correction of the text, which according to one of the members of the editorial committee, was in fact an act of “a continuance of the work of the first translators aiming solely at providing the best possible version of the original text.” I will now briefly discuss the first point of their opinion.

The United Bible Societies (UBS 1991), regarding the assessment of the Macedonian Bible, delivered an official act to the Macedonian Bible Society (September 26, 1995), which, inter alia, includes the following text: “The present edition of the Bible has the characteristics of an ‘Orthodox’ Bible. ... It is a valuable translation of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible Society should continue to promote and distribute this Bible.”¹² The Synodal Editorial Board assessed it similarly.

To that effect, the Secretary General of the Macedonian Bible Society stated: “We are deeply obliged to Mr. Krijn van der Jagt, a translation consultant at the United Bible Society in the Netherlands who gave his report on the translation of the Macedonian Bible on 15 October 1995 whereby it is written: ‘Macedonia possesses a valuable translation of the Bible which should be promoted and distributed.’”¹³

The second aspect does not convey particular oversights in the content of the translation, but implies certain lexical errors that need to be corrected. This is not my own opinion but a viewpoint of the Secretary General who assisted the revision of the Biblical text and who in an interview for Crkoven život (Church Life), gave an elaborate explanation about the work and

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opinions of the team assigned to revise the text. I am familiar with some of the opinions presented here from the seminar that was held in Skopje (1997) dedicated to the translation of the Holy Scripture and organized by the United Bible Societies with its chairman Mr. Krijn van der Jagt, a Biblical text translation consultant.

Indisputably, the translation of the Bible has minor mistakes. However, there were and will be corrections of the text, in order to improve the translation, making it closer to the original as much as possible. As far as I know, the mistakes were corrected by a mixed Commission (representatives of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, of the Catholic Church and of the Christian Protestant Community). In my opinion, they will not try to make complete changes in the nature of the translation. The style will not be changed. It dealt with removal of topographical mistakes, of grammar mistakes, of exegetical mistakes, of inconsistency in using the right titles, correct spelling of names (e.g. Isus-Jesus), usage of tenses (aspects) in relation to the Jewish language, elimination of paraphrases, etc. The Commission tried to replace the Old Slavic Church vocabulary with new modern Macedonian expressions, and the archaic expressions with modern language. One of the tasks of the team was also the pronunciation of words in the Biblical text based on the Old Slavic translation and Septuagint. In order to complete the task successfully, this team received a list of the most important names in the Hebrew language, from which the original names should only have been transcribed and made closer to the original Biblical text. However, the names already accepted in the Macedonian cultural tradition remained unchanged. For example, the names Samoil and Saul, were not replaced with Shemuel and Shaul, etc.

There are such revisions of the Bible, regardless of whether it is about old translations or about translations in some of the modern languages. There is also a revision of the oldest Biblical
translation—the translation of the 1970s, known as Evsevieve, Lucianic\textsuperscript{14} and Hesychian\textsuperscript{15} Recension of the Greek Biblical text. Also, the Church Slavic Bible has several corrected editions, known as Gennady’s Bible (1499), Ostrog Bible (1581) and Elizabeth Bible (1757-fourth edition).

Nowadays, this role in the Orthodoxy is played by the Biblical standing commissions established within the Synods of the Orthodox churches, or by the commissions established within the Biblical associations. In this regard, we are familiar with the activities and contributions of the Bulgarian\textsuperscript{16} and Russian standing Biblical commissions\textsuperscript{17} and with the work related to the East Slavic Biblical texts (Church Slavic, Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian) regarding a few important issues, such as, the issue of the use of the Church Slavic text in the Divine Liturgy; how important is the Church Slavic Bible; the issue of keeping it in use; how comprehensible is it for the new generations; the issue of its complete replacement with modern translations; the Church Slavic Bible as Textus Receptus when translating the Biblical texts

\textsuperscript{14} According to many scholars of the history of the biblical text, and according to the works of Blessed Theodorit and St. John Chrysostom, the Lucianic Recension was widely used in the entire Orthodox East, and was the basis of later translations until the invention of printing in the 15th century. Russian biblicists Evseev and Blagoveshchensky claimed that “The translation of the Slavic Bible by the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius was based on the Lucianic Recension.“ South Slavic biblicists shared the same opinion. (For an extensive study about Lucianic Recension see Dragan Milin, Introduction to Holy Scripture of the Old Testament, (Belgrade, 1991), 97 (in Serbian); J. Popović, Hagiographies of Saints for October, (Belgrade, 1977), 299-303 (in Serbian); History of the Septuagint Text, Septuaginta, Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuhta LXX interpretes edit Alfred Rahlfs, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, p.p. LXIV).

\textsuperscript{15} A valuable Christian recension about corrections of the Biblical texts of the Holy Scripture dating from the time of Lucian is the recension by Hesychian (+311). It was mostly used by Cyril of Alexandria. Unlike the Lucianic Recension which includes duplication of nouns (Lord Lord), Hesychian did not follow this practise. It is believed that the foundation of the Slavic translation of the Holy Scripture was the Alexandrian Recension, i.e. Hesychian Recension (see Dragan Milin, \textit{op.cit.}, 97) (in Serbian).

\textsuperscript{16} The Holy Synod of Bulgarian Orthodox Church ever since 1900 established a standing Biblical commission of eight members under the direction of Metropolitan Dositey of Samokov, whose members included renowned professors, Metropolitan Boris who was born in the village of Gjavato near Bitola (Metropolitan of Ohrid) and L. Miletić, born in Štip, who were making the Bulgarian Synodal translation of the Bible, and another Biblical commission, called Духовна проверочна комисия, for an extensive study see: Атанасъ Димитровъ, Рьководство за изучаване на ветхозаветните и законоположителни книги на Св. Писание, София, 1990, 25.

\textsuperscript{17} For an extensive study about the work of the Russian Biblical Commissions see Журнал московской патриархии ….No. 1, 1991, 72-73 (in Russian).
into modern East Slavic languages; the issue related to preserving the Cyril and Methodius tradition, etc.

Conclusion

It is indisputable that the translation of the Bible in modern Macedonian is a contribution of an exceptional importance for the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric and for Macedonian people for several reasons. Firstly, our Orthodox people and their next generations were able to become familiar with God’s basic precepts and messages in a comprehensible language. In that way, people were able to, not only through words, but also through symbols, understand God’s eternal justice, which is the bedrock of human life and which offers improvement and shows the path to spiritual perfection.

Furthermore, given that the first Macedonian translation of the Bible covers a period of about 50 years of existence of the Macedonian literary language, the Bible would be a useful basis for further study of the Macedonian language. Another reason is that the first full Macedonian translation of the Bible (1990) will forever remain a basis of all further revisions of the Macedonian Bible. It is unquestionable that the Macedonian Bible holds a historical, cultural, and national first place, as full edition of the Bible in the Biblical tradition of the Macedonian people.

Taking all this into consideration, the Bible Society of the Republic of Macedonia accepted the initiative to correct the text of the Macedonian Bible as an act of “a continuation of the work of the first team of translators with the sole purpose of improving and making the Macedonian translation closer to the original Biblical text, as much as possible.”
I mentioned the work of the Bulgarian and Russian Synodal Biblical Commissions due to two reasons. The first reason is that I wanted to support the right stance taken by the Synodal Editorial Board in the process of translating the Bible into modern Macedonian literary language. The second reason is that I wanted to encourage the high clergy of our church to appoint a standing Biblical commission within the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which will deal with the improvement of the Macedonian translation of the Bible, and will preserve the Orthodox Cyril and Methodius tradition, by taking into account the spiritual interests of the wider circle of Orthodox believers. Moreover, the Synodal standing Biblical commission can deal with the following issues: systematic and continuous work on the text of the Church Slavic Bible, which is of magnificent church, historic, national, and cultural value for the Eastern Christians, because it belongs not only to the past, but also to the present and the future. The translation of the Bible in modern Macedonian literary language, joining the other Slavic translations, is a foundation of the future revisions of the Macedonian Bible.

When making corrections of some detected mistakes, present in the Church Slavic translation, and now in the modern Macedonian translation of the Bible, the need for a thorough comparison of the two translations with the original Bible appears again, as well as the need for a thorough study of the East Slavic manuscripts of the Bible tradition. On the basis of this work, both independent translations are expected to be thoroughly and textually improved, given the spiritual interest of the wider circle of Orthodox believers. This practice should continue.

In this work, the Commission would follow and use different Greek texts, in terms of the New Testament, so that the latest scientific Biblical material would be used, and moreover, other Greek texts of the New Testament, now spread in the Christian world throughout the West.
Here, I would emphasize the fact that a lot of mistakes appeared in the Old Testament parts of the Synodal Russian Biblical translation, because, in fact, there are two translations: the translation from the Masoretic text of the old Hebrew Bible and the translation from the Greek text of the Septuagint. The Commission would have the task to resolve the differences between the Masoretic text (7th century A.D.) and the translation of the LXX (Septuagint), which according to the majority of Slavic modern Biblicists is correct, accurate and original, due to which it is considered an authority as it was always in use in the Christian Church, but also “an authority as the best critical tool for correcting the Masoretic text.” Due to all this, I would emphasize the fact that the Synodal Russian Biblical translation should preserve the East Slavic tradition, and simultaneously use the Masoretic text of the old Hebrew Bible (Rom. 11:25), as well as the Greek text of the Septuaginta.

It is necessary to follow all the achievements of the world Biblical science and to use everything that can contribute to strengthening the gradual development of the East Slavic Biblical tradition.

I believe that the Synodal Biblical Commission will start a very important project of creating an interpretive version of the Bible in modern Macedonian language, as a gift for the next generations and their needs in the future.

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18 В. Н. Мышцын, Нужен ли нам греческий перевод Библии при существовании еврейского подлинника?, Богословский Вѣстник, 1895, NN. 2 и 3, 214-288, 345-377 (Professor V. N. Myshtsin, (Do we need Greek translation when there is Jewish original?), Theological Journal, 1896, No. 2 and 3, 214-288, 345-377) (in Russian).