

THE BIBLE IN SOUTH AND EAST SLAVIC LANDS: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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According to the *Life of Constantine-Cyril*, the philosopher credited with initiating Slavic literacy, the very first words to be recorded in the language of the Slavs were: "Iskoni bě slovo, i slovo bě ot" boga, i bě bog" slovo."¹ These, of course, comprise the opening lines of the fourth gospel (John 1:1). Thus, the earliest action of the first writer in Slavic was to translate the Bible. Later, in Moravia, Constantine continued his translation of holy writ when he taught the local Slavs "Matins and Hours, Vespers and Compline, and the Liturgy,"² all of which require at appropriate points in their recitation the insertion of Biblical verses (Timothy, now Archbishop Kallistos, Ware claims that the entire psalter is recited weekly in the Orthodox daily office [i.e., Matins and Vespers], and that in each celebration of the liturgy there are 98 quotations from the Old Testament and 114 from the New³). Later, in Rome, Constantine's biographer records that he presented the Pope with a copy of the Slavic scriptures.⁴ In the accompanying *Life of Constantine's* brother Methodius we learn that these "Slavic scriptures" are in fact the gospels⁵ and the *Apostolos* (the Acts and the pastoral epistles),⁶ copies of which, at least presumably, he also brought with him later to Constantinople when he was summoned there by the Byzantine emperor.⁷ At the very end of the *Life of Methodius* we read: ". . . [Methodius] took two priests from among his disciples, who were excellent scribes, and translated quickly from Greek into Slavic—in six months—beginning with the month of March to the twenty-sixth day of the month of October—all the Scriptures in full, save Maccabees. . . For previously he had translated with the Philosopher only the Psalter, the Gospels together with the *Apostolos*, and selected Church liturgies."⁸ Thus, at least according to this document, by the end of 884 the Slavs possessed in their own vernacular language the entire corpus of holy scripture, with the exception of two deuterocanonical books.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the Bible to the Slavs. The oldest datable Slavic manuscript, the Freising Fragments (ca. 1000 AD), contains a Biblical text (Matthew 6:9b-13, the Lord's Prayer). The oldest dated Slavic book is the Ostromir Gospel (1056-57). Almost without exception, every original work of old Slavic literature is shot through with Biblical citations. When printing arrived among the Eastern Slavs, it was parts of the Bible (the gospels and the psalter) which were printed first, in Moscow in 1565.⁹ The role played by vernacular translations of the Bible in the cultural development of the Poles, Czechs, Belorussians, Slovenes, Croats and Serbs is too vast to chronicle here. But, as Jože Pogačnik notes in citing Northrop Frye's work on the Bible as the "great code" of Western civilization, translating the simplicities and complexities of holy writ is something of a trial by fire for any dialect with literary pretensions. In Pogačnik's words, "A language which is capable of the Bible is literarily mature."¹⁰

While it is good to stress the centrality of Holy Scripture for the development of Slavic literatures (and not just Slavic: one would be remiss to exclude, at least in discussion of the Orthodox Commonwealth of Eastern Europe, the Romanians, whose literacy was initiated by vernacular translations of scripture), it is also expedient to note that little work has been done on investigating the translation of the Bible into the Slavic languages, and much of that work is now quite dated. To those familiar with this issue, "little work" may seem a gross understatement of the amount of literature in existence concerning certain

facets of Biblicistic activity among the Slavs. Certainly Gerhard Podskalsky, in his volume on Christianity and theological literature in Kievan Rus',¹¹ chronicles such a mass of scholarly erudition that his text occasionally fills no more than two or three lines of the page while the remainder is given over to footnotes. Nevertheless what he cites, particularly in regard to the Russian situation, frequently dates from the nineteenth century. It is clear, especially from the most recent Soviet treatment of the problem, M.I. Rižskij's monograph,¹² that (a) the fate of Biblical texts *per se* among the Eastern Slavs is a problem to which Soviet literary historians are not willing to devote a great deal of effort or attention, and (b) that contrary to Soviet practice, the awareness of literature from outside the Soviet Union is minimal (to cite but one egregious example: Marx, Engels and Lenin are cited as scholars of the Bible far more often than any so-called 'bourgeois' biblicist.) Indeed, only two relatively modern western Biblical scholars are mentioned in the footnotes, G. Gerleman, 1946, and Fr. or Er. Stier, 1954; hence an abundance of scholarly insights dating from the past three decades has been passed over. Moreover, though it is probably superfluous to mention it, Rižskij's book, though factual and useful in many cases, is nevertheless quite tendentious, in that it seeks to show the deliberate intent of Russian churchmen to confuse, delude and otherwise bewilder "honest" Christians through a manipulation of Biblical texts. With a fervor bordering on Bibliolatry, Rižskij attempts to liberate the true text (which however he seems to feel will then disintegrate under the pressure of its own internal contradictions) from that which the Church purveys, so that in the final analysis the investigation to which he individually has devoted so much time and fervent effort may prove to be simply an exposure of Christian duplicity, and not a scholarly treatise on the career of a vital text in the East Slavic realm.¹³ On the other hand, I am not unsympathetic to the difficulties facing a Soviet scholar working on this topic, especially in isolated Novosibirsk: whatever its shortcomings, at least his work breaks some new ground and turns over other ground long left fallow in a field that has yet to be worked thoroughly.¹⁴

If there is a shortage of contemporary investigations of the fate of the Bible among the Slavs, one may also note that there is a similar dearth of material concerning the transmission of specifically Biblical texts from south to north. It seems clear from the available evidence that Holy Writ was translated first in the south (by Cyril and especially Methodius, if we are to believe their vitae, or perhaps by the Turnovo school of hesychasts in the late fourteenth century), and then conveyed to the north—either in the so-called "first South Slavic influence," wherein the activities of the court of Preslav, and the schools and scriptoria surrounding Lake Ohrid, gave the Byzantine missionaries to the court of Prince Vladimir the necessary materials for Christianizing Rus'; or in the equally so-called "second South Slavic influence," now so rightly questioned by scholars east and west, in which traditionally a one-way traffic existed from south to north, by which translated texts were sent to the East Slavs. But there does not seem to be anywhere a definitive list of which Biblical books actually existed in Slavic at that time. Nor, except for the testimony of Methodius' life, is there any direct evidence that all the books of the Bible (except 1 and 2 Maccabees) really did exist in Slavic translation by the end of the ninth century. Indeed, I would submit that the difficulties facing Archbishop Gennadij of Novgorod at the end of the fifteenth century point us to quite the opposite conclusion. Faced with pressure from indigenous heretics (the Judaizers), Gennadij ordered the translation of the entire Bible from Latin and other sources into Church Slavic. Faulty and problematic as this translation was, it nevertheless indicates that the full Bible was not available in Muscovite Rus' at the time. One wonders how that was possible: if the full Bible had been

translated in Methodius' lifetime, is it conceivable that this text would not have been transmitted to the other Orthodox Slavs? Could such texts ever have been lost? Could confusion exist concerning them? The answer to all of these questions seems to me to be negative: if the full Bible in Slavic really had come into being during the first period of Slavic literacy, how is it conceivable that it would not have been shared throughout the Byzantine commonwealth?

In the remainder of this paper I would like to address some abstract issues concerning the translation of the Bible among the Orthodox Slavs. What I have to say should be understood as preliminary and tentative only: the material touching upon this subject is enormous, and I have only begun to read in it and digest its conclusions.

Before we advance into a consideration of some of the problems concerning Bible translation among the Orthodox Slavs, certain understandings must be established concerning Holy Writ. What we call the Bible was not definitively established as such until relatively late in the history of the book: if we wish to be technical, Roman Catholics have been enjoined to regard the Latin translation of the Bible (the Vulgate) as definitive only since 1546, in two decrees of the fourth session of the Council of Trent. Therein the names and order of the books of the Bible were established, and those whose Bibles differed in either number of books or arrangement were anathematized. For the Orthodox Church, a similar conclusion (and an identical arrangement of the canon) was reached only at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672. It is interesting to note that in both cases the Councils arrived at their conclusions as the result of pressure from what they perceived to be heretical Christian bodies, who were successful at least in part because they could cite Holy Scripture far more effectively than the Catholics or the Orthodox.

These technical considerations aside, what we call the Bible today was more or less in final form far earlier than these medieval conclaves would lead us to believe. The Old Testament, in the form that Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have accepted it (i.e., the Septuagint, a Greek translation of Hebrew texts) was codified by 100 BC and, despite the efforts of later translators to correct or otherwise alter it (Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion), it has survived to the present, through the works of Origen and Lucian (the efforts of the latter may also have had an effect on the definitive Hebrew canon, the Masoretic text, which lies at the base of Anglican and Protestant translations of the Old Testament). The New Testament (sometimes incorrectly called the Greek Bible, for in fact both Old and New Testaments are definitive only in their Greek versions, at least as far as the apostolic church was concerned) was compiled in the first and second centuries of the modern era, but its shape was determined only as the result of pressure from heretics using scripture and alleged scripture to their own ends.¹⁵ St. Athanasius of Egypt, in his thirty-ninth festal letter of 367, essentially provided the outline of the new covenant's canon, which was confirmed by a Synod of Rome in 382 (at which St. Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin, took part and played no small role). The Quinisext or Trullan Synod, which codified the decisions of both the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils, meeting under the dome (*in trullo*) of the emperor's palace in Constantinople in 692, formally closed the process of adding books to the canon. As a result, the definitive Bible for both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox numbers, in the Old Testament, nineteen historical books (i.e., the Pentateuch and Joshua through Esther), seven didactic or poetic books (Job through Ecclesiasticus), eighteen prophetic books (Isaiah through Malachi), and two more recent historical books (1 and 2 Maccabees); and in the New Testament (where all traditional Christian denominations agree), four gospels, the Book of Acts, thirteen Pauline epistles, the Epistle to the Hebrews (which the Vulgate considers

to be Pauline), the Epistle of James, two of Peter, three of John, and one of Jude, and the Apocalypse of St. John the Divine (or the Apostle). Thus all issues of the canon and of the definitiveness of scripture were effectively settled almost two hundred years before Constantine and Methodius' mission to the Slavs.

Another issue we should address is the place of Holy Scripture in the worship of the Church. Neither the Roman nor Orthodox traditions share the point of view of Protestant denominations regarding the centrality of scripture in the salvation of individuals. Both feel, as Archbishop Kallistos puts it, that the Bible "must not be regarded as something set up *over* the Church but as something that lives and is understood *within* the Church."¹⁶ It seems clear to me that the motive of the earliest translations of holy writ into Slavic was not so much to provide individual believers with direct access to the word of God (by and large, individual believers were illiterate and had no hope of such access), but rather to furnish the Church with the texts necessary for her worship. If the Gospels, Acts, Pauline epistles and psalter were necessary in their entirety, then most Old Testament books would suffice merely in excerpted form, hence the development of the *aparakos* Bible (those Biblical texts needed for the Sunday and holiday lectionaries) and the *parimejniki* and *palei* (or selected texts from the Old Testament). It would be very interesting to determine exactly the extent to which Old Testament books are actually cited in Old Slavic (particularly Old Russian) literature; despite a claim in the *Povest' vremennyx let* that one Kievan monk knew the entire Old Testament by heart,¹⁷ it would be revealing to determine the actual state of Old Testament knowledge in Kievan Rus' as attested by the surviving documents.¹⁸

Another issue also must be addressed in assessing the role Holy Scripture played in the ecclesiastical and literary lives of the Slavs. When Constantine and Methodius translated Biblical texts into *slověn'sk' język*, they presumably used the spoken language of their time. They defended their activities (in the *Proglas* to the Gospels) by appealing to St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians (14:9) in which the apostle to the gentiles claimed he would rather speak "five words with my understanding . . . than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." But how then are we to assess the activities of Patriarch Euthymius of Turnovo? In his desire to re-establish the ancient forms of holy writ so as to guarantee the correctness of Biblical and other translations into Slavic, did he not effectively undermine the vernacular culture of which the Slavs had partaken from the ninth through the early thirteenth centuries? What does such a move say about Euthymius' perception of the value of understandable scriptures in the life of the Slavic churches? Was not his revision of the books, and the subsequent Muscovite willingness to accept revised Holy Scripture in the fourteenth century,¹⁹ in fact a move to diglossia among the Slavs, a diglossia almost as profound as that which existed in the Latin west, except that access to the higher language of the diglossic pair allowed among the Slavs for no contact with classical antiquity or the wisdom of the past, but only yielded the ability to read a limited number of ecclesiastical texts in a somewhat more correct (i.e., archaic but perhaps also incomprehensible) form? Given among the enlightened and devout Bulgarians an ethos which exalted Holy Scripture as an icon (to be adored and contemplated) rather than a text (to be read and understood) we can certainly understand subsequent reactions among the far less sophisticated Muscovites when they were confronted with western learning regarding the incorrectness of their holy books. Of course they were unwilling to tamper with even the 'jots and tittles' of texts whose sense they did not comprehend but whose intrinsic value they superstitiously revered: hence the unhappy career of Maksim Grek in Muscovy. A second-rate humanist and the third choice for ambassador of Vatopedi Monastery to

Moscow,²⁰ his modest innovations were nevertheless so threatening to the Muscovites that he spent the bulk of his life incarcerated and isolated from any contact with those who might have responded to his stimuli. It would take the Orthodox Slavs until the nineteenth century to overcome the diglossia imposed upon them by the school of Turnovo: the divine mysticism of the Bulgarian and Serbian hesychasts (which would effectively disappear after the Turkish conquest of the South Slavic lands) became obscurantism in Muscovy. At least in terms of the scriptures this heavy hand would be felt most fatefully in the compilation of the Gennadij Bible of 1499, a tremendously defective translation which nevertheless lay at the base of all subsequent Church Slavic Bible editions among the East Slavs (including the first full printed Bible of Ostrog of 1586). For the Russians it would not be removed until the Holy Synod in 1856 authorized a modern Russian translation of the entire Bible, which was published only in 1876.²¹ Thus it took almost one thousand years to come full circle, from the vernacular Bible of Methodius (or however much of it he and his assistants did translate) to the vernacular of the *Sinodal'noe izdanie*, which stands virtually unchanged to the present day.²²

An even larger issue concerning the Bible among the Orthodox Slavs is the role scripture has played in their literatures. This is an important, indeed crucial issue, yet one which is scarcely addressed in contemporary criticism of Slavic literatures (though it is a cliché of western literary criticism concerning western works). Earlier in this paper I mentioned that Old Slavic literature is permeated with quotations from scripture. As far as that statement goes, it is true; but how are these quotations used? To what degree are the ethical problems posed in Biblical texts understood or incorporated into the writings of the Slavs? Beyond the simplest adaptations of some Biblical principles (e.g., that the last shall be first and the first last, in an attempt to validate the Slavic conversion to Christianity), how profound an effect did Biblical theology have on the Slavic consciousness?²³ How great a code was 'the great code' in the Slavic world? Have Biblical language and metaphor played a role in Slavic poetry and prose? Have the styles of the Bible had an impact on Slavic literature? Does any Biblicism survive now in the writings of these nations? What of the recurrent types and myths that Frye speaks about as so central to Western literatures? The Slavs are clearly members of the Christian, and therefore Biblical, heritage of Europe, but how is this membership manifested? These are questions I hope to answer as I continue to address myself to the history of the Bible among the Slavs.²⁴

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2. Kantor and White, 47.
3. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 209.
4. Kantor and White, 55.
5. Kantor and White, 77.
6. Kantor and White, 79.
7. Kantor and White, 87.
8. Kantor and White, 89.
9. Mixail I. Rižskij, *Istorija perevodov Biblii v Rossii* (Novosibirsk: Nauka [Sibirskoe otdelenie], 1978) 83.

10. Jože Pogačnik, "Veliki kód slovenskega jezika in književnosti," *Jezik in slovstvo* 29 (1983-84) 204.
11. Gerhard Podskalsky, *Christentum und theologische Literatur in der Kiever Rus' (988-1237)* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982) 56-72.
12. Cf. note 9 above.
13. One may also note some strange statements in the book, not the least of which is the opening one, where he claims that Alexander the Great helped to spread the Septuagint to the East. In that Alexander died in 323 BC, and the seventy translators did not gather together in Alexandria until the third century BC, it is difficult to see how this is possible (Rižskij, 8).
14. Of particular note is the recent Festschrift in honor of Professor Moshé Altbauer: *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 7 (1985), ed. D. Segal, W. Moskovich and M. Taube, especially the articles by Moshé Taube and Aleksander E. Naumow. I am indebted to Dr. Taube for bringing this work to my attention, as well as two other articles of his: [with M. Altbauer], "The Slavonic Book of Esther: When, Where and from What Language was it Translated?" *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 8 (1984) 304-20, and "Old Russian *bliskū* — 'pavement'?" *Die Welt der Slaven* 31 (1986) 1-4.
15. Han von Campenhausen, (J.A. Baker, transl.) *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) 327 ff.
16. Ware, 207.
17. Rižskij, 28.
18. See the 'Editor's postscript' by Horace G. Lunt to Altbauer and Taube, "The Slavonic Book of Esther," 320.
19. Dimitri Obolensky, "Late Byzantine culture and the Slavs: a study in acculturation," *XVe Congrès international d'Études byzantines, Athènes 1976. Rapports et co-rapports* (Athens, 1976) 18 [repr., D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Inheritance in Eastern Europe* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1982). Obolensky here cites the work of A.I. Sobolevsky, which I have not yet had the opportunity to examine first-hand.
20. Elie Denisoff, *Maxime le Grec et l'Occident* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1943) 289, 343.
21. One may note, however, that the heavy burdens placed on the translators of the Russian Church Slavic Bible into modern Russian (as they are outlined in Rižskij, 159-60) are not so different from the instructions given to the revisors of the Authorized (King James) Version of the English Bible, that is, to change as little as possible so as to minimize the awkwardness of contradictory scriptural texts; cf. "Bible, English," in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: U Chicago, 1947) 3: 529ff.
22. Rižskij, 187, notes that the Patriarchate, once again under pressure from competing translations into Russian issued in the west by the (émigré) Russian Bible Society and the YMCA, published a revised version of the 1876 Bible in 1956, but that this revision merely removed a few earlier typographical errors and other small inconsistencies. Apparently this is the only legal edition of the Bible in the Soviet Union since the 1920s.
23. Podskalsky, 274-77, concludes that even in the Kievan period, which in many ways was the epoch of closest relations between the East Slavs and Byzantium, the theological impact of Constantinople on Kiev was minimal.
24. A preliminary version of this paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in New Orleans on 21 November 1986.

POVZETEK

BIBLIJA V JUŽNIH IN VZHODNIH SLOVANSKIH DEŽELAH. UVOD V RAZISKAVO

Čprav najzgodnejši viri o prevodih Biblije v slovanske jezike trdijo, da je bil celoten kanon Svetega pisma dostopen celo že leta 884. je videti, kot kažejo kasnejša obvestila, da ni tako. Še vedno je težko natančno določiti, katera biblična besedila, posebno iz Starega testamenta, niso bila znana med Slovani pred Genadijevo Biblijo iz leta 1499. Razen tega znanstveniki sodobnega časa še niso natančno raziskali ni samega postopka prevajanja Pisma pri Slovanih, ni zapletenosti, ki jih je povzročil arhaizirani biblični jezik patriarha Euthymiusa, ni vloge, ki jo je imela Biblija pri formiranju slovanskih literatur (v pogledu teologije, jezika, metaforike, sloga, žanra in tematike).