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## **The Septuagint as a Base Text for Bible Translations in Russia**

### The Slavonic heritage

When the Slavonic tribes were Christianised in the ninth century, the Bible of the Byzantine world was basically, although not exclusively, the Greek Bible. Saint Cyrill and Methodius, “the Thessalonian brothers”, who initiated the process of Bible translation among the Slavs, also belonged to the Greek speaking Byzantine world. Confronted by the influence of German clergy, they highly valued their Greco-Slavonic identity, and so did their immediate successors. Naturally, therefore, the corpus of the Slavonic Biblical texts which were the result of their translation activity, represented a certain form of the Byzantine text-type, although modern scholars may disagree about its exact origin. For the Old Testament (OT), that meant they were based on the Septuagint (LXX). These texts remained the main, if not the only Bible in Russia for many centuries.

Nevertheless, other forms of the OT were neither completely unknown nor deliberately rejected in Russia. The first ever complete Slavonic Bible was published in Novgorod in 1499 under the auspices of archbishop Gennady. Remarkably, it contained some portions translated from Latin Vulgate or even from the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT), as was obviously the case with the book of Esther. The region of Novgorod had seen more fighting against Catholic forces than other Russian regions, and bishop Gennady is reported to have been one of the most fervent fighters against the heresy of “Judaizers. Yet none of these circumstances prevented him from using the main texts of his opponents as his base texts. I guess there was the feeling that the task of translating the Scripture was more important than the current inter-confessional situation he faced.

This episode can be also referred to as the beginning of a long tradition of textual eclecticism which flourished in Russia in the centuries to follow.

### The Synodal saga

A new page in the history of Bible translation in our country was opened in the early nineteenth century when the Bible Society movement was active in the Russian empire for a brief period. The Russian language had by now developed a highly elaborate literary form, completely distinct from old Slavonic. The question of translating the Bible into Russian was in the air. In this period of time, most translation was carried out by Protestants who naturally tended to use MT as their only base text. For them, MT was the original and LXX just a translation of it, however venerable and old. This point of view has dominated Protestant attitudes but has been revised by modern scholarship, especially in the post-Qumran era.

When the Russian Psalter was published in 1814 by the Russian Bible Society, the editorial preface stated that “not only Greek version was taken into account, but the very Hebrew original as well... The translators, without any doubts, had to adhere to the exact Hebrew wording”. The version itself was rather eclectic, mixing MT and LXX variant readings together.

This Psalter had a very short history: the Russian Bible Society was dismissed soon and its editions were banned. The idea, however, never died. Some enthusiasts continued their work on this project. As far as the OT is concerned, archimandrite Makary Glukharev, “the apostle of Altay” has to be mentioned, as well as protopriest Gerasim Pavsky. Both of them deliberately chose MT as their source text although Makary also suggested that another Russian translation should be prepared from LXX. It has to be said that this dream still has not come true.

Their personal activities, however, were not welcomed by the Church officials. It took decades before their drafts were revised and the complete Russian Bible, known today as Synodal, was published in 1872. During this process of revision, their drafts were checked

against LXX and the Slavonic version. Not only were the parts missing from MT incorporated into the translation, but many exegetical decisions were made to follow LXX as well. To illustrate the eclectic nature of the Synodal text, it will be enough to give just two examples from the book of Genesis.

In 2:2, MT says: “And on the *seventh* day God finished the work that he had done” (NRSV). LXX, however, suggests a reading which is in a better agreement with the Sabbatical law: “And on the *sixth* day God finished the work that he had done”. The Synodal version has chosen a rendering which was closer to the Hebrew in form but definitely followed the meaning of the Greek: “*by the seventh day*”, implying that this day was actually free of any work. The same was done later in NIV.

The second example concerns the well-known fact that chronology in the book of Genesis looks rather different in Hebrew and Greek versions. The Synodal editors decided to translate the Hebrew numbers in plain words while giving Greek numbers in brackets with figures. So 5:6-7 runs as follows: “When Seth had lived one hundred five [205] years, he became the father of Enosh. Seth lived after the birth of Enosh eight hundred seven [707] years, and had other sons and daughters”. One can only wonder how an ordinary reader looks at this schizophrenic arithmetic. Nevertheless, the main base text still was MT.

Larger insertions from LXX were marked with brackets. Later, when the Synodal Bible was reprinted by Protestants, they excluded all the bracketed passages, but this definitely did not result in a “LXX-free” Russian version. To eliminate all the exegetical choices influenced by LXX one would have to rewrite the whole translation verse by verse, carefully comparing it to the Hebrew text. Such a project has never been launched, nor is very likely to be launched in the foreseeable future. In any case, there seems to be no need for it, since Russian speaking Protestants are quite happy with the Synodal version as it stands.

### Eclecticism as a method

Why do we find such willingness to use more than one base text in producing the Synodal Bible? One explanation was provided by metropolitan Filaret Drozdov in his report to the Holy Synod in 1848<sup>1</sup>, long before the actual editing started. He suggested that all the three version known in Russia – MT, LXX and Slavonic – should be taken into consideration. In his opinion, the main base text should be MT while LXX and, to a lesser degree, Slavonic should provide help for exegetically or textually unclear passages and also serve as guides in where a dogmatic interpretation was to be considered (like in Isaiah 7:14). In fact, this very program was fully implemented by the editors of the Synodal Bible, largely due to the fact that Filaret was one of the most influential bishops of his age and the main promoter of the project, too.

His position, however, never remained undisputed. In the same period other views were also presented in the Russian Church. The development of the discussion was well summarised in a book by Prof. Illarion Chistovich<sup>2</sup>. Some, of course, insisted that no modern translation was needed at all, which seems to be the usual case with almost every new translation. People who admitted the necessity, or at least the permissibility of a vernacular version of the Scripture, were usually divided in two groups: those who favoured MT and those who preferred LXX. Most of the arguments from both sides have not yet completely lost their validity so it may be worth listing them here in brief.

The main arguments in favour of MT were as follows:

- ✓ *Hebrew is the original language of OT.* This is undoubtedly true but now there is much less certainty about the uniqueness of MT than there was a century and a half ago. It appears now that MT was just one of the text-types which coexisted for some period of time, and that LXX was derived from another type. None of these types can be completely identified with the original although it is generally agreed that MT did

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Журнал Московской Патриархии*, 1992, № 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> И.А. Чистович. *История перевода Библии на русский язык*. С-Петербург, 1899; Москва, 1997 – reprint.

represent the mainstream. At least the statistical distribution of the Dead Sea scrolls hints that this was the case in New Testament times.

- ✓ *LXX cannot be fully understood without reconstructing its Hebrew original.* This is true as well; a translation done from MT makes things easier for the translator.
- ✓ *The Church fathers occasionally used MT as well.* As was shown by Prof. Miltiadis Konstantinou (in his presentation at the symposium in Athens, September 1997), the Fathers preferred to use the Greek, the language they knew well, since the knowledge of Hebrew was extremely rare even among the most educated Christian scholars in the Middle Ages. But they never completely rejected MT as a corrupt or alien to Christendom. Gennady's Bible, as stated above, presents another example of this.
- ✓ *The reader should not be allowed to make the wrong assumption that the translators have concealed the "true" Hebrew text of the Bible.* As soon as a translation from MT was completed this political argument became invalid for the Russian audience but it may be worth taking it into consideration in some other contexts where the first translation of OT is discussed. Personally, I do not find it as strong as the other arguments.

In addition, one can say that now MT is a very handy text for translators: it is well studied, and is published in numerous editions with only minor differences between them, so that it seems logical to translate the text just "as is". With LXX, the situation is rather different in almost every respect.

The main pro-LXX arguments were as follows:

- ✓ *LXX is the ecclesiastical text.* This is true but we should also remember that, unlike the Vulgate in the West, LXX was never the *only* ecclesiastical text in the Christian East. The fact that LXX traditionally has been the *predominant* version of Scripture is because it is written in Greek, the language of the NT and part of most of the patristic writings and liturgical texts. The Byzantine theologians, however, were very far from making Greek the only sacred language, as can be easily seen from the example of Saint Cyrill and Methodius. On the other hand, it is natural that the Orthodox Church should prefer a translation of the text which it has been using since its birth.
- ✓ *MT is alien to the Christian tradition.* This development of the preceding argument is also true to some extent, since MT was fixed and preserved within the Jewish community of faith, that clearly identified itself as opposed to Christianity. In the same time, as stated above, it did not prevent Christians from using this text, usually as a supplemental source, whenever *hebraica veritas* ("Hebrew truth", as it was called by Jerome) was required.
- ✓ *Jews are reported to have intentionally corrupted MT in order to eliminate all references to Christ.* To support this opinion, such passages as Isaiah 7:14 are usually referred to. This assumption, however, has proven to be more mythological than historical, as are many other assumptions about Jewish-Christian relations. There is no direct proof of such a corruption, and even the Dead Sea scrolls, written long before such a corruption could have taken place, do not support this claim. What is true, is the fact that neither LXX nor MT in their present shape can be considered confessionally neutral, and confessional texts sometimes support certain beliefs of their congregations more strongly than do other texts. It is no wonder that Christian and Jewish scribes tended to choose from all the existing variant readings those ones which in best supported their theology. Neither is it strange that an ordinary believer should opt for such readings in a modern translation as well.

So, the decision of metropolitan Filaret and his co-workers was a compromise open to criticism from both sides. The Synodal version was born amidst hot debates about its principles. But it also appeared at about the same time as some other translations of the OT books, like the Pentateuch published in London in 1860 and the complete Hebrew-Russian Bible printed in Berlin in 1872. All these translations were done exclusively from MT. They received no approval from the Orthodox Church authorities in Russia (in fact, they were designed for audiences other than Orthodox ones) and pretty soon they became history.

From the other side, only two LXX-based editions appeared before the revolution of 1917. First of all, bishop Porfiry Uspensky translated the books of Genesis, Proverbs, Psalms, as well as first and second Maccabees<sup>3</sup>. Later, Prof. Yungarov translated the Psalter afresh and it was published in 1915 in Kazan<sup>4</sup>. He could not have chosen a more suitable book as the Psalms are much more important for both liturgy and individual worship than any other OT book; and at the same time, their Masoretic version does not always suit the traditional liturgical context of the Orthodox Church, which is based exclusively on LXX. These versions, however, were more academic than liturgical in nature. Perhaps the best way to use them would be to imagine a worshiper who hears the Slavonic text at a service or recites it in his private prayer and then refers to this book to learn the exact meaning of a difficult passage. Uspensky's version is almost completely forgotten now but reprinted copies of Yungarov's text still circulate among Orthodox believers.

The appearance of the Synodal version also stimulated and influenced the process of translating the Bible into minority languages of the Russian empire. From our distance in time, it is difficult to know the exact textual principles established as a basis for these versions, especially because OT portions appeared only in a very few projects, often without any explanatory preface at all. For instance, a quick glance at the Tatar Psalter, published in 1914 in Kazan by the Orthodox missionary society<sup>5</sup> shows that it was translated from LXX rather than MT, perhaps through the mediation of the Slavonic text.

Two years after the publication of Yungarov's Psalter Russia experienced the 1917 revolution and its aftermath, events that made the dispute about the preferences of MT versus LXX absolutely irrelevant for decades to come. Under other circumstances one might have expected a new Russian translation to be done directly from LXX, as was desired by many, including Prof. Chistovich who wrote<sup>6</sup>: "one cannot avoid the desire to see separate translations of the Bible from the Hebrew and from the Greek".

The reality was different. Under the pressure of the atheist regime believers from all denominations could only dream of even getting a Bible of any kind. The only ones available at all almost always happened to be the Synodal version. This translation itself became a symbol of survival for the Christians of all the denominations, and its every feature now was precious in their eyes, including the textual eclecticism. The Bible was Synodal, and no other. This is especially true of Protestants, while the Orthodox at least retained the Slavonic version too.

### The present situation

Long before the decline of the communist regime became obvious, the translation of the Bible into the languages of USSR was recommenced, both by academicians inside the country who even managed to publish separate OT books as pieces of "ancient Hebrew literature", and some enthusiasts abroad. Among them were the founders of the Institute for Bible Translation where I have the privilege to work. As far as I know, every single OT book was translated from MT although LXX may have been used as the source of variant readings in difficult places. This was definitely the reflection of the standard practice used by Bible agencies all over the world. The new Russian translation of the OT – a project which I served as a translator a few years ago – also takes MT as the source text and refers to LXX among other sources only when MT is evidently corrupt.

Since most translators into minority languages know little or no Hebrew they usually use a Russian version (mostly the Synodal) as their base text. Normally, this is a Protestant edition where all the insertions from LXX are omitted but I know of two projects,

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<sup>3</sup> Published in *Труды Киевской Духовной Академии*, 1869, №№ 2, 4, 5, 6; 1873, №№ 3, 9. These versions were never reprinted and became a rarity.

<sup>4</sup> П. Юнгаров. *Псалтирь в русском переводе с греческого текста LXX, с введением и примечаниями*. Казань, 1915; Сергиев Посад, 1997 – reprint.

<sup>5</sup> *Псалтирь на татарском языке*. Казань, 1914; ИВТ, 1976 – reprint.

<sup>6</sup> Чистович, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

namely Chuvash and Udmurt, where the decision was taken to use the fuller version. Both projects are partnership projects between the Institute for Bible Translation and the Bible Societies; in both cases the target audience has a strong Orthodox background. This was probably the reason why it was decided to make those two translations as close to LXX as possible. One of the Chuvach translators, Eva Lisina, told me once that she would like to translate the Psalms from Yungierov's version, as the nearest equivalent to LXX. The only obstacle was the total absence of any other books translated from LXX into Russian, so just for the sake of uniformity she had to stick to the Synodal.

The Synodal Bible became a mediator between ancient texts and modern translations, thus establishing a tradition of its own and, for better or worse, passing on its eclectic nature to translations for other languages and cultures.

Strangely enough, there are very few modern LXX-based translations in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (which include most of the former Soviet republics), even after the collapse of the Soviet system, when local Orthodox churches found themselves in a respected and independent position. For instance, both of the new Georgian translations follow MT, even to the extent of using the shorter version of Esther. The only full OT translated from LXX which I know is the Ukrainian translation recently initiated by the Catholics of Byzantine rite and completed by the Ukrainian Bible Society (as far as I know, it is going to be published soon).

In Russia, we have another remarkable example – the third LXX-based translation of the book of Psalms recently prepared by hieromonk Amvrosy Timrot<sup>7</sup>. In a private exchange, he told me that this translation appeared as a result of his mixed experience of prayer and scholarly studies. It is designed for worship and so is accompanied by the standard prayers which normally go with the reading of the Psalter. Its language is high styled, with a certain number of archaic Slavonic words but the translator tended to avoid any expressions which may seem obscure or too pretentious. Because the text is intended to be read aloud, the translator took care over the euphony of the wording. As for the content, he opted for compatibility with the traditional patristic exegesis. This also meant preserving ambiguity of expressions where both the Synodal team and Yungierov went for just one possible interpretation. In my opinion this is a good model to follow whenever an ecclesiastical translation from LXX is to be done. Fr. Amvrosy hopes to continue this work and to translate some other parts of OT which are read at the Orthodox Church services.

Now would seem to be the right moment to ask the question: are such translations needed in Russia nowadays? Not less, I think, than in the days of Glukharev and Chistovich. For the Orthodox churches, LXX remains the traditional ecclesiastical text. Besides, general readers who do not belong to a particular denomination are becoming more acquainted with different Bible translations. When I speak in public about the Bible, one of the most frequent types of questions I am asked by the audience is about the astonishing variations between different versions. Most of these can be explained as variant readings between different text types. So it would be rather useful to have two different translations prepared from the two most influential versions of the OT, i.e. MT and LXX.

I am thinking firstly about Russian translations. A Bible Society project, under the direction of M. Seleznev, currently has a qualified team of scholars translating a complete Russian OT from MT. It is hoped that this will be published within in a decade, bringing to fulfillment one part of the dream shared with Glukharev and Chistovich by many other scholars and simple readers.

But we live today in a culture which accepts the Bible in a variety of versions. An ordinary Orthodox worshiper goes to church where he or she listens to the words of the prophets and psalmists in Slavonic, i.e. in a LXX-dependent version. Then he or she comes home and opens his Synodal Bible where he finds sometimes a totally different version of what he has just heard, simply because this text is based on MT, and, with the exception of

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<sup>7</sup> *Псалтирь. Новый перевод с греческого текста 70 толковников*. Москва, 1999.

the Psalter, nothing can be done about it. It would be rather strange to keep this imbalance for ages.

As we see from Fr. Amvrosy's example, there are not only people who would benefit from such a translation but also those who could actually prepare it. Unfortunately those who are interested in such a translation are mostly individuals, not organisations. For the Institute for Bible Translation translating the Bible into Russian is out of question because of our general policy: we work with non-Slavonic languages. The Bible Society in Russia seems to be too busy with other projects, as and so is the Patriarchal and Synodal Bible Commission.

Nevertheless, I think it is essential that a new Russian translation of LXX appear in the immediate future - or at least a partial one, including the most important books. If the Bible agencies do not get involved, it is likely that this work will be done by somebody else without their assistance, with a great risk of inaccuracy or incompatibility with our general principles.

As far as translations into minority languages are concerned, I think we should seriously consider the recognition of LXX as a text type not inferior to MT which can also serve as a base text for translators. In some languages with stronger Orthodox presence we may even think of parallel versions: for instance, a complete OT translation from MT and separate books (first of all, Psalms) translated from LXX for liturgical usage. This is not in our current planning but if we try to look ahead I think we should not disregard such an option.

We are told that there are many dwelling places in the house of our Father (Jn 14:2), and the variety of the extant versions of the Bible is yet another aspect of this wonderful truth.