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The New Revision of the Hungarian Bible¹

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Historical

The Bible translation at present used by the Hungarian Protestant Christian community is a revised version of the so-called *Vizsolyi Biblia*, which appeared in 1590 in the Hungarian village of Vizsoly and was the work of Kaspar Károli and his colleagues. Kaspar Károli was the Reformed Church pastor there and superintendent of the Kassavölgy district. Neither the portions of the Old Testament and the translations of the New Testament which had appeared before 1590, nor the Protestant and Roman Catholic translations which have been published since have succeeded, even to the present day, in ousting the Károli translation from its unique position. This version formed the Hungarian language of succeeding centuries in the same way as the Lutheran version formed the German language. Right through the centuries and into the twentieth century, this Bible has held its own without any major revision (apart from small improvements which have been incorporated from the second edition onwards). The first thorough revision—in which the whole Bible appeared in 1908—shows so many alterations that it should not, in the view of many a scholar, any longer bear the deferential sub-title "*Translated into the Hungarian Language by Kaspar Károli. Edition compared with the original text and revised*". Károli's name, work, and spiritual influence were such that it was impossible, even after 300 years, to print a text with considerable alterations under anything else but his name. There is no doubt that neither the revisers, nor their sponsors, had any desire to put into the hands of Christian people anything more than an improved Károli translation. But even today there are many people who still use "the old Károli version" besides

¹ Translated into English by Beryl Guy.

the text which appeared in 1908. Many sects also prefer the old translation (as for instance Jehovah's Witnesses, because the name *Jehovah* is used in the old version and is almost entirely lacking in the revised version).

New Translations

The need for another new revision became more and more apparent, however, in the twenties and thirties. Two reasons activated this demand: firstly, the linguistic archaisms which, even in the revised version, produced with the years an ever increasingly disturbing effect on the person of today and of which people had been made more conscious by individual new translations of the New Testament by scholars like Masznyik, Raffay, Czeglédy, Kecskeméti and Farkas; and secondly, the increasing interest in the Bible which developed in the Hungarian Protestant churches as a result of the revival which began after the collapse in 1918. The British and Foreign Bible Society commissioned the Reformed pastor and former theology professor Alexander Czeglédy and the Lutheran Bishop and former theology professor Alexander Raffay with the work of a new revision of the Károli Bible published in 1908, that is of the revised Bible. Both of these men had already published their own translations of the New Testament (that published by Czeglédy had a second edition).

Revision Work before the End of the War

Through the work of the two above-named scholars, a revised Bible appeared of which a tentative edition was published in 1938. The Old Testament was the work of A. Czeglédy and the New Testament the work of A. Raffay. This Bible might better be called a new translation rather than a revision, and although it was received with great joy, criticisms were not slow in coming either. It became increasingly clear that any translation of the Bible with the claim to be a Church Bible cannot and must not be the sole work of two scholars, however outstanding they may be. The two churches therefore elected a committee to help Czeglédy and Raffay. The individual books of the Bible were each given to two or three specialists who checked them over and imparted their criticisms to the two revisers.

Czeglédy and Raffay worked on untiringly at the revision all through the war. Many articles dealing with the revision appeared in journals of scholarship and systematic theology. When, in the late autumn of 1944, the war reached the town of Cegléd from the east (where Pastor Czeglédy was in charge of a Reformed parish) and Pastor Czeglédy was lying in bed surrounded by books, he was saved by a miracle when a shell tore the roof away over his bed. A few weeks later this great scholar and worthy follower of Károli, a Hungarian Menge, succumbed to his serious illness. In the meantime, not only the advantages, but also

the deficiencies of the tentative edition of the Bible were becoming apparent and it was clear that people still preferred the revised Károli version of 1908 to the tentative edition. The great advantage of the tentative edition was the incontestably more modern and understandable language, but among the disadvantages principally mentioned was the exaggerated use of euphemism and the weakening of the impact of Biblical expressions. Nor was the consecutive setting of the text, instead of the division into verses, received very favorably.

The Revision Work after the War

As soon as the confusion of war had died down in our liberated land, the matter of the revision was taken up again. Unfortunately, Bishop Raffay had also died. Amongst Pastor Czeglédy's papers a typewritten copy of the Bible revision was found and was put at the disposal of the Joint Bible Commission of the two churches by his family. When it became possible to think of printing the Hungarian Bible again, the British and Foreign Bible Society expressed the desire that a new Hungarian text should be provided. The old plates were so badly worn that it was hardly possible to use them again for printing; but if the Bible was to be set up again at great cost, then the Society wanted to use a newly revised text for this Bible.

The Joint Bible Commission of the two churches therefore took the initiative by a resolution passed in the summer of 1947. When it was found that the text left among Pastor Czeglédy's papers was ready for printing, it was felt that it should go to press. But because the criticisms had been mainly directed against the New Testament in the tentative edition of the Bible, the New Testament was submitted for yet one more revision by a joint critical commission of seven scholars from both churches (Lutheran and Reformed).

The Chairman of this New Testament Commission was Dr. Josph Pongrácz (New Testament Professor Emeritus at the Reformed Theological School in Pápa); the other members of the Commission from the Reformed Church were: Dr. Karl Erdős (New Testament Professor at the Reformed Theological Faculty of the University of Debrecen), Dr. George Budai (New Testament Professor at the Reformed Theological School in Budapest), Dr. Ernst Mátyás (New Testament Professor at the Reformed Theological School in Sárospatak) and Dr. Andreas Békési (Reformed Pastor in Ócsa and honorary University lecturer); the Lutheran Church delegated the following to the Commission: Dr. Karl Friedrich Karner and Dr. Jenő Kiss (both New Testament Professors at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Sopron). To the great loss of the Commission and of Hungarian theology, as well as of evangelical Christendom, Prof. Mátyás died in the spring of 1950, when the work on the New Testament was almost at an end.

The New Testament Commission set to work at once and came to the conclusion that a thorough check of the New Testament text was necessary. In the meantime, the writer of this article had been asked

to make a scrutiny of the text of the Old Testament for any serious errors which might have remained and to prepare the manuscript for printing. He, however, declined to accept, not only pointing out particular deficiencies in the manuscript, but also expressing his conviction that a revision should not be carried out by one man, but that in the case of a Bible for church use the Reformed Church principle must be adhered to, that a committee of scholars should be responsible for the reliability of such a Bible revision or Bible translation, whereas the manuscript in question was the posthumous work of a single scholar. At his request, this problem was also discussed on the New Testament Commission which then laid before the session of the Joint Bible Commission (10th February, 1948) a request that a commission be set up for the revision of the Old Testament part of the manuscript. The Joint Bible Commission then revoked its former resolution (that the manuscript from the papers of Pastor Czeglédy should be printed) and gave to a commission the responsibility for the revision work on the Old Testament. The text to be used as the basis for the work was that found among the papers of Pastor Czeglédy, but the Joint Bible Commission gave to the Old Testament Commission absolute liberty to be guided only by the principle of faithfully reproducing the Hebrew text.

The chairman elected for the Old Testament Commission was Dr. Kálmán Kállay (Old Testament Professor at the Reformed Faculty of Theology at the University of Debrecen) and Vice-Chairman Dr. Johannes Deák (Old Testament Professor at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Sopron, Emeritus since 1949, but continuing to work); Secretary of the Commission: Dr. Ladislaus Martin Pákozdy (Professor of Biblical Theology and General History of Religion at the Reformed Theological Faculty of the University of Debrecen); Reformed members of the Commission: Dr. Ludwig Tóth (Emeritus Old Testament Professor at the Reformed Theological School in Pápa) and Dr. Ladislaus Stephan Pap (Old Testament Professor at the Reformed Theological School in Budapest); Evangelical Lutheran members: Dr. Nikolaus Pálffy (at that time University lecturer at the Evangelical Faculty in Sopron and now Old Testament Professor there in succession to Prof. Deák) and Superintendent Johannes Botyánsky (Pastor in Mezötúr); right at the beginning of its work, the Commission increased its number by the addition of another superintendent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the name of Paul Zászkaliczky (Pastor in Fót).

The Present State of the Work of the Two Commissions

When the New Testament was completed in the spring of 1949 and was even already set up at the printer's, the members of the Old Testament Commission each read through a proof. On the basis of examples from Matthew, Galatians, and Hebrews, they conveyed their critical comments to the New Testament Commission. From these it became clear that the Old Testament Commission, following the original text, had made more fundamental improvements and alterations and used more modern turns of speech than the New Testament Commission.

Several joint sessions of the two Commissions were then held and the New Testament Commission checked its text once again and improved it, in order to harmonize the work of the two Commissions. These joint discussions were also helpful and useful for the Old Testament Commission. So the New Testament is now almost ready for printing; the printer has begun to incorporate the improvements in the text which has already been set up.

The work on the Old Testament from the spring of 1948 to December 1950 in 25 sessions (of one week to ten days) has reached 1 Samuel. The text of Genesis and Exodus is ready for the press and Genesis is being set up. Since the Commission has not only the latest commentaries available, but also makes use of that valuable work which lies at the back of the latest Bible translations and revisions, which are at present being used in the Church throughout the world, the Commission can in all humility and gratitude to God claim that the new Hungarian Bible translation will be one of the finest in use in the world-wide Church. We are also very grateful for the books which we have received from abroad through the intermediary of the United Bible Societies and for the books of the tentative edition of the new Dutch translation received from the Netherlands Bible Society, as well as for the reference books sent by Christian Reconstruction in Europe.

Method of Work

As a general rule, both Commissions each assembled for a week once a month, in order to discuss the work that had been done at home and to determine the Hungarian text. The Reformed Theological School in Budapest and sometimes the Faculties in Sopron and Debrecen were the scenes of the joint work on the revision, since there were adequate reference books available there. To give some idea of the methods of working in the Old Testament Commission, one of the members of the Commission reads out the Hungarian text aloud and the other members follow in their *Kittel: Biblia Hebraica*. Each verse is discussed and often the text of a particular verse is only determined after lengthy discussion, or even put aside for further thought. The Commission never makes decisions by means of a vote; problems must always be solved by the agreement of all the members of the Commission, because matters of truth cannot be decided by a simple majority of votes. Even the slightest objection of only one member of the Commission must be taken very seriously. The sessions begin every day with prayers and often last, with an interruption at midday, until the late hours of the evening.

When a book of the Bible is completed, it is put on one side and some months later it is read aloud to see what the new text sounds like, for the Bible is primarily a book of the Church and of the Church service to be read aloud. In this respect the Old Testament Commission enjoys the valuable advice of Dr. Imre Révész, Emeritus Professor in the Theological Faculty of Debrecen and former Bishop of the Reformed Church there.

The Old Testament Commission requested the Hungarian Bible Council¹ to publish the individual books of the newly revised Bible (Old Testament) in tentative booklet form before the final text was set. This was done, because the Old Testament Commission was of the opinion that a Bible revision cannot be just the work of eight people, but that the work of the Commission should, before the type of the whole Bible is set, be made available to Church and even wider circles. All criticism can but be helpful for this most important work. (As I have been writing these lines, the post has brought me the first proofs of the first tentative edition of Genesis in booklet form.) The Hungarian Bible Council granted this request, and so opened up the possibility for very extensive cooperation and fellowship between scholars and churchmen working together on the new Hungarian Bible. The members of the Commission not only desire to serve as executors of the original text and guardians of the linguistic treasure of their fathers, but at the same time to work out a translation which will speak to the people of today and they will therefore welcome anyone who comes along with a better solution than they have found.

The References

The New Testament will provisionally appear without references. The Old Testament will already have a reference apparatus in the tentative edition. This is being prepared by the Secretary and will appear in the footnote section of each page. This apparatus brings in rich material which is being assembled from the following points of view:

1. The sequence of references to the history of revelation and salvation is given backwards and forwards (e.g. in Gen. 12 : 1 ff. there is reference to all the verses in Genesis and to all the important verses in the whole Bible where the blessing of Abraham is mentioned and is of importance, and in the same way all those verses are referred back to Gen. 12 : 1 ff.).

¹ During the course of 1949 the British and Foreign Bible Society handed over its work, which had been carried on for over a hundred years with rich blessing, to the largest evangelical Church in Hungary, the Hungarian Reformed Church which took over the staff of the Bible Society. At the same time the incentive was given for the formation of a *Hungarian Bible Council* of the evangelical churches and this soon took place with Bishop Bereczky elected as Chairman of the Council. All the evangelical churches of the country are represented on this Bible Council. All matters of the translation, publication and distribution of the Hungarian Bible have been taken over by the Council which fulfills approximately the same task as the national Bible Societies in other countries, except that it is not an official organization, but an ecumenical fellowship of the evangelical churches and fellowships represented on it. The administration is carried out by the Press Service of the General Conventus of the Reformed Church, but kept quite separate from its other business. At the same time the Hungarian Bible Council took over and empowered from its side also the two scholarly Commissions which had been nominated by the Joint Commission of the two evangelical Reformed and Lutheran churches. Although not all denominations are represented among their members and representation was not given on a percentage basis, but according to the qualifications of the scholars, both Commissions enjoy the full confidence of all the churches and fellowships and we are glad to find that Hungarian evangelical Christianity has found the way to brotherly co-operation also in the work of the Bible.

2. Difficult or obscure passages are referred to other parts of the Bible where the problem is solved or explained (e.g. in Gen. 6 : 6-7 an asterisk in the phrase "it repenteth* me" refers to the following: *Exod. 32 : 10, 14; Num. 23 : 19; 1 Sam. 15 : 29; Jer. 26 : 3, 13, 19; Amos 7 : 3, 6).
3. Where it is necessary, quite short objective notes are given, such as the explanation of a play on words in the Hebrew, of difficult expressions, the meaning of names, etc.

With this apparatus it is desired to follow the example of the first Károli Bible of 1590 which was provided with very good notes and explanations. It is, of course, understood that all confessional tendencies or hair-splitting will be avoided. The confessions will be given the opportunity through the tentative edition to give expression to their views on every detail in this apparatus.

The Churches and the Work of Revision

The churches have shown a great interest in the work of the Old Testament Commission. A number of evangelical churches send all kinds of parcels for each week that the Commission meets, so that the Commission is almost entirely fed by the churches during the times when it is in session. Thus the word of Gal. 6 : 6 is fulfilled to the Commission: those who are taught in the Word are in fellowship with those who teach them "in all good things". The organizer of this love feast, which resembles the early days of Christianity, is Mrs. Lenke Botyánszky, the "invisible housewife" of the Commission. The parcels often bring touching lines written by rough peasant hands which seldom take up the pen, bringing Bible verses and blessings. The Commission has the assurance that a large unseen praying Church is carrying its work in faith and this close link with the actual Church strengthens the working power, courage and endurance, joy and conscientiousness of the scholars.

Finally, a word of testimony. Our Hungarian evangelical Christianity has passed through the judgment of God who was gracious to us. God could have obliterated our churches and the light of His Word by the just fulfilment of His judgment. Instead of that we can work in our country day by day on a new revision or translation of the Hungarian Bible, translating one book of the Bible after another and even having it printed—preparing an edition of the Bible which will be a turning point in the history of the Hungarian Bible.

"Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art very great..."
 "O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people".
