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THE SONG OF SONGS IN THE SLAVONIC BIBLE TRADITION

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Introduction

Slavonic is the language of the Slavic Orthodox church tradition. It arose at the time of the introduction of the Slavic Liturgy by Sts. Cyril and Methodius, in the middle of the 9th century in Great Moravia. With slight modifications Slavonic is used today in Orthodox church practice in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria, Serbia and elsewhere.

In the course of time Slavonic became the supra-national written language of all Orthodox Slavs, with a high degree of codification. Changes in the grammar and lexicon of the vernaculars increased the gap between them and Slavonic. One should distinguish between Slavonic texts and early texts in vernaculars. In different Slavic lands the vernaculars began to be used at different times for written purposes.

In Roman Catholic regions the use of Latin for all church and administrative functions allowed vernaculars to be employed at first for secular purposes and then for non-official religious ones. Thus during the 13th century the Czech Bible was translated from the Vulgate and later printed in Prague in 1488. In the 15th century the first Bible texts in Croat appeared. The Polish translation of the whole Bible was made from Czech in the 16th century.

Quite a number of translations of the Holy Scripture into various Slavic vernaculars were prepared in the 16th and 17th centuries with the beginning of the Reformation, the Hebrew text of the Masoretic tradition (MT) being used as the source for the Old Testament.

In Slavic Orthodox countries there were no Bible translations into the vernaculars up to the 19th century. On the one hand, the strong monastic character of Orthodox culture prevented any serious movement towards the common use of Holy Scripture; on the other hand, the replacement of the religious language was not considered urgent, because of the close resemblance between Slavonic and the Slavic vernaculars. Thus the period of the absolute power of the Slavonic version of Holy Scripture lasted in Slavic Orthodox countries for a millennium, from the 9th to the 19th century.

There were three functional types of biblical text in Slavonic: the liturgical, the continuous, and the explanatory. Each of them had its own origin and history. Each was translated from Greek independently from the others, and had a number of textual features alien to the others. But their interaction in the process of transmission tended to smoothe away the textual differences, as I shall show.

The **liturgical type** was the Bible text adapted for church services in the form of two special books: the *lectionary*, that comprised a set of New Testament readings; and the *prophetologion*, that comprised a set of Old Testament readings.

This type was created at the time of the introduction of the Slavonic liturgy in the 9th century.

The **continuous type** (that is, the text comprising all the verses of a book in their conventional order) had comparatively restricted importance for the church practice. This type originated in the end of the 9th century when St. Methodius translated the greater part of the Bible, but only in 1499 was the making of the continuous text completed. This full Bible codex is known as the Gennadian Bible, after the name of the Archbishop of Great Novgorod. The printed edition of the Vulgate was used as a model, thus the so-called Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books were translated into Slavonic for the first time.

The **explanatory** or **exegetical type** (that is, the biblical text accompanied by theological commentaries) is to be regarded as a separate type of the biblical text, because it was translated afresh together with the theological commentary; all previous Slavonic texts, whether liturgical or continuous, were almost completely ignored by translators of this type. It should be noted that no original theological commentaries were written in Slavonic; all of them appeared as translations from Greek or occasionally from Latin.

Thus the translation of Holy Scripture into Slavonic was not made at one stroke. It was a long and complicated process, in which all Slavic Christian peoples took part.

Translations and recensions of the Slavonic version of Song of Songs

(1) *The continuous text of Song.* This is known in approximately 25 manuscripts from the 14th to 16th centuries, of Russian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian provenance. There are no manuscripts from the 17th century, because copying of the continuous Bible texts was dropped immediately after the printed edition of the Slavonic Bible appeared in 1580. On the basis of its language and literary history, the continuous text may be ascribed to St. Methodius and dated to circa 885. The Greek source is the Septuagint in its late Byzantine form, defined by Alfred Rahlfs (1923) as the R-Recension. It seems that in some readings the Vulgate was used as a help in the interpretation of the Septuagint. For example, in 4.2, *ateknousa ouk estin* is translated as *jalovy niestj*, "none is barren" (KJV). This corresponds to Vulgate *sterilis*; all other Slavonic translated texts have literal renderings of the Greek: *bezchadna*, *bezchadstvujonshti*, "childless". This text is published and studied in Alexeev 1983a.

(2) *The Croatian glagolitic recension of the continuous text.* It is believed the Croats were Christianised by Sts. Cyril and Methodius in the middle of the 9th century. They received the Slavonic liturgy together with the Slavonic version of Scripture. From the beginning of the 10th century the See of Rome tried to forbid the Slavonic liturgy in Croatia; only in 1248 was it allowed in a restricted diocese. According to the Byzantine rite, Song is not read during the church service, and so it was missing from the Greek *prophetologion.* It was included in the Latin breviary in 1389 when the feast of the Visitation of Our Lady was prescribed by Boniface IX. As a result the Slavonic version of Song translated from the Septuagint was changed according to the Latin sources. The Latin text in question was not the Vulgate but Vetus Latina (Itala) that had been used by the Roman Church before the canonisation of the Vulgate at the Council of Trent in 1546. This Croatian version is known from several manuscripts of the breviary from the 15th century.

The text was published partially by Bercić in 1864, but no full investigation is available.

(3) *The 12th century explanatory translation.* This is known in 25 manuscripts from the 13th to 18th centuries, all of Russian provenance. On the basis of its language and literary history, the Russian origin of the translation can be proved. The text of Song is not complete: about 20% is missing, but several verses are written twice. Corruption of this kind is usual for the explanatory type of Bible text. The translator knew the Methodian translation of Song and used it from time to time, but preferred the Greek text of his sources. The text of Song is accompanied by exegetical catenae borrowed from commentaries on Song by Philo of Carpasia, Hippolytus of Rome, and Gregory of Nyssa, and Catenae of Song by Procopius of Gaza. There are no catenae of this structure in the Byzantine or any other ancient literature (Syriac, Armenian). Here we come across two quite different translation techniques: a very literal translation by Gregory, and very skilful translations by Hippolytus and Philo. It is obvious that a Slav editor brought together previously translated ingredients of the catenae. For two or three centuries this exegetical translation was used exclusively for miscellanea of a catechetical character (an introduction in Holy Scripture in the form of questions and answers). Only in the 15th century did it begin to be used as a theological composition. The text is published and studied in Alexeev 1988.

(4) *The 1499 recension of the explanatory translation.* In 1499 the Novgorodian circle of philologists compiled the first full Bible codex, the Gennadian Bible; it took the printed Vulgate as a model. The books translated earlier were copied from the available manuscripts, while missing books were translated from Latin. Some books known to the Slavonic tradition only in the explanatory form were simply transcribed from commentaries: Revelation, Job, the greater part of the Prophets, and Song. Several small amendments were made in the text of Song, but there are no traces of collations with the Vulgate or alternative Slavonic manuscripts. Some small passages from the commentaries were mistakenly preserved in the text of Song.

(5) *The second explanatory translation.* About 1420 the famous Bulgarian and Serbian philologist Constantine of Costenec translated the Commentary on Song by Theodoret of Cyrrhus. This Byzantine author was extremely popular in Slavonic literature; almost all his Old Testament commentaries were translated in the 10th and 11th centuries in Bulgaria. Like his East-Slavic predecessor of the 12th century, Constantine knew perfectly the continuous text of Song in the Methodian translation, but preferred to preserve peculiarities of his Greek source. This work is free from the defects of the first explanatory translation, mentioned above. Only four or five South-Slavic manuscripts from the 15th and 16th centuries containing this text are known. They were studied and partly published by Trifunović in 1971.

(6) *The recension of the second explanatory translation.* A very short time after the completion of the previous translation, the commentary was removed from the text, thus a new continuous text of Song appeared. It is known in four South-Slavic manuscripts of the 16th century. It is published and studied in Mincheva 1989.

(7) *The first targum of Song.* In one Russian manuscript from the 16th century, we find a translation of Song from the MT. The source language shows itself through phonetic features of the onomasticon (cf Hebrew *Hezhbon*, Septuagint

Hesebon = Slavonic *Esevon*) and some semantic peculiarities. Among them the literal translation of names is a very usual characteristic of the Jewish synagogue translation (= targum). E.g. 1.5 *rdq* is translated *pole,* "steppe, desert", Hebrew *lbnon* by *lies*, "forest", cf the same rendering *bychst'n,* "forest" in Jewish translations of Song from the MT into Persian in the 5th-7th centuries (Asmussen, Paper 1977). The place of the translation is Western Russia (there are a number of specifically Polish, Czech, and Belarussian words in the text), but the date is uncertain. The perfect Slavonic grammar speaks against the late period of the 15th-16th centuries. At all events the targum originated before the 15th century. It is not without importance that the manuscript containing the text did not belong to the Jewish community, since besides Song it has an illuminated copy of the Revelation. The text is published and studied in Alexeev 1981.

(8) *The second targum of Song.* A manuscript from the beginning of the 16th century contains a set of OT books translated from the MT: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel, Lamentations, Esther, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Song, that is, the part of the Hebrew Bible that is called *kethuvim*, "writings". The language of the translation is a mixture of Slavonic and the Belarussian vernacular. The place of the translation is western Russia (Belarussia), where it appeared at the end of the 15th or the beginning of the 16th century. The translator was familiar with the first targum but used it only incidentally. The text is published and studied in Altbauer 1992.

(9) *The translation from the 15th century Czech Bible.* Only one manuscript of the 15th century has the text of Song accompanied by short explanatory remarks and a foreword with a discourse on love. The translation was made from a Czech source, namely the third recension of the Czech Bible. The recension is connected with the Czech pre-reformation movement of Jan Hus (Kyas 1971, 60). The place of the translation is southwestern Russia, now Ukraine. The text was published in Kostomarov 1861; for some notes on the Czech base, see Alexeev 1983b.

(10) *The translation of Francysk Skoryna.* This famous Belarussian philologist published his own translation of most of the Bible in Prague in the second decade of the 16th century. The booklet with the text of Song was printed in 1518. His main source was the Venetian edition of the Czech Bible of 1506. Besides this, he also used Postilla by Nicholas de Lyra (Nürnberg 1493) and the continuous text of Song in the Methodian translation. The language of the translation is Slavonic, with strong influence from the Belarussian vernacular.

(11) *The Ostrog Bible of 1580.* This is the first printed edition of the Slavonic Bible. It was published in the town of Ostrog (Ostrih) in Volyn' (near L'vov-Lemberg). The publisher was Ivan Fyodorov who had been the first printer in Moscow under Czar Ivan the Terrible, but had to migrate to Ukraine, then a part of Poland. Several professors of the Orthodox college in Ostrog worked with Fyodorov. A handwritten copy of the Gennadian Bible was used as a basis for printing. Those books that had been translated from the Vulgate for the Gennadian Bible were retranslated from the Septuagint in the 1518 Venetian Aldina edition. The publishers also used a number of additional Slavonic manuscript sources. The preparation of the new text of Song was very complicated. The following Slavonic sources were used: the first explanatory translation in the recension of the Gennadian Bible, the continuous text in the Methodian translation, and the explanatory translation of Constantine of Costenec. In addition, in some cases the publishers used the text of Francysk Skoryna and the Czech Bible. Thus the Ostrog

Bible became a thesaurus of the Slavonic Bible text tradition. For details see Alexeev 1990.

(12) *The Elizabethan Bible of 1751.* This new edition of the Slavonic Bible was carefully prepared by a group of Bible philologists in St. Petersburg in the reign of Empress Elizabeth. The text of the Ostrog Bible was collated and corrected according to several Greek, Latin and Hebrew printed sources as well as some manuscript sources of the Slavonic Bible. It is still reprinted.

Conclusions

Before the invention of printing, the mainstream of Bible work went through the *trans-confessional text of Holy Scripture.* Choice of the Greek (Orthodox) or Latin (Roman Catholic) sources was not restricted by any confessional prejudice.

The two above-mentioned translations of Song from the MT did not have wide circulation among the Slavic Christian community, but the reason for this is purely accidental. Meantime the Jewish translation of the book of Esther made in Rus' in the 12th century was distributed in many copies and was included in the Gennadian Bible (with the addition of chs 10-16 in a translation from the Vulgate). On the other hand, the Slavonic text of the Pentateuch (originating in Bulgaria in the 10th century) was divided in Russian manuscripts into *52 parashioth*, and the majority of manuscripts of the Pentateuch had a great number of glosses from the MT. These facts show that Jews in East-Slavic countries used the Slavonic version of Holy Scripture for religious purposes.

It may be claimed that before printing became the main way of reproducing biblical texts, that is during the manuscript period, there was no tendency to elaborate a confessional text; the trans-confessional text of the Bible was accepted as a norm. Among medieval Slavonic translations of the Bible there are many made from the original Greek; these constitute the main bulk of the Bible tradition. In addition, there are a number of Bible texts translated from Hebrew and Latin, and also from Czech and Polish sources. Translations from the non-Greek texts show no traces of heretical doctrine. The strictly confessional attitude to Holy Scripture became a characteristic feature of the modern period, when printing made it possible to have absolutely identical copies of the text.

Moreover, between the three functional types of biblical text, there was a distinct sacral and social hierarchy, the dominant position being occupied by the liturgical text. This fact opened the way to religious tolerance of the continuous and explanatory types.

In the manuscript period, the main tendency was towards mono-functional Bible texts. Each new Bible translation was supposed to serve only one purpose. This tendency explains many peculiarities of the Bible text.

For example, the first explanatory version of Song 1.9 reads "thy neck like a steed in a necklace" (cf KJV: "thy neck with chains of *gold*"). There is no mention of a *steed (horse)* in the Greek Bible; it comes from the commentary of Gregory of Nyssa. In this version of 5.5 there is a reading "the door being locked and I opened to my brother" (cf KJV: "I rose up to open to my beloved"). The mention of the locked door comes from the commentary of Philo of Carpasia, and ultimately from Jn 20.19.

One may regard the biblical text of such exegetical compositions as an emanation of the theological commentary which accompanies it. The commentary

did not just explain the Bible text: to a certain degree the commentary produced it. Every explanatory text is a literary unity: both parts of it, the Bible passages and the commentaries on them, are indissolubly bound together. It is this literary phenomenon that produces the tendency towards mono-functional texts.

In the course of time the Bible text could change its nature, passing from one type to another. Usually the movement was from the explanatory to the continuous type. But there were also other possibilities. For example the explanatory translation of Song was used at first as a catechism. We know from other sources about adaptations of liturgical texts for use as continuous texts and vice versa, and about collations of liturgical texts with continuous and explanatory ones. This led to the homogeneity of the Bible text in its various types. Thus these processes contradicted the tendency towards the mono-functional text that dominated at the time of translation. Translation and transmission followed different tendencies.

As for translation technique, the dominant feature of the Slavonic tradition is literalism. This was called forth not only by cultural and mental factors typical of the Middle Ages (cf Barr 1979), but also by the great similarity in linguistic structures of Greek and Slavonic. The continuous text of Song is the most liberal of the Bible translations from Greek (it is also typical of the literalistic practice of translation to have the most liberal translation in the beginning of the tradition, cf de Lagarde 1863). However, it is more literal than the two translations from the MT; this is natural, since the structural difference between Hebrew and Slavonic is so great (see Alexeev 1987).

The literalistic translation cannot be absolutely reliable because of the polysemy of grammatical structures and lexical meanings. The very tradition of literalistic translations evoked in society a certain dissatisfaction with the existing results and thus originated an abundance of translations from the same source.

Space prevents me from dwelling on this very important question, which may be more readily illustrated by New Testament data. I give only one example from the 12th century explanatory translation. The Greek *nevros*, "young deer" is translated here by the Slavonic *zhila*, "nerve" (2.9, 17, 4.5, 7.3, 8.14) as if the Greek *neuron* had been read by the Slav translator. The principles of late Byzantine orthography make possible the confusion of the two Greek words, so we cannot describe this translation as a mistake. The translator knew the reading of all these places in the Methodian continuous translation of Song where the rendering *alnishch*, "kid" was used. The tendency to literalistic translation led him to neglect a simple and primary sense of the text in favour of something mystical and secondary.

Thus the tradition of literalism in Slavonic and later in Russian Bible translations calls again and again for a more easily understandable translation. The problem of the substitution of Russian for Slavonic is a minor problem of the Russian Church situation today. The major problem is to switch from the tradition of literalistic translation to the new tradition of intelligible, appealing, impact-making, coherent translation (see de Waard and Nida 1986, 78ff).

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*In Russian.