

FILLING SOME GAPS: NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF GEORGIAN BIBLE TRANSLATION¹

KETEVAN GADILIA

kgadiliya@gmail.com

The author is a Research Associate and Translation Project Coordinator with the Institute for Bible Translation, Moscow, Russia.

The history of spiritual literature of any Christian nation started with Bible translation.
— Korneli Kekelidze²

1.1 Introduction

The title of this article came to my mind after I read a number of scholarly works (mainly in English) about Georgian Bible translation. The peculiar jumble of correct and incorrect information, as well as outdated and stereotypical statements about Georgia and Georgian Bible translation compelled me to exert some effort to improve this unsatisfactory situation.

Christianity is one of the greatest factors that influenced the unique character of Georgian culture, the philosophy of its sense of nationhood, and finally the formation of the common Kartvelian³ mentality.

The Georgian Bible translation is closely connected with two highly important events in Georgian history—the creation of the Georgian alphabet and the foundation of the Georgian Church.

For a long time, the prevailing view was that the Georgian alphabet was of Armenian origin. This view was based on a passage in Koriwn's *The Life of Mashtots*, which ascribed the creation of the Georgian alphabet to the Armenian scholar-monk Mesrop Mashtots. This view was refuted by Georgian scholars several decades ago, but is, unfortunately, still mentioned as a theory not only in Armenia but also in Western scholarship. Z. Aleksidze has demonstrated that

1 I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. David Clark, without whose generous help and support this article would never have been published in this journal. The article is an expanded form of an article in Russian that appeared in *The People Understood the Reading: A Collection of Articles in Honour of Dr. Marianne Beerle-Moor* (ed. David J. Clark and Andrei S. Desnitsky; Moscow: Institute for Bible Translation, 2009).

2 Korneli Kekelidze was a famous scholar, philologist, and outstanding researcher of Old Georgian literary works.

3 *Kartveli* is a native name for Georgian. The Kartvelians consist of the Georgians, the Megrelians, and the Svans.

the aforementioned evidence preserved in Koriwn's work is a later interpolation.⁴ Furthermore, according to Tamaz Gamkrelidze, the Kartuli Asomtavruli⁵ and Armenian alphabets are based on entirely different structural principles which preclude any participation on the part of Mashtots in the creation of the Asomtavruli script.⁶ R. Pataridze analyzed the Armenian script and came to the conclusion that the creator of the alphabet used the letter-signs of three alphabets: South Semitic (Christian Ethiopian), Kartuli Asomtavruli, and Greek.⁷ However, these fundamental works of very serious and solid scholars have not been taken into account appropriately. Their research results have not been translated into any European languages, resulting in their neglect by international scholarship.

The translation and revision of the Bible or individual books of the Old and New Testaments has a history of more than fifteen centuries and is a great tradition in Georgia. Among the early versions of the Bible, the Georgian translations are significant, although they have not yet been adequately assessed. The antiquity and uniqueness of the extant manuscripts as well as the long experience of the Georgian Bible translation school is noteworthy not only for Georgian culture, but also for the study of Bible translation in general.

1.2 How is Georgian Bible translation reflected in scholarly literature?

Western scholars did not have any significant knowledge about Georgian Bible translation for a long time, even up to the beginning of the twentieth century. The following excerpt is a good example of standard knowledge about Georgian Bible translation: "A well-supported tradition makes the first translation of the Bible almost contemporaneous with this conversion and refers it to Mesrop [Mashtots] . . . but the fact is not quite certain and the beginnings of a native version may really be as much as two centuries later."⁸

Fortunately, during the last hundred years some progress in this field has been made by Georgian researchers (see below). Important contributions have also come from foreign researchers such as G. Garitte, J. N. Birdsall, J. Molitor, R. Blake, F. C. Conybeare, A. Baumstark, B. Outtier, M. van Esbroeck, and many others; more details can be found in *The Early Versions of the New Testament*.⁹ Nowadays there is at our disposal a significant range of investigations dedicated to various aspects of Georgian Bible translation. Nevertheless I have to agree with the following statement: "If any version is most notable for our ignorance about its origin, it is the Georgian."¹⁰

4 Z. Aleksidze, *The Book of Epistles. Armenian Text with Georgian Translation, Research and Commentary* [in Georgian] (Tbilisi, 1968), 37.

5 "Asomtavruli" means capital letters. Asomtavruli is the earliest type of Georgian alphabet.

6 Gamkrelidze, *Alphabetic Writing and the Old Georgian Script* (New York: Caravan Books, 1990), 195.

7 R. Pataridze, *Georgian Asomtavruli Alphabet* [in Georgian] (Tbilisi: Nakaduli, 1980), 544.

8 Burton Scott Easton, "Versions, Georgian, Gothic, Slavonic," <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/V/versions-georgian-gothic-slavonic.html>.

9 Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 182–214.

10 <http://www.skypoint.com/members/waltzmn/Versions.html>.

At the present time in Georgia, research on the Georgian Bible is being carried out in various fields corresponding to its complicated nature. It includes the description, study, and analysis of the ancient manuscripts, the identification and investigation of the history of their creation and the problems of their dating, grammatical features, orthography and calligraphy, and, finally, the preparation of critical and academic publications. Regretfully, however, the results of a large number of studies that are released in Georgia have not been fully taken into account in foreign scholarly works. The reason for that is the lack of any translation into European languages.

Even the authors of current publications outside Georgia still refer to obsolete stereotyped data or to ideas that have long since been discredited. For instance, an excerpt from a textbook for students of one of the important universities¹¹ in Moscow states: “There is a Georgian translation, so called *georgiiskiy*, which is done not from Greek, but from Armenian.”¹² First, the author uses the outdated term “*georgiiskiy*.” Second, the scholarly tradition of the Armenian basis of the Georgian translation became obsolete a long time ago. Third, and the main inaccuracy, “*georgiiskiy*” refers to the work by St. Giorgi Mtatsmindeli (Athonite), who in fact revised and translated the New Testament and Psalms against the Greek texts in the monastery of Mount Athos in the first half of the eleventh century. So it is evident that this theory persists from one publication to another without any adequate evaluation. For example, the theory is repeated in such a reputable international edition as *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* (with 4,000 authors from seventy-four countries): “Aus armenischen Vorlagen sind Teile des georgischen AT und NT bereits im 5. Jh. übersetzt”¹³; and that is despite the fact that in general this edition tries to take into account the results of current research, uses modern methods, and demonstrates a deep knowledge of the subject. Such a simplistic summary of the arduous and complicated problems concerning the origin of Bible translation evokes perplexity and regret from twenty-first-century readers.

The recently published *A History of Bible Translation* contains a brief but well-verified story of Georgian Bible translation,¹⁴ although there is an inaccurate account of the nature of *xanmeti* and *haemeti* versions (on the *xanmeti* and *haemeti* types, see section 2.2 below; the grammatical and historical meaning of the Old Georgian *xan* and *hae* letters is well-described also by Metzger¹⁵). The New Testament published in 1963 and the Bible published in 1989 are introduced as “the

11 Pravoslavniy Svyato Tikhonovskiy bogoslovskiy universitet (St. Tikhon Orthodox Theological University).

12 A. Emelianov, *Introduction to the New Testament* [in Russian] (Moscow, 1999), 34.

13 “Parts of the Georgian OT and NT were translated already in the 5th century from an Armenian base text” (ed. Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski, and Eberhard Jüngel, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* [8 vols.; 4th ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998–2007], 1496).

14 Erroll Rhodes, “Secondary Versions: Arabic to Old Slavonic,” in *A History of Bible Translation* (ed. Philip A. Noss; Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007), 99–101.

15 Metzger, *The Early Versions*, 200.

most recent revision of the Bible published by the Georgian Orthodox Church.”¹⁶ In fact, the New Testament of 1963 is a reprint of the Old Georgian Canonical text by St. Giorgi Mtatsmindeli; and the Bible of 1989 is a new translation into modern Georgian. There is no information about the publications prepared and published by the Institute for Bible Translation at all.

The purpose of this article is to present briefly the state of current knowledge about Bible translation into Georgian in order to give readers a chance to be engaged in this many-sided problem and to draw attention to the achievements of modern Georgian scholars.

2. The base text of the Georgian translation

In fact, there is no definite knowledge of the textual base of the Georgian translation, or its correlation with various foreign sources (Greek, Syriac, and Armenian). Even a brief description of the arguments concerning this problem would take up too much space. The significant theories are as follows:

- a) The Syriac hypothesis (F. C. Conybeare, 1897; A. Vööbus, 1953; J. Molitor, 1967–1969)
- b) The Armenian hypothesis (T. Kluge, 1910; G. Garritte, 1955)
- c) The Greek hypothesis (F. Zorell, 1927; A. Shanidze, 1945)

The concise summary by K. Danelia is very apt: “initially the methodology of the research was not entirely appropriate.”¹⁷ An unsystematic comparison of various manuscripts/recensions of various translations, or even of various versions of the same recension with the various types of Greek, Syriac, or Armenian versions/manuscripts/recensions led the scholars concerned to a preliminary conclusion that was predetermined by their approach. And then the results of specific investigations were generalized to cover the whole Georgian Bible. It is indisputable that Georgian manuscripts contain traces of Greek, Syriac, and Armenian sources. The correctly formulated research objective should be stated in the following way: when and how (directly or indirectly) did these elements penetrate into Georgian translations? The problem is relevant only where the early manuscripts are concerned.

2.1. The first Georgian translation

Who was the first translator of the Bible into Georgian? Was it an unknown hero in Georgian history or a group of devoted translators? When exactly was the Bible translated? It seems that these questions are doomed to remain forever without clear answers. The names of the first translators have not been preserved, and the data about the first translations can be reconstructed only indirectly. It seems that the four Gospels and the Psalms were translated no later than the fifth century. Unfortunately, the most ancient manuscripts, like many other Greek or Hebrew ones, have not survived and are utterly lost. Fortunately, some fragments of their text are preserved in later manuscripts. Indirect evidence is found in the Old

¹⁶ Rhodes, “Secondary Versions,” 101.

¹⁷ K. Danelia, *The Old Georgian Versions of the Prophetic Book of Jeremiah* [in Georgian] (Works of the Department of Old Georgian Language at Tbilisi State University; Tbilisi, 1964), 164.

Georgian literary works dating from the fifth century. Approximately a century after Christianity became the official religion of Georgia, it is mentioned in the biography of Prince Bakari¹⁸ (an enlightened figure at the turn of the fifth century), that in his childhood the young prince carefully read the Holy Scripture. In the hagiography of “The Passion of Saint Shushaniki” (dated 475–484), it is told that Shushaniki knew the Psalms by heart and took the Holy Scripture with her to jail. The authors do not state the language of the Holy Scripture that Bakari and Shushaniki were reading. On the one hand, this may reflect some uncertainty and ambiguity. On the other hand, it may mean that the authors considered it unnecessary to mention facts that were well known; in other words, they took it for granted that both the prince and the queen read the Holy Scriptures in Georgian.

One more solid proof that Bakari and Shushaniki read the Bible in Georgian is a verse from 2 Tim 2.17 cited in the “Passion of Saint Shushaniki,” which contains an extraordinary translation of a Greek word that is not typical either of Syriac or of Armenian translations.

2.2. The dating of Georgian manuscripts

In the nineteenth century in the Genizah of the Jewish Patriarchate in Cairo, numerous manuscripts were discovered. Most of them were palimpsests, and one of them was a Georgian-Hebrew palimpsest. Many of these manuscripts finally reached Cambridge University Library (including two pages of palimpsests), the Bodleian Library in Oxford (including one page of palimpsest), and the British Museum (including three small pieces).

In 1897 one of the palimpsests from the Bodleian was sent to St. Petersburg, where P. Kokovtsev was able to establish the date of the Hebrew part of the palimpsest as eleventh century; accordingly, the Georgian layer (Jer 17.26) must have been created before the tenth century (later the date was identified as seventh century). The palimpsest was published in 1899. In 1922 Ivane Javakhishvili¹⁹ discovered the resemblance between the configuration of the capital letter B in undated manuscripts and in the palimpsest. The earlier form of the letter B was written with the top closed, whereas the later form had the top open. This fragment of the palimpsest became important because of the frequent usage of the prefix *x* (velar fricative), the verb marker of the second person subject and the third person object, and the comparative degree of adjectives. A. Shanidze studied the Old Georgian texts with these formants, so-called *xanmeti* texts, and came to the conclusion that this formant was used before the seventh century, but from the eighth century the formant *x* was replaced by the aspirate *h*, so-called *haemeti* texts. At present, more than twenty fragments of *xanmeti* texts have been found, totaling about 2,000 pages.

Usually, Georgian manuscripts of the Bible are called either by the name of the monastery where they were produced (for example, Oshki Bible, Jruchi

18 Later he became a monk called Petre Iberieli (known to Western historians as Peter the Iberian) and developed into a well-known philosopher and writer.

19 Ivane Javakhishvili was an outstanding historian and paleographer, and the founder in 1918 of Tbilisi State University.

Four Gospels, Gelati²⁰ Bible, Athon recension, etc.), or by the place where the manuscript was discovered or was preserved (Adishi²¹ Four Gospels), or by the name of the translator (Giorgiseuli, which means “belonging to Giorgi”), or finally, by the linguistic aspects of the dating (*xanmeti* and *haemeti* texts).

Here I propose four major historical periods of Georgian Bible translation:

Period I, approximately from the fourth/fifth centuries to the ninth century: *xanmeti* and *haemeti* recensions that are not dated directly or the texts that are represented by fragments preserved in literary works.

Period II, from the ninth to the twelfth centuries: Adishi Gospel (897), Jruchi Gospel (936), Parkali Gospel (973), Oshki Bible (978/9), Athonite recensions (tenth to eleventh centuries), Jerusalem recension (eleventh century), Tbeti recension (913/995), Berta recension (tenth century), Opiza recension (913), the Gelati Bible (1108) and many others.

In the first half of the eleventh century St. George the Athonite produced the recension of the New Testament and Psalms that become canonical for the Georgian Orthodox Church until the present day. This period was finalized by the Gelati Bible at the very beginning of the twelfth century.

Periods I and II saw the development of a well-known concept by St. Grigol Xandzeli (ninth century): “Kartli (or Georgia) is the designation of all the country in which the divine service is performed and all prayers are offered in the Georgian language.”

Period III, from the seventeenth to the second half of the twentieth century: A long break from the thirteenth until the seventeenth century was followed by a renaissance at the end of the seventeenth century. During this period of approximately five centuries, no significant recensions appeared. This is the result of dramatic historical events in Georgia. In addition, because of the conservativeness of the Georgian language, the old texts remained understandable for a long time (the old texts are partially understandable even nowadays). At the turn of the eighteenth century, Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani (1725)²² set about editing the Bible on the basis of the Gelati recension. This is the so-called Mtskheta recension, one of the fullest manuscripts of the Georgian Bible.

From 1705 the history of printing the Bible begins: King Archil published the Psalms in Moscow in 1705. In 1709 the Gospel and Psalms were published in the printing house founded by King Vakhtang VI in Tbilisi. Prince Bakari published the whole Bible in Moscow in 1743, the so-called Bakariseuli Bible.

Period IV, from the second half of the twentieth century up to today: This is a new stage of Bible translation in Georgia that was anticipated by investigations

20 Oshki is a tenth-century cathedral church, now in Turkey. Jruchi monastery is in western Georgia (built in the tenth century). Gelati is a monastery and academy that was founded in 1106 by the king of Georgia, David the Builder.

21 Adishi is a village in upper Svaneti, a mountainous part of Georgia where the Adishi Gospel was preserved and is still kept. The Adishi Gospel is the oldest dated extant manuscript created at the Shatberdi Monastery, in the south-western Georgian principedom of Klarjeti (now in north-eastern Turkey).

22 He was a Georgian prince, a monk, a great writer, scholar, and politician.

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and then in the 1940s by a series of critical publications of Old Georgian Bible texts initiated by A. Shanidze in Tbilisi University (see section 3 below). A modern translation of the whole Bible was published in 1989 by the Georgian Orthodox Church (the so-called Patriarchy edition). The Institute for Bible Translation started to produce a Modern Georgian translation in the 1970s. By 2001 it had released more than eleven editions of the New Testament and Psalms under one cover and the project culminated in the publication of the whole Bible in 2002. After a pause of several centuries a new page has been turned in the history of Bible translation in Georgia. The Bible translation group at the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church continues with its work of Bible translation. To date, the group has translated and published Matthew (2001), Mark (2005), Luke (2008), and Genesis (2007).

3. The critical study of Bible translation in Georgia

In the 1940s in Tbilisi State University, the academician Akaki Shanidze initiated the critical study of the Old Georgian manuscripts of the Bible and their subsequent publication. This was a good opportunity for such an enterprise, because during World War II the officials of the USSR showed a greater tolerance towards the Church. Since that time a brilliant group of scholars established remarkable traditions of research. They are: A. Shanidze, K. Kekelidze, I. Imnashvili, P. Ingoroqva, M. Shanidze, T. Tskitishvili, K. Danelia, I. Abuladze, E. Dochanashvili, Z. Sarjveladze, L. Kajaia, and many others (in addition to works cited in the footnotes, a small selection of their works is in the list of references below). This critical study of the Old Georgian Bible translations enabled the Catholicos' Council of the Georgian Orthodox Church to prepare and publish in 1963 (for the first time since the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921) a limited number of copies of the canonical text of the New Testament in Tbilisi. In general, the Georgian scholarly tradition suffers from a serious shortcoming, namely, that most of the investigations, even highly significant ones, are written and published only in the Georgian language. Despite the great contribution of the above-mentioned scholars to the field of Bible translation studies, the greater part of their work is still accessible only in the Georgian language, and thus remains unknown internationally, because only a very small number of foreign scholars can read Georgian.

Approximately twenty years ago, Zurab Sarjveladze established a group of scholars with the purpose of undertaking a critical study of the Georgian New Testament leading to its further publication. Initially the members of the group were Dr. Gulnara (Dodo) Ninua, Dr. Elguja Giunashvili, as well as Dr. Manana Machkhaneli, Dr. Darejan Tvaltadze, and Sofia Sarjveladze (researchers of the "Orioni" laboratory in the Department of Old Georgian Language at Tbilisi State University). After intensive hard work, the group prepared the text of the four Gospels—the result of the critical study of forty manuscripts of the pre-Athonite

period,²³ as well as of the manuscripts of St. Giorgi Mtatsmindeli. In 2003 the group published the Adishi Four Gospels together with scholarly comments and a dictionary. It is sad indeed that neither Zurab Sarjveladze nor Dodo Ninua could see this significant publication, as they had passed away by that time. Despite this sad blow, the group is continuing its work and is in the process of academic publication of the New Testament. On the basis of the comparison of the text of the Adishi Gospels with the recensions of the Greek original and the Armenian translations,²⁴ the scholars came to the following conclusion:

The text of the Adishi Gospels is translated from the Greek original, and some Armenianisms used occasionally are only of a lexical character and are not recensional; hence this is a secondary phenomenon and can be seen only in the layer which was corrected by the editor of the copy according to the Armenian text of the Four Gospels.²⁵

4. Conclusion

The study of Georgian Bible translation is ongoing. Scholarly works in European languages have also appeared, including the following. In 1997 I. Kapanadze published “Lexical Borrowings in Georgian and Russian Translations from the Books of the Bible in Greek (Kerpi-Kumir-idol-istukan-podobie).” In 2003 and 2004 there appeared in English and in Georgian a paper entitled “Khanmeti Fragments of the Old Testament and the Problems of the Descent of the Georgian Bible,” by Ana Kharanauli, and “Die Geschichte der Übersetzung der Georgischen Bibel (kurzer Überblick),” by the same author. At the present time, Georgian scholars are paying attention to detailed investigation of the correlation of Georgian Bible translation with Aramaic and Syriac versions. One of the elements of this project is the translation of significant works, such as those of Jonas C. Greenfield (*A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, 7th expanded ed., 2006; “Aramaic in the Achaemenian Empire,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, 1985, 2:698–713). These were translated into Georgian by Helen Giunashvili and provided with a preface and comments in 2008.

The early manuscripts still hold a number of secrets waiting to be discovered. The uniqueness of Georgian Bible translation makes it a significant part of world Bible translation history. Mutual interest and intensive communication among scholars will increase our general knowledge of Bible translation history.

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23 The conventional classification of the manuscripts by the period of activity of St. Giorgi Mtatsmindeli (at the turn of the twelfth century).

24 Adishi was considered the most armenianized translation.

25 Zurab Sarjveladze, ed. *Adishi Four Gospels* [in Georgian] (Tbilisi: Sakartvelos macne, 2003), 142.

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REVIEW

Edwin Gentzler. *Translation and Identity in the Americas: New Directions in Translation Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. Pp. xvii + 214. \$170.00 (cloth), \$44.95 (pbk). ISBN: 9780415774512.

Translation and Identity in the Americas is an exciting book. With an abundance of examples both vivid and delightful, Edwin Gentzler (University of Massachusetts Amherst) demonstrates the richness and complexity of cultural negotiations in and through the context of translation, arguing primarily that translation is not something which happens between cultures, but rather something that fundamentally constitutes those cultures (5). Hence, for the groups at the center of his analyses, "translation thus was not derivative in any sense, but primary" (20). Drawing on a broad definition of translation put forward by Sherry Simon, Gentzler explains that he will attend not only to texts designated as translations but also to "translation phenomena" that manifest either inadvertently or under a different name. In many respects, this orientation is what makes the book so complex and provocative. This, coupled with its reliance on poststructuralist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, positions the book to make a very strong contribution to the field.

The five chapters that form the heart of the book represent a collection of critical explorations into instances where the construction and contestation of cultural identities are conditioned by and revealed in translational acts. Beginning with "Multiculturalism in the United States," Gentzler demonstrates the latent traces of various ethnic groups embedded within the landscape of the U.S. national identity, albeit either buried beneath layers of mistranslation or neglected altogether. Repeatedly, Gentzler demonstrates that what is *not* translated is more indicative of national identity than the translated texts of stories to which we traditionally lay claim (e.g., 15, 21–22).