

THE 1968 ESTONIAN BIBLE<sup>1</sup>

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The need for a new version of the Holy Scriptures in Estonian had become increasingly urgent since the beginning of our century. For various reasons, however, the first translation (made in 1739) remained the only one available until 1969. The last edition of the 1739 version (BFBS 1945) differed only slightly from the first, as a result of some orthographical revisions, while both spoken and literary Estonian had greatly evolved since the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> So the rendering of Rom. 8:20 in the last edition: "Because the animal has been cast under the empty knee" (RSV: "for the creation was subjected to futility") sounded as mysterious for a native Estonian as the English one above does. A new edition of the Bible was really urgent.

In 1912 a limited edition of the New Testament with the Psalms was printed as a specimen of a new translation that included the whole Old Testament. This version—of remarkable quality—has never been printed.

The next attempt was made in Estonia, where in 1935 a selection of biblical texts for school use was edited by Dean Harald Põld (Lutheran). Three years later this selection was followed by a New Testament with Psalms—again as a first step toward a complete edition of the whole Bible, as in 1912. But once again, this complete edition never came out. Moreover, the most competent Estonian reviewer<sup>3</sup> refused to consider this attempt a new translation, calling it "a negligent revision" of the old version. He calculated—after having examined some 6% of the Old Testament text—about 6,000-7,000 errors in the planned Old Testament edition. Besides this, he pronounced a hard judgement against its style: "If anyone wrote such a style in school, his life would be made very difficult." As for the style, one must consider the native setting of the language. Since the 19th century, the Estonians had been creating many new words and expressions to enrich the language,<sup>4</sup> and the new version had the declared aim of helping this renewal by making use of many neologisms not intelligible to the common reader. The style met with sharp criticism from many other reviewers, too. Nevertheless, this version has been published and sold until now without emendation.<sup>5</sup>

For the 200th anniversary of the first Estonian Bible, a revised edition appeared in 1940. It was a luxurious, illustrated edition of which only rare copies exist outside Estonia.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Piibel (The Bible), London, BFBS 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Kurman, George, *The Development of Written Estonian*, Indiana University, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Masing, Hugo, *Uue piiblitõlke puudusi* [Some shortcomings of the new Bible translation] in: *Eesti Kirjandus* 29 (1935), p. 500-507.

<sup>4</sup> Tauli, Valter, *Johannes Aavik's Language Reform 1912-1962*, in: *Estonian Poetry and Language*, Stockholm, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> *Uus Testament ja Psalmid*, Stockholm, BFBS 1947.

<sup>6</sup> *Suur Piibel*, Tartu 1938-1940.

At the same time, the Roman Catholics started a new translation of the New Testament, the first annotated one in Estonian. Only the first two gospels<sup>7</sup> could be printed before the Soviet occupation of 1940 interrupted the project.

To meet the urgent need, Lutherans outside Estonia, encouraged by the BFBS, decided in 1955 to start the great work. A committee of six members was set up.<sup>8</sup> One of them died in 1962, another was not able to collaborate; so the main work was carried out by four persons. Orthodox and Catholics were not invited to collaborate, nor was there a poet or a writer on the working committee. Financial conditions imposed strict limits to the project: only one person could be employed full-time. All other members had to contribute while continuing<sup>9</sup> their other professional duties.

The committee started without illusions: the only realizable goal was a make-shift one. Understandably interested in reducing to a minimum its excessively burdensome task, the committee decided to take the partial translation of 1938 as the basis of its work—an unhappy decision, because both the 1912 version and the 1940 revision are much better than this unpopular edition. The style of the 1938 text, however, was to be revised to what may be called a “moderately progressive” modern Estonian.

The greatest task—to translate all Hebrew books, except the Psalms—was carried out in eight years by the only full-time member of the committee. A selection of 75 chapters was printed in 1963 for criticism.<sup>9</sup> No samples were published of the revised Psalms and New Testament. In 1968, thirteen years after the beginning of the project, the whole Bible was printed.

Before evaluating the results, one may raise an agonizing question: why must a translation committee work in such hard conditions? But it is clear that, independently of the answer to this question, the quality of the version would be prejudiced by the material conditions under which the work was carried out.

The second Estonian Bible is, as expected, an uneven one, both in the quality of the translation and in style. This is an almost inevitable consequence of the combination of two different versions. Moreover, the part dating from 1938 (New Testament and Psalms) has been only slightly revised, mainly in the style. Some manifest errors clearly indicated by reviewers thirty years ago (e.g. Matt. 12:16, Acts 23:7 and 16:22) have not been corrected. The Psalms have not been sufficiently aligned with the newly translated Hebrew books (e.g. Ps. 18:8 and 2 Sam. 22:8 are translated in two different ways and wrongly divided in both places; erroneous verse divisions can be found in several other places). Compared with the RSV, pages with 10-15 different renderings per page are not rare (e.g. Gen. 1 and 3, Ex. 32, Num. 16, Deut. 32, Judg. 20, 1 Sam. 14, 1 Kings 13, 1 Chron. 28), but neither the aim of the

<sup>7</sup> Püha Matteuse evangeelium, Tallinn 1940[?]; Püha Markuse evangeelium, Tallinn 1940[?]. (The title pages of the only copy available are lost.)

<sup>8</sup> Three clerics and three laymen; five were Lutherans, the sixth a Baptist. One member translated the Old Testament, another one was appointed as reviser for the New Testament. The other members (all academically qualified) had the task of reviewing the texts drafted by the first two.

<sup>9</sup> Valitud peatükke Vanast Testamendist. Uppsala 1963.

translators nor their working conditions enable us to compare their version with that of the RSV translating team.

The Psalms seem to be the weakest part of this edition. A Hebrew word is often translated in different ways in the most unexpected cases (e.g. אָדִיר in the first and the last verse of Ps. 8; צַר in Ps. 60:14 and 108:14); expressions which can hardly be called anything but antipoetical occur (12:6, 17:5, 143:7, 144:14). There are even some unjustified additions to the text ("against each other" in Ps. 18:18; in Ps. 29 the sevenfold "voice of YHWH" is translated three times by "the voice of rumbling of Jehovah").

Several neologisms adopted by the 1938 translation have been replaced by more common terms, but others still remain and sometimes even new ones have been inserted (Ps. 18:45, 6:3-4). The New Testament does not always follow the UBS text (e.g. Acts 3:6, 4:24-25, 15:23, 16:13, 18:3-7, 19:37).

The newly translated books, though better in rendering the sense of the original text, are not free from mistakes in both precision and style. The doubtful texts are not marked as such, and the solution adopted differs in many cases from the one preferred by the RSV, even in places where the RSV does not indicate another possibility (e.g. Judg. 5:2a). Owing to the fact that this edition will serve many Estonian émigrés who will often be obliged to compare it with other translations, one may ask if the Committee would not have done better to follow in these cases some internationally recognized version, such as the RSV or the Zürcher Bibel.

For the next edition a revision of the Psalms appears to be the most urgent task. An entirely new version—if possible by the translator of the other Hebrew books—would naturally be preferable. Secondly, the collaboration of poets and writers seems necessary to improve the style, which combines some elements of the old version with modern Estonian and even some uncommon neologisms. Since the Estonian-speaking Orthodox and Catholics are too few to make a translation of their own, it would be a highly appreciated act of Christian charity for the next edition to include, as some earlier Lutheran editions did, the canonical books of the Orthodox and Catholics. A short preface of the same sort as we find in the RSV would be very much appreciated too, because there is no introduction to the Bible in Estonian.

In conclusion, one must repeat the words of the review of thirty years ago already cited:<sup>10</sup> "Even with this edition, we do not yet have a translation such as could be justifiably demanded by Estonians, even in the present situation." We must be very grateful to the Committee which worked in very hard conditions for thirteen years, but we must also insist on a thorough revision of the 1968 edition, which may serve as the basis for future, gradually improved editions.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 3.