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God Ended His Work - And He Died

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“GOD ENDED HIS WORK—AND HE DIED”

That’s the way Genesis 2:2 reads in the present Russian Bible. But God’s alive and well in the wondrous New Testament translation by the Adventist Bible team in Zaokski. The question is, Can they resurrect Him in the Synodal Old Testament?

Sir Frederic Kenyon, an authority on biblical manuscripts, used to say that “the Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear and hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries.”¹ It is good to have such assurance regarding the text of the Bible in the original languages, but what about the translations of this Book in modern languages?

This question arose in my mind some 50 years ago when, as a young

Christian, I started to compare the Bible in Russian (at that time the only available, so-called “Synodal” translation) with other translations in German, which I could read. Often the verdict was not in favor of the Russian Bible. It was then that I began to dream about translating the Scripture into contemporary Russian.

I was not, of course, the only one who recognized the deficiencies of

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the Synodal translation. In a 1917 address to Russian Orthodox Church officials, Prof. I. E. Yevseyev, chairman of the Russian Bible Commission, admitted that “the Synodal translation of the Bible completed in 1875. . . urgently requires revision or still better, complete replacement. . . . It does not follow consistently the original text. . . . In some places,” said Yevseyev, “it follows the Hebrew text, in others, the Greek text of LXX or the Latin text—in a word, everything had been done to deprive this translation of wholeness and homogeneity.

“A much more serious problem,” Yevseyev pointed out, “is its literary backwardness. The language. . . is

heavy and outdated, its Slavonic artificial, and its literary rendering a century out of date. . . and brightened neither by inspiration nor artistic richness.”

Prof. Yevseyev urged a new translation be made that would not be “backward and mechanical, but. . . artistic and creative. This matter,” he said, “is of national importance and demands the most careful and constant attention of the Church.”²

It would not be fair to say that the Synodal translation was entirely bad. Russian Christians owe much to those noble men who undertook the task of translation despite great opposition from influential circles within the state church itself. For



The author with the Synodal version of the Bible.

many decades their translation helped millions of people to maintain their faith in God despite severe persecution. We have only to regret that nearly a century was to elapse before the deficiencies enumerated by Professor Yevseyev were to be addressed.

Did God Really Die?

Since 1875 the Russian language has gone through so many changes that modern readers find some words in the Bible incomprehensible. Other words have acquired new meaning. For example, the old Russian word for "offend," as in "Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (in Matthew 11:6 [KJV] and other passages). Today's Russian understands that verse to say: "Blessed is. . . whosoever is not attracted to me." The Russian word *potchil* ("rested") in the phrase "God ended his work. . . and he rested" (Gen. 2:2) now is read to mean "God ended his work. . . and he died." The "God is dead" theologians of a few decades past might find confirmation in this reading, but Russians seeking understanding find only confusion.

Quite often the theology of the translators is reflected in the Bible, as one can see in the Synodal translation of 1 Peter 3:21: ". . . even baptism doth also now save us . . . not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the promise [instead of "the answer" or "appeal" as in some English translations] of a good con-

science toward God." The Russian reader gets the impression that one can be saved through the resurrection of Christ if he or she at the time of baptism pledges faithfulness to God (an understanding that has brought a number of converts into the baptismal tank but not through the church doors). The translators here (in an admittedly difficult passage), as in many others, convey a false idea regarding human nature and the way of salvation.

Some distortions cast aspersions on God and His character. For instance: Where the original text and even the Slavonic translation of the 10th century say that sometimes God has to strike His children because He loves them, the Synodal translation calls God a "severe chastiser" (Eze. 7:9). It is no wonder that righteous Enoch's relationship with this kind of God is represented in the Synodal translation as "Enoch walked *under* God" instead of "Enoch walked *with* God" as the original text reads (*italics added*).

The same rendering occurs in Micah 6:8, where God's requirement that His child "walk humbly" with Him is rendered "to walk humbly under your God." Thus the Synodal translation conveys quite a different concept of God and His relation with His children than the Hebrew text. We see a similar distortion of God and His character in John 14:16, where Jesus is said to "entreat



The translation team: front row, left to right, Alexander Vladimirovich Bolotnikov, Valery Valentinovich, Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov. Back row, left to right, Evgeny Jurjevich Vechkanov, Aleksander Ivanovich Paraschuk, Ivan Viktorovich Lobanov, Marina Viktorovna Borjabinc.

the Father” rather than simply to “pray to the Father” or “speak to the Father,” as the Greek renders it. The Synodal translation fails to convey the truth that Christ addressed the Father as the equal One.

Literal Troubles

The Synodal translators generally attempted a literal rendering, which sometimes got them into trouble. One example is the passages where Ezekiel prophesied that Israel’s “heart of stone” would be replaced by a more malleable “heart of flesh” willing to live by God’s laws (Eze. 11:19, 20; 36:26, 27). Instead of translating the Hebrew phrase *leb basar* as “heart of flesh,” they used

the Russian, *plotyanoye serdtse* (“fleshly heart”). Even worse, the Russian translators repeated the same phrase in Romans 7:14, where Paul uses the word *fleshly* (in the Greek) as synonymous with *sinful*. Thus the Synodal translation makes it appear that God replaces our “heart of flesh” with a sinful heart! Such unfortunate theological renderings, together with the heavy and outdated language of the translation, make reading the Bible hard work and lower the readers’ interest.

During the past decade the Russian Bible Society along with some foreign organizations have provided Russians with Bibles—the old translation, of course. Today, 30 percent

“God grants you success in your work because He wants to give a chance to everyone to discover the life-changing truths of the Bible for themselves and to make His Gospel easily understandable even by those with little education, the unfortunate, and the homeless.”

of Russian citizens say that they have Bibles, but only half of them say they've tried to read it; and most of those who've tried confess that they don't understand much of what they're reading.

Hard Reality

In 1993, with the founding of the Bible Translation Institute in Zaokski, my youthful dream of translating Scripture into contemporary Russian was itself translated into reality. But the reality of more than 70 years of militant atheism hindered progress. It was hard to find specialists in the biblical text or any scholarly help from the churches of Russia. For all those years attempts to study religious traditions and their primary sources were suppressed. Churches were deprived of any opportunity to educate ministers or nurture scholars in theology and biblical languages. Certainly it is impossible in a few short years to undo the damage an atheistic government caused in this area of knowledge.

Still, the Bible is God's book. He is the one who commanded His disci-

ples to go to all nations and teach them “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20, NKJV). The Bible translation project, then, is significant if the gospel is to be taken throughout Russia. And God has a way of supplying His “troops.” A brilliant young Jew in the Ukraine, Alexander Bolotnikov, who was preparing to become a physicist, instead became a Seventh-day Adventist. Rather than attending Moscow University, he attended Andrews University, and has been a significant help in translating Hebrew into third-millennium Russian. And God prepared a seminary faculty in Zaokski, where the translation project is centered, and moved *It Is Written* to finance preparation of the New Testament and the Psalms.

Right from the beginning, we determined to achieve clarity and ease of reading as well as accuracy of translation. We have sought to prepare a version suitable for public and ecclesiastical reading and liturgical usage as well as for personal studies, preaching, teaching, and memorization. In order to achieve these goals,

we are consulting foreign and local scholars and cooperating with people of different religious backgrounds, including representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Anticipation

While working on the New Testament, we were able to publish the Book of Romans. We praised God when we received very positive responses from readers. So it was also with I Corinthians, which was published by the St. Andrew's Biblical Theological College's rather prestigious scholarly journal (the college is run by representatives of a progressive wing of the Russian Orthodox Church). I was encouraged when after this publication the vice-

president of the Russian Bible Society, Aleksey Bychkov (the former leader of the Baptist Church in the USSR), told me that he likes our translation. We are pleased that fellow believers are eagerly waiting publication of the whole book. You can see this from the following letter sent to us from St. Petersburg:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters, the translators of Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

"I have just put down the booklet with your new translation of this ancient letter. Words cannot express how grateful I am to God for this clear light. We have been waiting for it for so long. It is without a doubt one of God's modern miracles! God grants you success in your work



Alexander Bolotnikov: a would-be physicist turned theologian.

because He wants to give a chance to everyone to discover the life-changing truths of the Bible for themselves and to make His Gospel easily understandable even by those with little education, the unfortunate, and the homeless.

"I hope I will not offend you in any way by my confession that, having tasted the joy of reading the Bible in your new clear and accurate translation, my interest for reading the old version is subsiding and I am anticipating your new translation of the other portions of God's Word. May the Lord grant you strength to complete this work of translating all the Scriptures as soon as possible and to distribute them as widely as you can. Through your work God has shined His light so clearly and has brought the personality of Paul, his time and his message much closer to us. Ordinary hardworking people, who, I think, constitute a majority in the world, deserve to have such a lucid translation of the Bible. Even my mother and my father, who do not yet attend church, enjoy reading this little booklet with your new translation. My evaluation of your work is largely intuitive since, though being 35 years of age, I am still quite young in the faith. Counting from the day of my baptism, I am just a three-year-old Christian. May our heavenly Father richly bless each of you and may He continue to guide you and give you strength and

lead you to victory. I am grateful to you from the bottom of my heart.

Respectfully,
Your sister Vera
Central Seventh-day Adventist
Church, St. Petersburg, Russia"

Something Old, Something New

In March we published the *New Testament in Modern Russian Translation*. We are now proofreading the new Book of Psalms. All this work was sponsored by *It is Written*, which, however, is now unable to finance a new translation of the whole Old Testament. We have agreed with them to limit our work to revising the Synodal translation of this part of the Bible. Our joy is tinged with regret that we must publish a book that will have within its covers not only the compelling words of the New Testament and Psalms in contemporary Russian, but also something of the old version. Perhaps yet God will show us that His vision exceeds ours, and that He has in mind all the inspired text. It is this that we continue to pray and hope for. □

REFERENCES

¹ *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (Harpers, 1941), p. 23; quoted in *General Conference Committee on Problems in Bible Translation*, (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publ. Assn., 1954).

² Prof. H. Chistovich, *The History of Bible Translation Into Russian* (Moscow: Russian Bible Society, 1997), p. 5.