

THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO THE SLAVIC  
LANGUAGES: BIBLICAL CITATIONS IN THE  
*LIVES OF CYRIL AND METHIDIUS* AND  
THE FIRST SLAVIC BIBLE TRANSLATION

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Who first translated the Holy Scriptures of Christianity into Slavonic? When and where was this done? What was the fate of that first translation? These questions are far easier to ask than they are to answer. All the textbooks, and virtually all the scholars, agree that the first Bible translations were done by Constantine-Cyril (d. 869) and Methodius (d. 885). Most suggest that the translations were done probably no earlier than 855 and obviously no later than 885. Some insist they were done in Constantinople before the brothers left on their mission, while others insist with equal fervor that they were done “in the field”, during the brothers' stay in Great Moravia, wherever that may have been. Sooner or later every scholar cites as proof of these answers the two great medieval monuments which describe Constantine and Methodius' lives and deeds, the *Vita Constantini* (henceforth VC) and the *Vita Methodii* (VM). The former is extant in over seventy manuscripts, the oldest of which dates only to the second half of the fifteenth century, however. Traditionally, and probably also correctly, the author of this hagiography is considered to be Methodius, who may have written it immediately upon Constantine-Cyril's death in Rome. The latter text is extant in far fewer (16) manuscripts, however the oldest of them is part of the *Uspenskij sbornik*, which is usually dated as twelfth century. The author of the VM is unknown, but tradition again ascribes it to one of Methodius' successors, and internal evidence suggests it was written before the end of the ninth century.

So much has been known and accepted as accurate since the nineteenth century, when Slavic studies, including Cyrillo-Methodian studies, began; little has changed since then. Can we, should we, who stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century, be satisfied with these answers? Of course, yes, we should be satisfied if these answers are in fact correct. On the other hand, perhaps little has changed in the study of these fundamental questions because the old approaches to them have been exhausted or discredited. Perhaps it is time to turn once again *ad fontes*, to

the sources, and pose the questions anew. That is what I propose to do in this paper.

What exactly did the brothers translate, at least as far as the Bible is concerned? The two lives seem quite specific and unambiguous about it:

Въскореже се емоу богъ яви... и абие [тѣгда, Н. С. ] сложи писмена, и начя беседу писати еуаггельскоую, еже искони бе слово, и слово бе оу [от, Н. С. ] бога, и богъ бе слово, и прочяя (VC 14).

Да тоу яви бѣ философоу словеньскы книги, и абие оустроивь писмена и беседу съставиль... (VM 5).

The two brothers translated the daily prayer offices and the Saturday vigil-Sunday liturgy, and Cyril composed a homily or discourse based on the first verse of the Gospel according to John, which, according to the *Byzantine lectionary* (i. e., the listing of readings for each liturgical celebration of the year), is the Easter reading, and the very first passage of the evangelistarium (Gospel readings arranged according to their use during the liturgical year). But the VC does not record specifically that either Cyril or Methodius translated biblical texts *per sū* (other than John 1: 1, which is quoted). What Pope Hadrian II received from them when the brothers arrived in Rome in 868 is recorded as *книги словеньскыя*, which may have been the liturgical and office translations they had done, since the liturgy and the offices were then immediately celebrated and sung in Slavonic.

Admittedly both the VC and the VM are full of biblical quotes in support of Cyril and Methodius' activities among the Slavs. Lehr-Splawiński counted at least 82 in the VC: 57 from the Old Testament, and 25 from the New, of which 16 are specifically from the Gospels. In the VM there are 29: 13 Old Testament and 16 New Testament, of which 4 are from the Gospels (a fifth which he cites is probably not). Were these citations drawn from Cyril and Methodius' translation of Holy Scripture? My analysis of the Gospel citations suggests that they were not (cf. Kyas 1963, but Bláhová 1982). In comparing the oldest versions of the VC and the VM (plus variants) with the oldest Slavonic Gospel manuscripts (*Zographensis*, *Marianus*, *Savvina kniga*, the *Ostromir Gospel*, and *Assemanus*), only three of the VC citations correspond closely: the well-known Christmas prophecy Matthew 1: 23 ("Behold, a

virgin shall be with child ...”), the opening of John's Gospel (“In the beginning ...”), and the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel (“All power is given unto me ... Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations ...”). All the other citations exhibit some significant difference: either they are a loose paraphrase (Luke 6: 27-29, Luke 11: 9-10, Matthew 5: 45), a conflation (John 10: 27-28 with John 10: 3), a misquote (John 15: 13?, Luke 11: 52), or simply an alternative Slavonic rendering not paralleled in any other ancient Slavonic source. For the most part this last group of VC Gospel citations seems farther from the Greek than the other Slavonic translations (with one exception: Matthew 5:32, where for “divorced woman” VC 15 has *otpuštenojo ot moža* for Greek *apolelymenen*; the others have *podpěgo*). Of the four Gospel citations in the VM, three are extremely short, wellknown, and exact, while the fourth (Matthew 7: 15-16) is a loose paraphrase, and the fifth, if it is from Luke 23: 46, is a double misquote (it is only a single misquote if it is from Psalm 31/30: 5). Is it conceivable that the authors of the VC and the VM cited the Gospels from memory or from some written translation that is not fully consistent with the oldest extant Slavonic Gospel translations? Work on the citations from the Apostolus and the Old Testament suggests they are equally distant from later Slavonic translations.

Methodius' life on the other hand does mention specifically that Pope Nicholas “blessed the brothers' teaching and put the Slavonic gospel [*словеньское еванглие*, Н. С. ] on the altar at St. Peter's” (VM 6). Unfortunately Pope Nicholas had died before the brothers reached Rome (VC 16 records correctly that it was Pope Hadrian who received them and that he accepted simply “Slavonic books”), thus undermining somewhat the credibility of this passage. Later (VM 8) Pope Hadrian is quoted as commanding that at any Mass celebrated for Slavs „първее чьтоуть апль и еванглие римьскы таче словеньскы”, which would seem to imply reading of texts in two languages. However, immediately preceding this the Pope notes that he had consecrated and sent Methodius to the Slavs to “explain Scriptures” in their language („сказая книги в языкъ вашъ”): that might imply oral interpretation, not written translation, of the Scriptures into Slavonic. One must take into account, however, that at the end of that chapter the Pope threatens to excommunicate anyone who reviles „книгы языка вашего”.

Finally, however, the VM does give an explicit description of the translation of biblical texts by the two brothers, in Chapter 15: using two priests who were „скорописця” and working over a period of six months, “from March to the 26th of October [884?, H. C. ]”, Methodius:

... преложи въбързе вься книги вься испльнь разве макавеи от гръчска языка въ словюньскъ.

Furthermore it notes:

... пьсалтырь бо бе тькъмо и еванглие съ апльмь и избьраными слоужбами црквньными съ философьмь преложилъ вьпървее. Тгдаже и номоканонъ рекыше законуу правило, и отчьскыя книги преложи.

This passage has been commented on repeatedly, for it has many problems. In the first place March to October is not six but eight months, and the phrase “two priests скорописця” is not in the dual but plural. But this problem was solved (Mathiesen 1967) by positing that the VM was originally written in glagolitic, and that when it was transcribed into cyrillic, glagolitic “v” (numerical value 3) was simply transposed into cyrillic “v” (numerical value 2), and glagolitic “dz” (numerical value 8) into cyrillic “dz” (numerical value 6). One should note, parenthetically, that correcting those errors effectively doubles (from 2 x 6 into 3 x 8) the number of monkmonths Methodius took to complete his translation, so that the work was done perhaps in less haste than originally thought.

What is of particular interest here is not only the text's stress on speed, but on completeness: all the biblical books, each one in its entirety, except Maccabees, the four books of which bring to a close the Slavonic Old Testament. As far as I can tell, all scholars have always taken this passage to mean that Methodius finished translating everything in the Christian Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, which he and his brother had not translated before. And this assumption would seem to accord with the way Scripture is used in the worship of the Orthodox Church, which reads only a portion of the canon of Holy Scripture in its yearly cycle of readings (Metzger 1963: 81): not even all the gospels are read (90. 6% of John, for example, but only 27% of Mark), and little of

the Old Testament (except for the Psalter). First Cyril and Methodius together did what was absolutely necessary to have a complete cycle of readings for the Christian year, and then Methodius did the rest. This, at least, is the traditional reading of VM 15.

This passage is problematical, however, for more than its numbers. Its odd insistence on translating everything completely, its qualifier that Methodius did all the books except Maccabees, its mention that he translated “from Greek into Slavonic”, and finally even the pluperfect afterthought, that Cyril and Methodius had translated some biblical books before this point, require that we pay closer attention to the claims being made here. Let us also keep in mind that the complete translation of the Bible that St. Methodius did in 884 has never been found: most scholars have assumed it was lost during the brutal expulsion of Methodius' disciples from Moravia immediately after his death.

Why stress that Methodius translated “from the Greek into Slavonic”? It seems unlikely that either Cyril or Methodius would have considered translating the New Testament from anything other than its original language (Greek), which was after all their native language as well. To date, no study has shown convincingly that the earliest extant scriptures in Church Slavonic were translated from anything other than a Greek base. But of course the possibility always existed of translating Old Testament books either from the Greek of the Septuagint or from the original Hebrew (and Cyril at least knew Hebrew). St. Jerome used the Hebrew scriptures in producing the Vulgate, so there was a holy precedent for using them. To stress that the translation was from the Greek suggests to me that Methodius – whose knowledge of Hebrew in any case is not attested – used the Septuagint, which for the Orthodox church to the present day is the only canonically acceptable version of the Old Testament. Add to that the qualifier about everything but Maccabees, and one wonders if the passage is not really suggesting that Methodius translated not the whole Bible, but the whole Old Testament, and that he did not quite finish the last books of it before he was forced (by health, impending death, whatever) to stop.

There is another possible reading of this passage as well. The stress on Methodius' translating everything from the Greek may indicate that his and his brother's earlier translations were not from Greek biblical manuscripts. After all, they were working in an area

where Latin biblical manuscripts would have been much more readily available than Greek, since Pannonia and Moravia (wherever it was) were in the missionary sphere of the western church, and the local population had already been evangelized by western missionaries, some of whom – the Iro-Scottish monks – were known for their translating activities. Perhaps the brothers had adapted these translations for their initial use. Then Methodius, during his visit to Constantinople in ca. 880, may have collected the necessary Greek manuscripts to retranslate their earlier work (the VM does record that he received gifts from the emperor while he was there – what better gifts for a scholar than books?). Subsequently all these translations – both the Latin-based and the Greek-based – were lost.

Or, one more possibility: the VC is reticent about written translations of biblical texts (at least in my reading of it). Perhaps what Cyril and Methodius had provided were oral translations of the Psalter, the Gospel and the Apostolos. This hypothesis is less remarkable than perhaps it seems at first: it is quite conceivable that both Cyril and Methodius knew the Psalter in Greek by heart (monks typically recite it in its entirety at least once a month and its poetic structure makes memorizing it straightforward). They and their disciples may have quickly committed a Slavonic Psalter to heart in the same way, without writing it down. We already know that the Pope had ordered that at Mass the Gospel and Apostolos be read in Latin first, whereupon a Slavonic oral translation could immediately have been provided. So, yes, Cyril and Methodius had translated the Psalter, Gospel and Apostolos before, but it was only Methodius and his speedwriting priests who had committed them to parchment later on, revised and improved, perhaps, on the basis of Greek manuscripts Methodius had recently obtained.

Whatever it was specifically, Methodius' accomplishment as recorded in VM 15 was monumental, and all the more remarkable if one considers that whole Bibles were an extreme rarity in the medieval world and quite massive in size. Typically they were found only in the libraries of major monasteries or cathedral churches. They were not necessary for the ordinary needs of parishes or parishioners, clergy or lay, and they certainly were not suited for missionary work, especially in the tumultuous conditions to be found in Moravia at the time. The Slavs' neighbors did not have Bibles in their own languages. Most important, however, this

monumental work vanished, and the search for any trace of it in subsequent Slavic Bible texts – be they the oldest Old Church Slavonic codices, Croatian breviaries, or the first extant full Slavonic Bible of 1499 – has not been notably successful (despite numerous claims to the contrary; cf. Kyas, for example).

Consider the following as well: VM 15 claims Methodius translated at one and the same time not only the whole Bible (or at least the whole Old Testament, which was big enough), but also the nomocanon (a compilation of church laws) *and*, quite vaguely, “the fathers’ [i. e., *patristic*, H. C. ] books”. Grivec (1960) disputes this passage, claiming rather that the nomocanon had been translated earlier. And no collection of patristic writings ascribable to Methodius has been identified. In addition, such a collection could have been as huge as his complete Bible. And, once again, the need for such a major translation is as obscure as that of the whole Bible itself: only a major religious or educational center could justify having one.

In the absence of any hard facts, we are faced with a terrible quandary here: which, if any, biblical texts did Cyril and Methodius translate? To answer this question without resorting to hypotheses or inferences (even if they are my own and I love them dearly), I propose we consider again what exactly the VM is trying to tell us (and with this I will conclude).

If we look at the last chapters of the VM, from Chapter 10, when Methodius is returned to Moravia by the pope after his imprisonment in Germany, to Chapter 17, where his holy death is recorded, we see a pattern, based, as Riccardo Picchio taught us many years ago, on a biblical thematic clue, in this case, 2 Timothy 3-4, where St. Paul, approaching death, admonishes his beloved disciple Timothy to keep the faith, makes his last will and testament and appoints his heir. For example, St. Paul makes prophecies, and so does St. Methodius. The author in VM 11 offers to relate “one or two”, but in fact he gives three, the last of which alludes to Paul’s advice to Timothy, especially 4: 3-4: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, ...” (Neither Lehr-Spławiński nor Kantor note this parallel in their translations of VM.)

In VM 12 Methodius is compared in his fight against evil to Moses in his struggle with Dathan and Abiram (Slavonic *Дафан и Афирои* – Numbers 16: 12). In 2 Timothy 3: 8 the reference is to

Moses' contest with Jannes and Jambres (Slavonic *Ианнии и Амъериу* – Exodus 7: 11). Though the opponents are different, the structure and point of each Old Testament reference are the same: seducers will arise to mislead the weak and confound the strong, but they will not prevail.

The final chapters of the *vita* depict Methodius and the Pope (*via* a papal letter – VM 12), Methodius' traveling to meet with the Byzantine emperor and the patriarch (VM 13), and Methodius' traveling to meet with the Holy Roman emperor (VM 16). Between these two travelogues, in VM 14, is a quote from St. Paul (2 Cor 11: 26-27, but also less obviously from 2 Timothy 3: 11), on the hazards an apostle must endure when traveling. These chapters clearly depict an exalted Methodius in contact with the powerful of his day, as well as a Methodius who follows in the footsteps of St. Paul.

Finally, the last chapter, VM 17, cites 2 Timothy 4 outright:

течение же съвърши, вероу съблюде, чая правьднаго венца, и понеже тако оугожь боу, възлюбленъ бысть.

And, as in 2 Timothy 4, Methodius appoints his successor, Gorazd, and then the Slavic apostle dies (1 Cor 9: 22):

вси бывшааго вьсячьско вьсемъ, дабы вься приобрель.

So St. Paul, and so too St. Methodius.

But how does VM 15, the famous passage on Bible translation, fit into this integrated structure? Omitting it altogether would do no violence to the conclusion of the *vita*. In fact, it would improve the flow of the text, for it would make Methodius' meeting with the Holy Roman emperor follow immediately upon the letter from the pope and his meeting with the Byzantine emperor and the patriarch. If it is an insertion, however, it must have been an early one, for no manuscript is without this chapter. Moreover, and most important, this reference to Holy Scripture is fully supported by a passage in 2 Timothy 3, verses 15-17, especially 16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God ...".

Thus a reference to Scripture might be expected here, if the author of the VM is following his biblical model faithfully. A grounding in scripture was to be a guarantee of Paul's successor's orthodoxy. How true this would be of Methodius' successors as



well! Especially if these were scriptures translated explicitly from the Greek, translated explicitly not only by Methodius alone but by both the already sainted Cyril and Methodius together. I will suggest the following alternative reading of the two lives: their internal evidence does not convince me that Cyril made definitive, enduring translations of Holy Scripture, and it leads me to question profoundly what exactly Methodius may have translated, particularly in the tumultuous conditions of Central Europe at the time. Moreover, to return to a point I raised but left hanging earlier, the very high quality of all those biblical translations scholars have ascribed to Cyril and Methodius over the past two hundred years suggests to me that native Slavs, not learned Greeks who knew Slavonic very well, made them or at least first recorded them.

I wonder, therefore, if VM 15, modeled on 2 Timothy, is really suggesting that not Methodius but Methodius' successors composed in writing, perhaps in the peaceful, prosperous scholarly centers of Preslav or Ohrid, under the protection of a sympathetic Slavic emperor, the first full translation of Holy Scripture into Slavonic, based on translations they had heard from their saintly teachers. By crediting Methodius with this translation, VM 15 is really claiming not his and his brother's literal authorship of the first Slavic Bible, but their holy sponsorship. Pseudepigraphy – falsely ascribing a work to a famous writer – was a frequent and honorable phenomenon in the premodern world. If that is the case, then the VC and the VM were written without the benefit of a full Slavonic translation of Holy Scripture at hand, which accounts for the distorted quotations of Holy Scripture in them. This hypothesis also allows us to imagine that Slavs, not Greeks knowing Slavonic well, translated the Bible into Slavonic. And it makes more proximate in time – maybe the early tenth century – and location – Macedonia or Bulgaria – the first Slavic Bible translation and the oldest Slavonic Bible manuscript, the *Codex Zographensis*.

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## РЕЗЮМЕ

Ответ на вопрос, кто впервые перевёл Библию на славянский язык, стал уже шаблонным: святые Кирилл и Мефодий, во второй половине девятого века, в так называемой Великой Мораве, где бы она ни находилась. Ответ так же стар, как и само славяноведение, но правилен ли он? На основании сравнения евангельских цитат в *Житиях Кирилла и Мефодия* с теми же самыми местами в самых древних славянских рукописях евангелий, автор доклада выдвигает следующие гипотезы: Мефодий к концу жизни (ср. гл. XV его *Жития*) перевёл не всю Библию, а только Ветхий завет; или братья вместе переводили не с греческих, а с латинских рукописей Библии, и этот перевод потом пропал после изгнания их учеников из Моравы; или их библейские переводы были только устными, никогда не записанными в окончательной форме. Кроме того автор доклада предполагает, что гл. X» *Жития Мефодия*, подражая известному зачалу из второго послания св. Павла Тимофею (3-4), указывает не на Мефодия как переводчика Библии, а на его славянских учеников, живших в уже более благоприятных условиях в Болгарии царя Симеона.

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