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THE THIRTY-YEAR ACTIVITY OF THE MACEDONIAN BIBLE SOCIETY, WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON MODERN TRANSLATIONS OF THE SCRIPTURE INTO MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE

By Borche Grambozov and Gjoko Gjorgjevski

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Abstract

The Macedonian Bible Society was founded in 1993, but its activities began the following year. The translation and printing of biblical texts have been the primary focus of the society's work, and this paper aims to trace its three-decade-long activity through the lens of translations into the Macedonian language. Biblical translations are an integral part of humanity's cultural history, with many factors influencing translation processes over time. It is important to recognize that translation involves two closely intertwined elements, both aspects deeply connected: language and cultural context. This text provides an overview of the history of the Society, with particular emphasis on the characteristics and significance of translations of the Scriptures into modern Macedonian.

Keywords: Macedonian Bible Society, Bible, translations, Macedonian language

For over a millennium, the writing of testimonies about the Word of God to humanity—and later about the Word of God among people—has continued. Over the centuries, these texts were transmitted and copied by hand on perishable materials, such as papyri and parchment, until the advent of printing, which made sacred texts more widely accessible. Through these methods, the written Word of God—the Holy Scripture, the Bible—became the most translated and widely distributed book in human history, significantly influencing the course of social and cultural development worldwide. The Word of God, a beacon for our steps and a light for our

path (cf. Ps 119:105), has often served as a torch that illuminates the history of humankind, of many peoples in the past—including the Macedonian people—and of contemporary culture. As Saint Ephraim the Syrian says, "The Word of God is a tree of life, yielding blessed fruit on all sides."

1. A Brief History of the Macedonian Bible Society

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20) is the message of the Risen Jesus to His apostles—a message that remains equally binding for later Christians. It imposes the duty to teach and observe everything that God, the Word, has taught and commanded, and it excludes no one from this obligation. This is a responsibility of the Church throughout all ages and, by extension, a responsibility of Bible societies around the world, including the Macedonian Bible Society, which began its activities 30 years ago.

On October 29, 1993, with the assistance of the United Bible Societies (UBS), the founding assembly was held, in which the majority of the registered churches in the country participated. A Board was elected, and His Beatitude Mihail, then Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia, was chosen as the first president of the Board of the Society. The following year, in May, the society began working under the name "Bible Society in the Republic of Macedonia" (which was renamed the "Macedonian Bible Society" in 2019). Prof. Petko Zlateski, M.A., was appointed as the first Secretary General and held this position until his passing in 2020.

Although the Macedonian Bible Society celebrated 30 years of activity, it is important to emphasize that its origins date back much earlier. Specifically, after World War I, in 1918, the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) opened a representative office in Belgrade, which coordinated the Bible-related needs of the countries that would later form the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) for several decades. The BFBS played a key role in the translation of sacred biblical texts into the Macedonian language.

Over the past three decades, more than 100,000 Bibles have been printed in Macedonian, along with twice as many separate editions of the New Testament. All of this is guided by the main mission of the society: to make the Holy Scriptures accessible in a clear and understandable Macedonian language, thereby helping people recognize the importance of the biblical message in their lives.

In addition to translations of the original biblical texts, thousands of copies of illustrated biblical texts, known as Children's Bibles, have been published. A portion of the biblical gospel texts has also been translated and published in Braille, to serve those who are blind or have impaired vision. Twenty years ago, the entire New Testament was recorded in an audio version—first on cassette and later on CD. The recording of the new translation of the New Testament in Macedonian has just been completed. Furthermore, these biblical texts, whether recorded or written, are also available in electronic format through various applications.

2. Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the Macedonian Bible Society

The 30-year activity of the Society was commemorated with a solemn celebration on October 24, 2024, at the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Independence. During the ceremony, His Beatitude Stefan, Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia and President of the Board of the Society, addressed the attendees with an insightful speech. Among other things, he highlighted that "the main reason for our—and, in general, the Christian—love for the Bible is not that it is the most significant book in history, nor is it the depth of its thought or the power, wealth, and beauty of its content... What makes the Bible irreplaceable is that in it and through it, God Himself speaks...". In a promotional speech, Clement, the Bishop of Heraclea, emphasized: "The translation and publication of sacred texts throughout history, despite its necessity and complexity, has proven to be a particularly demanding endeavor. The creative challenge of conveying the meaning of the untranslatable, of establishing a living communication between the reader and the spirit of the text, represents a continuous challenge for language—a challenge that calls upon the translator's creative skill and energy." As a representative of the United Bible Societies, Mr. George Sochos also gave a welcoming address. At the end of the ceremony, Prof. Gjoko Gjorgjevski, the Secretary General of the Society, delivered a closing thank-you speech. The celebration was accompanied by musical performances on various instruments, poetic readings of psalms, and a screening of a short clip from the recently filmed documentary about the activities of the Macedonian Bible Society.

3. The Translation Activity of the Macedonian Bible Society

3.1 Overview of the History of Modern Macedonian Bible Translations

As was the case with the oldest translations into Slavic by the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius, the first translation into modern Macedonian was made for church and liturgical purposes. The liturgical Gospel was first published in 1952 (daily and holiday readings from the Gospels), and only a few years later, in 1957, the liturgical Apostle appeared (daily and

holiday readings from the Epistles of St. Paul, from the Council Epistles and from the book of Acts of the Apostles). However, the translation effort of biblical texts into Macedonian began during World War II, in 1942, before the Macedonian literary language had even been codified.¹ The translation was carried out by the then Father Gjorgji Miloshev, later Metropolitan Gavril of Povardarie, and then Archbishop and Head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (1986-1993), but Prof. Trajan Mitrevski and Academician Petar Ilievski, then a religious teacher, also participated in the finalization of some New Testament texts.² In 1959, a complete translation of the text of the four Gospels was published for the first time, while the first complete edition of the New Testament appeared in 1967.

For many years, a commission of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, once again led by Bishop Gavril, and composed of Bishop Mihail (then Metodi Gogov, who would later serve as the Head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church from 1993 to 1999), Prof. Father Trajan Mitrevski, Prof. Boris Boskovski, and others, worked on the translation of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament.³ The Church Slavonic text of the Holy Scriptures was used as the base text, in consultation with other Slavic and modern translations.⁴ While Prof. Gjorgji Miloshev is regarded as the translator of the protocanonical books of the Old Testament, the deuterocanonical books were primarily translated by Prof. Metodi Gogov.

After several decades of dedicated work, it was not until 1990 that the first complete translation of the entire Holy Scriptures into Macedonian was published. The content of this first edition of the Macedonian Bible follows the example of the Church Slavonic Bible, containing both canonical books, for a total of 77 books.⁵

¹ Ацо Гиревски, *Македонскиот превод на Библијата*, Православен богословски факултет, Скопје 2004, 53-55.

² Петар Илиевски, „Краток преглед на историјата на македонскиот превод на престолното евангелие“, *Јубилеен зборник: 25 години митрополит Тимотеј*, Дебарско-кичевска епархија, Охрид 2006, 217-224.

³ In a Synodal decision from 1974, the participants involved in the preparation of the Old Testament text included the translator Prof. Gjorgji Miloshev, the Metropolitan of America and Canada, Mr. Cyril, Rev. Trajan Mitrevski, Rev. Slavcho Petrov, Rev. Petar Jordanov, Deacon Jovan Karevski (later Metropolitan Petar), Deacon Jovan Takovski, and Boris Boskovski. Their task was to review the text and prepare it for printing. However, the Commission failed to carry out its work, and the editorial responsibilities were assumed by Professors Rev. Metodi Gogov, Rev. Trajan Mitrevski, and Boris Boskovski, along with the translator Gjorgji Miloshev. They continued their work, with interruptions, until the final publication of the Macedonian edition of the Holy Scriptures.

⁴ The agreement of the Metropolitan Administrative Board from 1960 states: "The translator is tasked with translating the Old Testament based on the Church Slavonic and Latin translations, while making comparisons with the Serbian, Bulgarian, and Russian texts, as well as with German, French, English, and other translations, so that the translation can be as accurate and precise as possible."

⁵ The only difference is in the arrangement of the Old Testament books. While in the Church Slavonic Bible the Third Book of Ezra is separated at the end of the Old Testament, in the Macedonian edition it is placed after the Second Book of Ezra.

In the meantime, a revision of the existing translation was made. The revised text was published in two editions in 2006: one with the deuterocanonical books and the other with only the protocanonical books. Earlier, in 2001, the Psalter was printed separately according to the revised version.

The Liturgical Gospel was reprinted for the first time in over half a century in 2008, with a new revised text prepared by the Commission of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.⁶

3.2 On the Language and Linguistic Characteristics of the first Translations⁷

The translator himself best describes the language of the first edition of the Holy Scriptures in modern Macedonian: “Considering that our Bible translation, made a thousand years ago, underwent changes in language, making it incomprehensible, this was the very reason why the need for a new translation arose, one that would be complete in our modern Macedonian literary language... In the translation, we tried as much as possible not to deviate from the original, while also ensuring that the language remained understandable, purely folk, and accessible to everyone.”⁸ Other modern translations were also consulted in the process, mostly from our neighboring languages, which is where some foreign lexemes and syntactic constructions originate and are noticeable. On the other hand, the use of translations based on a different textual tradition makes the text differ in some places, especially in the Old Testament, from the Church Slavonic translation.

The text contains numerous archaisms, words borrowed from Church Slavonic, as well as the use of case forms in names. Additionally, the use of *On* instead of *Toj* as a third-person pronoun when referring to God is a characteristic feature. In the revised edition of 2006, corrections of both textual and linguistic nature were made. For example, the pronoun *On* (for the third person) referring to God was replaced by *Toj*, and the genitive-accusative constructions for personal names were modernized. In the revised translation, these names are now in the nominative form, with the exception of *Bog* and *Gospod* (which remain "na Boga," "na Gospoda"). Some Bulgarian, Serbian, and Croatian words that had crept into the first

⁶ The commission, led by the Metropolitan of Debar and Kichevo, Mr. Timotej, included: Prof. Dr. Ratomir Grozdanoski, Prof. Dr. Gjoko Gjorgevski, Archimandrite Nektarij, Protodeacon Slave Projkoski, and Prof. Fr. Jovan Kumevski.

⁷ More on this topic see: Ѓоко Ѓорѓевски, „Современите преводи на Светото писмо на македонски јазик“, *Зборник од Предавања на LVI летна школа на Меѓународниот семинар за македонски јазик, литература и култура, Охрид 17-31.08.2023 година*, Скопје 2024, 22-27.

⁸ The excerpt is from the speech by Archbishop Gavril of Ohrid and Macedonia at the promotion of the Holy Scriptures, held on October 18, 1990, at the University Library in Skopje.

edition of 1990 were corrected.⁹ Other unnecessary foreign words were replaced with Macedonian terms, and some phonetic features that were not native to the Macedonian language were aligned with Macedonian speech tradition. The spelling of many personal names and toponyms was also harmonized with the Hebrew original.

From an orthographic point of view, both the 1990 translation and the revised 2006 edition emphasize the use of capital letters for pronouns and pronoun forms referring to God, i.e., the Lord. There is a repetition of certain words, most often pronoun forms, but also prepositions, likely with the intention of drawing the reader's attention or making the text easier to remember.¹⁰

Regarding the textual basis, it is noted that when revising the text, the Hebrew original for the Old Testament was used, which differs from the Church Slavonic translation and the ancient Greek base (LXX, the Septuagint). The intention was likely to merge the two versions into one edition, so it is possible that the brackets at the beginning of the Bible originate from this, marking the longer versions of the LXX, which then disappear.

Despite all the remarks, the revised edition contains a refined text in which numerous errors and omissions from the first edition have been corrected. A special contribution has been made to the correction and unification of names, with an appropriate criterion applied. It is known that biblical names can be transcribed either according to the Hebrew original or according to the Church Slavonic translation, which in turn is based on the Old Greek translation (LXX). All New Testament names and toponyms, as well as all Old Testament names that appear in the New Testament, are transcribed according to the Church Slavonic, or the Old Greek version. This means that names which are considered domesticated or well-known have not been altered. However, all names and toponyms that appear five times or fewer in the Old Testament are transcribed according to the Hebrew original.

Over the years, there has been a growing need for a new translation into modern Macedonian that preserves the essence and richness of the Church Slavonic heritage, while applying the vocabulary and syntax characteristic of the modern Macedonian language. The criteria were developed in line with the thoughts of Blaže Koneski, who noted: "In the historical development of our language, certain old Slavic suffixes have changed externally or become

⁹ Ѓорѓи Поп-Атанасов, „Белешки кон јазикот на македонскиот превод на Библијата“, *Македонскиот јазик во современиот превод на Библијата*, Православен богословски факултет, Скопје 2008, 16-17.

¹⁰ Лилјана Макаријоска, „Македонскиот јазик во современиот библиски превод и во изданијата на МПЦ“, *Македонскиот јазик во современиот превод на Библијата*, Православен богословски факултет 2008, Скопје, 27.

unproductive, giving way to new methods of word formation. Because of this, Church Slavonic terms should be adapted in form to reflect the current state of word formation in our language.”¹¹ This means the goal was to prepare a text that would be more understandable to younger generations and would convey the content of the New Testament in accordance with the characteristics of modern Macedonian.

3.3 Latest Translation Activities of biblical texts

Towards the end of 2023, a new translation of the New Testament from the original Greek was published, prepared by Orthodox theologians. Additionally, the 2024 were published a new translation of the Psalter, with two versions: one from ancient Greek and the other from Hebrew.

The new edition of the New Testament is the first translation into Macedonian from the original Greek text. Two respected editions of the original text were used as sources: the edition prepared in 1904 by B. Antoniadis, revised in 1912, and the Robinson-Pierpont edition, published in 1991. In cases where these two editions differ, the version that aligns with the Church Slavonic text of the New Testament has been chosen. Additionally, numerous modern translations have been used as comparative texts. Each book is preceded by an introduction with brief notes on the authorship, origin, and content of the New Testament text. At the end of the book is an appendix containing a brief biblical dictionary of measures and coins. The abbreviations for the books, as well as the names and titles in the text, are taken from the latest Macedonian edition of the Holy Scriptures, while the division into chapters and verses follows the original text.

After the 2001 edition, in 2024, two editions of the Psalter were printed, as previously mentioned: one as a translation from the Hebrew original, and the other from the Greek translation of the LXX. One of the main features of the translation is that it is in modern Macedonian, with particular attention given to preserving its poetic form. It is well known that in the Church, the Psalms are the most frequently used Old Testament text and have always held a special place, both in individual prayers and in communal worship. Therefore, special emphasis was placed on the poetic nature of the translation, ensuring that it could be used in church services.

¹¹ Блаже Конески, *Граматика на македонскиот литературен јазик*, МАНУ Скопје 2021, 76.

Finally, it is important to note that all the above-mentioned editions of the translation of the Holy Scriptures into modern Macedonian, in whole or in part, are owned by or coordinated with the Macedonian Bible Society, whose main activity is the translation of the Holy Scriptures. The translation and printing of biblical texts will remain a priority of the Societies' activities in the future, while constantly reminding us that the Word of God is not given to be closed in a book, but to be engraved in our hearts. After a 30-year journey, the Macedonian Bible Society continues resolutely with its mission to share the Word of God. The anniversary marks a reaffirmation of the evangelical goal, inspiring all involved in its work to remain united in their commitment to spreading the good news of the salvation of the world and humanity.