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Marija Girevska
St. Clement of Ohrid, Skopje

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THE ODYSSEY OF ARCHBISHOP GAVRIL'S TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

By Marija Girevska

Dr. Marija Girevska teaches English for Theology at St. Clement of Ohrid Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia.

Abstract

Translating the Bible is not an easy task in any language. Every translation of the Bible is a confirmation of the capacity of a language to convey the Bible's manifold depths and meanings. The publication of the Macedonian Bible has been received as a historic event in Macedonia. Archbishop Gavril's translation remains a unique pillar in the development of the Macedonian literary language. The entire process of the planning, translation, and printing of the complete Macedonian Bible encompassed a period of some 50 years. Drawing on these references, the article explores the impressive journey of Archbishop Gavril's translation of the Bible into Macedonian as documented in his personal letters and correspondences.

Key words: Bible, translation, Archbishop Gavril, Macedonia, personal letters.

Introduction

Seventy years ago, on June 24, 1947,¹ Fr. Ćorgi Milošev signed an agreement with the Initiative Board for Organization of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to deliver a full

¹ Agreement No. 852/47, Archives of the Initiative Board. Aco Girevski, *Makedonskiot prevod na Biblijata (The Macedonian Translation of the Bible)*, Skopje: Pravoslaven bogoslovski fakultet "Sveti Kliment Ohridski", 271. (In further text – MTB).

translation of the Four Gospels from Old Church Slavonic into Macedonian language. By July 1948, he delivered the copies of the Four Gospels, saying that he has “tried to adhere to the Church-Slavonic text and the spirit of the Macedonian literary language,” adding that “it was not only a demanding job, but a delicate one as well.”² The year 2017 marks the seventieth anniversary of the officially documented beginnings of the Macedonian translation of the Bible.

Almost 40 years ago, in June 1979, Metropolitan Gavril wrote another letter,³ this time to Zvonimir Smiljanić, the executive secretary of the Bible Society of Yugoslavia, where he presented his reasons for the delay in sending the manuscripts of the Macedonian Bible. He assured him that the Macedonian translation of the Bible had been completed, but the final redacted version of the text had not been confirmed. He also wrote that he had been fully immersed in his engagements in regard to the newly opened Faculty of Theology in Skopje. Metropolitan Gavril was appointed Dean of St. Clement of Ohrid Faculty of Theology in December 1977. This year, the Faculty of Theology is celebrating 40 years of research and teaching.

The establishment of the Faculty of Theology is closely related to the work and life of the third Archbishop of the restored Macedonian Orthodox Church-Archdiocese of Ohrid. Moreover, Archbishop Gavril was the chief translator of the Old and New Testament into Macedonian. This year also, we mark another anniversary—50 years since the restoration of the Macedonian Orthodox Church—Archdiocese of Ohrid.

The Beginnings of the Macedonian Translation of the Bible

Fr. Milošev began secretly translating the New Testament during the Second World War between 1942 and 1944 in the Church of Theotokos in Veles, a small town in the central part of

² *Letter III* (July 14, 1948), MTB, pp. 272 – 273.

³ See *Letter CXVI* (June 25, 1979), MTB, p. 350.

Macedonia. After the liberation from Bulgarian occupation, he “revised the text in line with the 1946 Orthography of the Macedonian language and later made a new revision which was sent to the Initiative Board.”⁴ The Four Gospels were published for liturgical purposes in B1/8 format printing by Goce Delcev Printing House in 1952 in Skopje. In this letter, he also revealed the names of the two theologians who were working as redactors of the translated Biblical texts, Petar Ilievski⁵ and Boris Boškovski.

Following the second agreement, from January 21, 1955 to 1957, Fr. Milošev delivered the translation of the Epistles, the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation. “For Church purposes the Initiative Board published the second part of the New Testament, i.e. the “Apostol” [the Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles] in B/16 format printing leaving out the Book of Revelation,” Milošev explained in a letter in 1973.⁶ The printing was delivered in 1957 by Prosveta Printing House in Kumanovo. The publication of the Macedonian translation of the

⁴ *Letter LXXIX* (December 24, 1973). In MTB, p. 328.

⁵ After the death of Archbishop Gavril, Professor Petar Ilievski (1920-2013) wrote an article (entitled *Half a Century Since the Publication of the Macedonian Liturgical Gospel*, later renamed as *The First Slavic and Macedonian Translation of the Gospel*) stating that B. Boškovski and himself were the translators of the 1952 New Testament. In this article he never gave any proofs that could support his statement. It is just his word against all facts. He simply explained that the archives had been lost in the flood and in the earthquake of 1962 and 1963 respectively. However, not all the documents have been lost. In his thorough research of the translation of the Macedonian Bible, Aco Girevski enclosed 145 preserved letters dating from 1947 until 1992 in addition to Gavril’s preserved 1942 manuscripts and typed copies of the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 1-10, 19:28-30, 20:1-16, 24:43-51, 25:1-11, 26:25-45), the Gospel of Luke (chapters 19:44-48, 20:1-18, 22:54-71, 23:1-3), and the Gospel of John (chapters 8:49-59, 9:1-8, 11:11-32) (Girevski, MTB, 95). What is clear from these official documents and correspondences between the British and Foreign Bible Society and its representatives and Fr. Milošev is that Ilievski emerges exclusively as one of the two redactors of the 1952 NT, whereas Milošev appears as the one and only translator of the entire corpus of the Biblical texts (apart from Archbishop M. Gogov’s translation of the Book of Deuteronomy). Strangely enough, Ilievski happened to publish this article in 2003, 13 years after the publication of the Bible and many years after the death of both Fr. Gavril and B. Boškovski. In the article he makes references to Girevski’s research (Girevski suggests that his doctoral thesis in manuscript was probably given to Ilievski by one of the supervisors who was a close friend of Ilievski), yet overlooks all the documented facts enclosed in the study. From Boškovski’s own words, in the recorded conversations between Girevski and himself (2000), we learn that Ilievski was mostly engaged in typing of the translated texts, and Boškovski did the general language revision, whereas Archbishop Gavril was undeniably the translator. Fr. Milošev received a copy of the 1952 NT with the inscription “for the translation of this historic work” (March 14, 1953). Professors Ilievski and Boškovski remain to be valuable redactors of the 1952 Macedonian NT, but we have no proof that Ilievski or Boškovski were in any way engaged as translators. See *Letter CXXIX* in MTB, 361.

⁶ See *Letter LXXIX*, MTB, 329.

“Apostol” would initiate the practice of using contemporary Macedonian language during the service of the Divine Liturgy.

In 1957, Milošev began the translation of the Old Testament and this undertaking marked the longest period in the history of the first complete Macedonian translation of the Bible. The complete Macedonian Bible saw the light of day in 1990.

The Translator of the Macedonian Bible

Ćorġi Milošev (the full name of Archbishop Gavril) was born in 1912 in Skopje. He graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje in 1936 at the Department of German Language and Slavistics. At that time, he was one of 135 graduates holding a university degree in Macedonia. In 1942, he was ordained a priest. Three years later, while serving in the parish in Veles, he also took the position of teaching German language at the city gymnasium. He was elected president of the Spiritual Board by the clergy of Veles and its area. He soon made contact with the Initiative Board for Organization of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. As a delegate, he participated in the First Clergy and Laity Assembly in March 1945 in Skopje, where a resolution was adopted to restore the Archdiocese of Ohrid. Soon after liberation, Milošev became editor of Prosvetno Delo Publishing House where he remained until his retirement in the early 1970s. During his career at Prosvetno Delo, apart from editing, Milošev produced numerous bilingual dictionaries (Macedonian and German), a collection of traditional wedding folk songs from the Galičnik region,⁷ and was the co-author of several student textbooks.

⁷ Ćorġi Milošev, *Galički svadbarski narodni pesni*. Državno knigoizdatelstvo na Makedonija, 1946. Second edition in Kiril Penušliski (ed.). Skopje: Sigmapres, 1996. Galičnik is the birthplace of Milošev’s parents. It is a beautiful mountain village, one of the biggest and oldest Mijak villages in Macedonia. Mijaks (Мијаци, Mijaci) are known for their ecclesiastical architecture, woodcarving, and icon painting. The tradition of having a Galičnik wedding is still kept very much alive today.

Reading the archives of Archbishop Gavril, all his letters and reports that have been preserved throughout the years (as I have previously mentioned, some of the archives have been destroyed in the great flood which happened in Skopje in 1962 and in the devastating earthquake that followed in 1963) in regard to his tremendous work with the translation of the Bible in Macedonian, I could not help but notice the honesty and humanity in his writings, his professional approach and work ethic, his personal self-sacrifice and humbleness, his diligence and determination to carry on with the meticulous process of translation of one of the most important books known to our Western civilization; to bring the Holy Scripture into modern Macedonian language for the first time.

What strikes me the most is his total devotion to have the work finished against all odds—no matter how many obstacles were put in his way. In his own writings, he clearly stated that he was profoundly determined to continue his work. On several occasions he even refused to accept any payment for his translational work,⁸ despite the fact that there were times when he had to sell some of his home furniture just to make ends meet.⁹ Sometimes his work was delayed because of his professional engagements or his own illness (lying in bed for a month in the autumn of 1955 and in the spring of 1966.) At other times, it was by reason of political conditions in the country (Macedonia was part of the Yugoslav policy of social-communism) or on account of the engagements involved in the restoration of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. There were times when he had to deal with difficult people who were assigned to be working

⁸ In a letter from September 12, 1955, Milošev writes to Velimir M. Jeremić (Executive Secretary of the Bible Society of Yugoslavia): “It is not about the emolument, I have already worked [on the translation of the Bible] without any emoluments.” (*Letter VIII*, MTB, 276). In another letter from November 4, he is willing to grant the NT author’s rights and royalties “for free” to the British and Foreign Bible Society (*Letters XIV* and *XIX*, MTB, 281, 285, respectively).

⁹ *Letter XIV* (November 4, 1955), MTB, p. 281.

with him as redactors on the project.¹⁰ In the following period, his personal engagements increased as he became Metropolitan and Dean of the newly established Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Skopje. But even his duties and engagements as the third Archbishop of the restored Macedonian Orthodox Church seemed never to have slowed him down or discouraged him from completing the process of translation.

The Process of Translating the Bible in Macedonian

The origins of the Slavic literacy, faith, and culture in Macedonia are closely related to the work and mission of the Holy Brothers St. Cyril-Constantine (826-869) and Methodius (circa 815-885). Their manuscripts sealed the first authorized translations of the liturgical books in the Old-Slavic language. The Holy Brothers worked together on the translation of the Bible. Methodius translated the Old Testament from Greek into Old Slavic, except for the two Deuterocanonical Books of the Maccabees.¹¹ The translation was completed in Moravia where Methodius was assisted by his students. In this context, the Bible translation completed by Methodius is the third translation in the history of Bible translations, following the Vulgate (a late fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible) and the Wulfila Bible (a fourth-century Gothic version).

Archbishop Gavril's translation was built upon the legacy of the Holy Brothers. The task was to be as consistent as possible with the original Hebrew and Greek Biblical texts. The spiritual journey that has opened the door to his success in Bible translation lasted for almost five decades.

¹⁰ In a letter dating from December 8, 1955, Milošev complained to Jeremić that one of the members of the Redaction Commission was greedy for money: "I have already pointed out in our previous conversations that there is a man from the Commission who is avaricious" (*Letter XVII*, MTB, 283). It remains a mystery who he is referring to. We only know for sure that the Redaction Commission at that time was composed of six other members.

¹¹ Vera Stojčevska Antić, *Svetlinata na tradicijata (The Light of Tradition)*. (Skopje: Matica makedonska, 1998), 7.

During this half-century period, Professors Trajan Mitrevski and Boris Boškovski remained to be the two chief redactors¹² of the translated Biblical text which had been approved primarily by the Initiative Board, and later by the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.¹³ The Commission consisted of experts in the fields of linguistics, theology, and printing. In the 1970s, it was expanded to six more members including His Eminence Metropolitan of the American, Canadian and Australian Diocese Kiril (as president of the committee), Rev. Metodi Gogov (later Archbishop of MOC-AO and translator of the Book of Deuteronomy), Prof. Jovan Takovski, Rev. Slavcho Petrov, Rev. Jovan Karevski (Metropolitan Petar) and Rev. Petar Jordanov.¹⁴

The entire process of completing the translation of the Bible into Macedonian was lengthy, with months of protracted negotiations. It was simply a laborious process.¹⁵ The entire corpus of the translated Biblical texts had to be retyped seven times. What was peculiar was that Milošev, at one time, was using a Bulgarian typewriter. So, every time he finalized a translation, he would have to go over the text once again in order to correct and amend all the non-Macedonian letters.¹⁶

As for the original Biblical texts that were being used for the Macedonian translation, it was recorded that Milošev translated from an 1890 Old Church Slavonic Bible (printed in

¹² The Redaction Commission for the 1952 NT included Boškovski and Petar Ilievski. In later redactions and revisions Ilievski was only *nominated* as a consultant for the Greek language for a 1974 dynamic equivalent translation of the NT (*Letter LXXXII*, MTB, 330).

¹³ See *Letter CXXIII* (May 4, 1984). In MTB, 355-357.

¹⁴ Syn. No. 86/12. Arch. No. 2/74. Cf. MTB, 334.

¹⁵ For instance, as soon as the text was being translated, it was revised and typed by the translator himself. Next, it was given to others to be retyped and sent back to him for a second revision. Then the copy was sent to one of the members of the revision committee for a thorough review. After receiving the reviewed copies, the translator would retype the entire text for the third time before sending it to another editor. The Bible Society or the Synod also did a revision which was returned to the translator for another retyping. Working under such poor conditions with no copier machines, let alone modern day computers and printers, made me realize how strongminded and relentless Milošev had been in his pursuit of delivering the Bible in Macedonian.

¹⁶ For example, the Bulgarian letter *ŭ* had to be handwritten into letter *j*, just as the letters *κ* and *π* had to be handwritten into *ќ* and *п*.

Moscow), “which represented a continuity of the renowned Church Slavonic Bible from the 15th and 16th centuries, also known as the Church-Russian recension of the Bible.”¹⁷ The extended list of consulted Bible translations included the 1925 Bulgarian Synodal edition and the 1953 Russian Synodal Bible, as well as Serbian (1933), Latin (Vulgata), German (Luther’s and other German translations), French (Louis Segond’s translation), Italian, Greek, and English translations.

In a letter sent to Jeremić in November 1955, Milošev asserted that “the [BFB] Society requires the translated text to undergo revision by certain commission. [...] Indeed, this is only formalism, because *it is the translator who bears the moral and material responsibility** before the Society, and to some extent the theological and linguistic redactor of the text.”¹⁸ [*My emphasis.] For Milošev, the translation of the Bible symbolized his masterpiece, his lifetime achievement: “In essence, it is my lifework,” he remarked in a letter dating from April 1966.¹⁹

The Bishop Gavril of Holy Mount Athos, (who has been recently declared a saint in a canonization Liturgy held by His Beatitude of MOC-AO, the Archbishop Stefan) at receiving the news that the Macedonian Bible had been ready to be printed, addressed Archbishop Gavril with the following words: “Your Beatitude, even if you had not done anything else in your life, just with the translation of the Bible you have earned your place in the Heavenly Kingdom.”²⁰

The Translation of the New Testament and the Psalms

In September 1955, A. L. Haig (a representative of the European office) informed the British and Foreign Bible Societies in London about the authority of the Macedonian translation

¹⁷ Girevski, MTB, 73.

¹⁸ Letter XIV in MTB, 280.

¹⁹ Letter XLVI (April 18, 1966), MTB, 303.

²⁰ Aco A. Girevski, *Prvični soopštenija za kniževnata ostavština na Kočo Racin od profesorot Ćorgi Milošev* (Professor Ćorgi Milošev’s Earliest Writings On Kočo Racin’s Literary Legacy). Skopje: Menora, 2007, 177.

of the New Testament and Psalms, giving the names of the Macedonian revision committee: “Rev. Nestor Popovski, Rev. Kiril Stojanov, Rev. Bora Stankovski and Rev. Dimitar Peshevski— described as clergy; Rev. George Miloshev, Krum Toshev, and Boris Boshkovski— described as scholars”.²¹ Mr. Jeremić stated that “all these men are able and well respected in Macedonia.”²² However, in the following months, Milošev insisted that he continue his work only with B. Stankovski (a theologian) and Krum Tošev (a linguist), complaining that “the conglomerate of seven men has not even begun to work [on the project], let alone to finish it,”²³ adding that “I do not wish to impose my opinion, my only desire is to break this deadlock.”²⁴

The following year, on June 22, 1956, the Initiative Board adopted a resolution to put Milošev in charge of the translation of the remaining books of the Epistles, Acts, Psalms, and the Book of Revelation. Apart from translating it, Milošev typed the entire translated material himself.²⁵

The Translation of the Old Testament

Milošev signed an agreement to translate the Old Testament on July 1, 1960 in Skopje. “The Diocesan Council’s Steering Committee (Rev. Nestor Popovski and Archbishop of Ohrid and Skopje and Metropolitan of Macedonia Dositej) authorizes the translation of the Old Testament to the translator Ćorđi Milošev in order to maintain the unity of style of language and lexicon as in the New Testament that he had translated.”²⁶ In the following decade, Milošev would be engrossed in work, part in revision of the new edition of the NT and in the

²¹ *Letter X* (September 29, 1955), MTB, 278.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Letter XIX* (March 4, 1956), MTB, 285.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Letter XXVIII* (September 20, 1956), MTB, 291.

²⁶ *Letter XXXIV* (December 1, 1960), Art. No. 362/60, MTB, 297.

arrangements of its publication in London, and part in the translation of the OT. What is more, the seven-membered board that was assigned in 1974²⁷ for the OT revision was soon reduced to only four people, including Rev. M. Gogov, Rev. T. Mitrevski, B. Boškovski, and Milošev himself. In the meantime, his work was postponed as he was waiting for the new edition of the Macedonian Dictionary.²⁸ The Old Testament was never published as a separate translation.

The Translation of the Book of Deuteronomy

Metropolitan (later Archbishop of MOC-AO) Mikhail (Михаил) translated the Book of Deuteronomy. He started working on it in the spring of 1984 and finished it in the following May. Metropolitan Gavril suggested that the books should not be divided into canonical and deuterocanonical books, but to follow the unanimous approach of the Church Slavonic Bible.²⁹ The manuscripts of this translation are preserved in their entirety and are kept in the library dedicated to Gavril's archives in Skopje.

Conclusion

The publication of the completed translation of the Macedonian Bible was not an easy endeavor, but it certainly was a rewarding one. A small nation, amid the encircling gloom of circumstances, could finally reach after the Holy Scripture in its own language. "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" (Peter 2:2).

At the promotion of the first complete Macedonian translation of the Bible in October 1990, the translator, Archbishop Gavril, addressed the audience with the following words: "The delivery of the Holy Scripture in contemporary Macedonian language is a recognition for all of

²⁷ Syn. No. 86/12. Arch. No. 2/74. Cf. MTB, 334.

²⁸ *Letter XLIV* (November 25, 1965), MTB, 301.

²⁹ Girevski, MTB, 137.

us—for our history, language, and culture; it stands as an inerasable testimony to the Macedonian people.”³⁰

It is our joint responsibility to treasure Archbishop Gavril’s legacy of intellectual and spiritual excellence in life.

³⁰ *Nova Makedonija*, October 19, 1990, 10. *Op. cit.* MTB, 228.

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