



The Kralice Bible: Czech-mate to the KJV

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IN THE BEGINNING

The fascinating history of Czech translations of the Bible goes back to the ninth century, to the very beginnings of Christianity among the Slavic peoples. Following the request of the Moravian Prince Rastislav, Byzantine Emperor Michael III commissioned Constantine (later renamed Cyril)—an outstanding scholar, philosopher, and educator—to make the gospel of Jesus Christ understandable to the recently Christianized Moravians. Constantine came from Salonika (nowadays Thessaloniki), a Greek city where the Old Church Slavonic language was commonly spoken. This language was well understood by Slavic nationalities, including the Moravians. Even before he and his older brother Methodius came to the region of the present day Czech Republic and Slovakia in 863, Constantine had designed an alphabet especially for the Slavonic language and translated what he considered to be the most important parts of the Gospels, starting with John 1:1, “In the beginning was the word....” Soon after, followed the translation of those parts of Scripture that were traditionally read during the liturgical year, that is, most of the Gospels and Psalms, and portions of the book of Acts and the Old Testament.

The Kralice Bible and the King James Bible have much in common. These translations become dominant for the Protestant churches worshipping in Czech and in English for over three centuries. Learning about the history and aims of these versions can help us recognize the appropriate moment and motives for new translation projects.

From the *Life of Methodius* (885) we learn that shortly after his brother's death in 869, Methodius, the Archbishop of Moravia, translated the rest of the Bible into Old Church Slavonic. Unfortunately, the manuscripts were lost following his death in 885 when his students were forced to leave Moravia. The Moravian King Svatopluk, a Roman sympathizer, insisted on Latin as the exclusive language of the church in his region, and it became so for several centuries. However, Methodius's students eventually settled to the south in Bulgaria, and through them bits and pieces of the Old Church Slavonic translation were preserved in the liturgies and writings of Bulgarian, Russian, Romanian, Serbian, and Croatian churches. We can safely conclude that, thanks to the so-called Salonika brothers (Constantine/Cyril and Methodius), Czechs had their Bible in a proto-Czech language shortly before the year 885.

What made this Bible translation successful? The pioneering idea of using the language of the people was important,¹ but not original—the Armenians and Georgians, to name but two, already enjoyed Bibles in their own language. The Salonika brothers credited the Apostle Paul himself in the prologue to their gospel translation, referring to 1 Cor 14:15: “I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue” (KJV). In their case, the phrase “words with my understanding” stood for vernacular languages and “words in an unknown tongue” for the Latin used those days in the church. The goal of this endeavor, however, was not to make Bibles available to those who could not read Latin. In a time of widespread illiteracy and enormously expensive production of manuscript copies, such a goal would have been impossible. The only vehicle for bringing Scripture to the laity was liturgy. Therefore the Salonika brothers put great effort into getting permission from Rome to use the Old Slavonic language in the liturgy of Moravian churches. Although the Old Slavonic Bible had many qualities of its own, it was this permission (granted by Hadrian II) that made it influential among the Slavic peoples for many centuries.

LATIN VERSUS THE VERNACULAR

For Moravian Christianity, the schism between Rome and Constantinople in 1054 meant the forceful replacement of its Old Slavonic elements by Latin. However, even during the next two centuries of Latin dominance, the oral tradition of the Old Slavonic Bible and liturgy enjoyed some use, mainly for educating the laity in the basics of Christianity. The thirteenth century witnessed the revival of this tradition, as it became an effective tool for suppressing various popular misconceptions and heresies.² In Christianized regions like Great Moravia, the struggle for new faith (Christianity) was replaced by the struggle for

¹According to M. Weingart, this was the first translation among the Slavic peoples and one of the very first in Europe (as noted in V. Čapek, *Historie Bible*, 3rd ed. (Praha: Advent, 1990) 36.

²V. Kyas, *Česká Bible v dějinách národního písemnictví* (Praha: Vyšehrad, 1997) 31.

pure faith (church doctrine), a struggle that would motivate Czech Bible translation for the next four centuries.

Until the pre-Reformation era of Jan Hus (1369–1415), this struggle was carried out under the supervision of the Roman Catholic Church. The practice of vernacular preaching was pioneered mainly by Dominicans and Franciscans. But this required only the translation of those parts of Scripture that were fundamental for Christian faith. The clergy, fluent in Latin, had no need of a Bible translation other than the Vulgate. The non-Latin-trained cloistered women, however, needed more than just portions of the Gospels in Czech. These nuns wanted to understand the Scripture used in the Latin mass, and the cloisters were in a position to provide for both those translations and the manuscript copies.³

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In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, these needs led to several Czech translations of the Gospels and the Psalter, and eventually, after several revisions, to the first complete Czech translation of the Bible known as the Dresden Bible or the Leskovec Bible in 1360. Like the Wycliffe Bible, and other translations of the time, it was based on the Vulgate. According to Kyas, the translation is fairly loose, using the flexibility of a still developing Old Czech prose language to strive for clarity of meaning rather than literal rendering. Linguistic analysis shows that it most likely took a team of ten experts to produce the translation (including the Apocrypha) in three to five years, plus two more years to copy them into one manuscript.⁴ The Leskovec Bible became the primary source of Scripture knowledge for the next two centuries, not only for Czechs and Slovaks but also for the Poles, as it greatly influenced their oldest Bible translations.⁵ Subsequent Czech Bibles up to the time of the Reformation are best seen as redactions of this Leskovec Bible.

During those two centuries, several factors contributed to the success of the Leskovec Bible and its redactions. In 1369, shortly after the appearance of the Leskovec Bible, Emperor Charles IV prohibited the reading of any part of Scripture

³For compelling evidence that the Bible translations into the Czech language in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were primarily ordered by and targeted for the women cloisters, see Kyas, *Česká Bible*, 32, 50.

⁴Kyas, *Česká Bible*, 43–44, 50–51. The pergameneous manuscript of the Leskovec Bible consisted of 681 pages, each 15.75 by 11 inches. J. Vraštil describes the dramatic last moments of its existence. The manuscript was preserved in the Royal Public Library of Dresden until 1914, when it was transferred to Leuven University for copying. After the first day of copying, this and many other precious manuscripts were burned in a great fire set by the German troops looting Leuven. Only the copies of one third of the manuscript, made just hours before the disaster, were preserved (J. Vraštil, *Zkáza bible Leskovecké—nepřímá příčina k vydání bible Olomoucké*, Lidové listy no. 129, 4.6 [1933]).

⁵Kyas, *Česká Bible*, 120–123.

in the vernacular by laypeople.⁶ The reason was not the translation itself (the Leskovec Bible contained no heterodox readings), but its possible misinterpretation by theologically untrained people. While they could comprehend its words in the vernacular, according to the edict they “do not understand them in a safe and good sense,” and, consequently, “through a false understanding men should be led into heresy or error.”⁷ However, these translations were never meant for popular use—the vast majority of people, including even the relatively wealthy, could not afford to purchase them. Being luxury items, paradoxically, kept the vernacular Bibles alive. As icons of not only material but also spiritual and intellectual richness, greatly valued by the rapidly spreading humanism of the day, such Bibles became trendy presents for royalty and treasured possessions of those who could pay for their production. During the first decades of the fifteenth century, this “Bible fashion” was, according to Kvas, most likely the primary reason for a new Czech translation, or what he labels as the second redaction of the Leskovec Bible.⁸ These Bibles were of top quality material, artistically written, beautifully decorated—but very rarely read.

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In those very days, this beautiful—but dead—use and image of the Bible was about to change dramatically with the preaching and teaching of Jan Hus. He vigorously opposed multiple papal bans to read Scripture in the vernacular and promoted Czech translations in his popular sermons at the reformist Bethlehem Chapel from 1402. Hus is often credited with his own translations of the Bible into Czech, specifically the second and the third redactions of the Leskovec Bible. His zeal for Scripture, preaching, and liturgy in the vernacular was one of the main reasons behind the trumped-up charges that led to his martyrdom in 1415. The reformed movement named after him, the Hussites, enthusiastically carried on this legacy, and, in spite of severe persecution, portions of Czech Bibles (mainly the New Testament) circulated widely among the laypeople.⁹ The Hussites themselves

⁶Prior to 1369, Charles was a great supporter of the vernacular. He was directly responsible for several sacred literary works in Czech, and “he set on foot a translation of the Bible into Czech by the monks of the Slavic-speaking cloister he had founded in 1348 (Emmaus).” See S. H. Thomson, “Learning at the Court of Charles IV,” *Speculum* 25/1 (1950) 14. However, Charles’s position, especially on the use of sacred literature in the vernacular by laypeople, changed after his interview with Pope Urban V at Rome. See also M. Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1920) 83.

⁷The quotations are from the English translation of the edict in Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, 84.

⁸Kvas, *Česká Bible*, 66.

⁹According to *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 129, over fifty complete or fragmentary Bible manuscripts in Czech have been preserved from the fifteenth century.

excelled in their biblical knowledge; not that they would individually study it (the manuscripts were still far from affordable), but because it became a vital part of their preaching, teaching, ethics, and overall interest.¹⁰

Thus the Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks were ready for *sola scriptura* a century before the Reformation.¹¹ Three more significant factors, however, prior to Martin Luther, made the idea of a Bible in the hands of every Christian attractive and possible. First was the reforming impact of Renaissance humanism. Czechs, like other central Europeans, “were led to new religious experiences by humanist curiosity rather than by existing confessional commitment.”¹² The second factor was the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (ca.1439), producing thousands of affordable Bible copies. Its importance for the upcoming Reformation can hardly be overstated. The third factor grew out of the rise of rationalism with its fresh scholarly insights and critical approaches to the tradition. In the area of Bible translations, this movement is associated with two Oxford professors in the last decade of the fifteenth century, Thomas Linacre and John Colet. By using Greek in reading, teaching, and translating the New Testament, they demonstrated how corrupt and inaccurate the Latin Vulgate had become, as well as the importance of translating the Bible directly from Hebrew and Greek.

The combination of all these factors signaled that the time was ripe for the monumental new translations of the Bible into the language of the people: Luther’s Bible in German, the King James Bible in English, and the Bible of Kralice in Czech.

THE BIBLE OF KRALICE—THE KJV OF CZECHS, MORAVIANS, AND SLOVAKS

The Bible of Kralice was the first complete translation of the Bible from the original languages into the Czech language. Translated by the Unity of the Brethren and printed in the town of Kralice nad Oslavou, the first edition had six volumes and was published between the years 1579 and 1594. The third edition from 1613 is classic and remains the most widely known and used Czech translation of the Bible.¹³ Not unlike the influence of the KJV in the English-speaking world, the Kralice Bible shaped the Czech language for centuries following. How did this monumental translation come into being?

The Unity of the Brethren (known also as the Bohemian Brethren, the Moravian Brethren, or the *Unitas Fratrum*), during the first century of its existence (1457–1557), was a very unlikely candidate to produce such a scholarly, spiritual, and widely influential masterpiece. As a typical pietistic movement, the Brethren

¹⁰See, e.g., Kyas, *Česká Bible*, 111–112.

¹¹“In 1519, in his Leipzig disputation with Johann Eck, Luther defended Hus’s teaching as Christian and evangelical.” See J. R. Palmitessa, “The Reformation in Bohemia and Poland,” in R. Po-chia Hsia, ed., *A Companion to the Reformation World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) 191.

¹²R. J. W. Evans, “Calvinism in East Central Europe: Hungary and Her Neighbours, 1500–1700,” in M. Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism 1541-1715* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 198.

¹³This information is included in the “stub” note on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_of_Kralice (accessed May 10, 2011).

emphasized practical Christian life rather than doctrinal precision or church tradition. As J. R. Rice notes, their spiritual father, Peter Chelcicky (a student and sometimes critic of Hus), “never acknowledged any human authorities in his faith and interpretation of the Bible. This attitude may have influenced the *Unitas Fratrum* to shy away from human-composed creeds or doctrines, and initially to reject theological education and training to interpret the Bible.”¹⁴ The change came with Jan Blahoslav, who became bishop of the Brethren in 1557. A learned scholar himself, he insisted that “only a thorough education for the leaders [and] for the simple Brethren can ensure a peaceful development of the *Unitas*. Of course all great knowledge is to no avail if it is not guided by true piety.”¹⁵ His appeal was embraced by the Brethren. Also the times were favorable, as the Brethren finally enjoyed a few decades of peace and relative prosperity during the reign of Maximilian II (1527–1576) and his son Rudolph II (1552–1612). They sent students to get the best reform-oriented theological and biblical training of those days in places like Wittenberg, Heidelberg, Geneva, and Oxford. Thus, along with furnishing a scholarly library and acquiring their own printer, the Brethren prepared the grounds for a new translation, the Bible of Kralice (KB), which became the standard Protestant Bible for Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks for three and a half centuries.¹⁶

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Blahoslav set an example and a norm for the KB with his translation of the New Testament from Greek, published in 1564.¹⁷ Its later revised edition became the last volume of the first six-volume edition of the KB. The combination of critical scholarship with pietism resulted in a relatively accurate and highly cultivated rendering of the text. According to Blahoslav, the reverence for Scripture should be reflected also in a translation with a rich and refined vocabulary, cultured syntax, and graceful literary style. Therefore he opted for traditional, even archaic Czech, especially that of the old sacred writings. His New Testament translation experience prompted Blahoslav to write a handbook of Czech grammar. By finishing it just a few months before his death (1571), he paved the way for the translators of the Old Testament. Faithful to these ideals, the whole KB acquired a pathos and pa-

¹⁴Janel R. Rice, “The Biblical View of the Ancient *Unitas Fratrum*,” *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church* 13/3 (2006) 3.

¹⁵As quoted by M. Strupl in “Jan Blahoslav, ‘Father and Charioteer of the Lord’s People in the *Unitas Fratrum*,” in M. Recheigl, ed., *Czechoslovakia Past and Present* (The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1968) 10.

¹⁶The KB is regarded by many as “the finest extant specimen of classical Czech” and “a landmark in Czech literature.” See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/323196/Kralice-Bible> (accessed April 20, 2011). See also <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/615379/Unitas-Fratrum> (accessed April 20, 2011).

¹⁷Its publication was illegal because the Council of Trent decided on the Vulgate’s magisterial authority in 1546.

tina that attracted and fascinated unsophisticated and intellectuals alike from its birth to the present day.

The work of translating the Old Testament and revising the New Testament started in 1577 and took a team of seven translators and three assistants seventeen years to complete. The first edition appeared in six large volumes, because, besides Scripture, it contained much extrabiblical material, such as introductions, text-critical notes, word studies, commentaries, summaries, cross-references, and beautiful artistic decoration. As Kyas writes, this edition was to substitute for a whole theological library of the Brethren pastors and congregations, so its notes and comments contained the summary of the Brethren's religious views and church apologetic as well as their essential common dogmatic (*loci communes*).¹⁸ A single-volume edition for wider public use came out two years later (1596), without the exegetical notes and comments, but with helpful cross-references and registers. The third authentic revised edition of the KB in 1613 (also a single volume without the notes) became the standard text for many revised editions up to the New KB published in 2009.¹⁹

The window of opportunity for another Czech Bible Protestant translation closed down for centuries. Starting with the Thirty Years War and the Counter-Reformation all the way to the First and Second World Wars and the domination of communism, Czech, Moravian, and Slovak Protestant movements fought many battles for their very existence and identity against their enemies—and among themselves. However, they all believed that one battle had already been won—the battle for their own Scripture—and they carried the KB with them as a torch in the dark times.

THE KB AND THE KJV

There are many intriguing parallels between the KJV and the KB. True, their starting points were very different. The KJV had the support of the Church of England and the king, while the KB was the illegal product of a persecuted Christian minority movement. The KJV project had a host of Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster scholars at its disposal, while the Brethren needed to train a handful of their scholars abroad. In the end, however, both translations became dominant for the Protestant churches worshiping in these languages for over three centuries.²⁰ Both Bibles were authorized by these churches, and some adherents even regarded them as inspired texts.

When looking for reasons behind the success of these Bibles, one must not

¹⁸Kyas, *Česká Bible*, 188. A detailed study of these notes and comments by J. B. Souček showed that the Brethren were clearly Protestants, more Calvinist than Lutheran in their theology. See J. B. Souček, *Theologie výkladů kralické šestidílnky* (Praha: Královská česká společnost nauk, 1933).

¹⁹This continuity as well as the need for a new KB is beautifully illustrated in a ten-minute video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_J8GbiUMo0 (accessed April 19, 2011).

²⁰Slovak Lutheran worship was almost exclusively in the Czech language of KB until the second half of the nineteenth century.

forget their prehistory. As shown above, the authors of the KB clearly built on the work of their predecessors: the seeds planted by the Salonika brothers and nurtured by heroes of faith like Jan Hus. The history of the English Bible may be shorter, but certainly not short of its own heroes like John Wycliffe or William Tyndale.

As for the milieu of the translations, one can point to an extraordinary and very fortunate combination of social, churchly, and economic factors that nurtured both projects. Contributing social factors included the era of relative peace, humanism with its appreciation of elegant language and art, and the striving for religious and political independence. The church factors included primarily the Reformation—with its emphasis on Scripture, on the “back to the original” rendering of its text, and on the need for a Bible that could be comprehended by every believer—along with the intellectual credentials of the translators and their respect for church tradition as reflected in dignified language. Subsequent authorization of these translations and their liturgical use ensured their dominance for centuries. The economic factors are rather obvious: the invention of the printing press allowed for the widespread dissemination of affordable Bibles, and the involvement of well-to-do individuals and organizations enabled first-class education for talented scholars, material support for the work on the translations, and investment in their publishing.

All things considered, such a *kairos* for Bible translation must be of God—the divine gift of a rare and unique historical opportunity. If we as a church or individuals are not to miss another such kairotic moment, we need to prepare for and recognize the opportunity. Such preparation is the ongoing task of *ora et labora* (pray and work), especially in the field of exegesis and biblical languages. Learning about the history of our Bibles will certainly help us recognize the *kairos* for yet another translation. ⊕

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