
The Influence of the Foreign Bible Societies in the Development of Balkan Literary Languages: The Greek Experience

NOMIKOS MICHAEL VAPORIS

AMONG THE GREEKS the language question, that, is, what shall be the language of the Greek people antedates both the establishment of the Greek state and the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

Blessed and/or cursed with a linguistic and literary heritage that included Classical, Hellenistic, and Byzantine elements, the Greeks had a rich fare to choose from when it came time to discuss the question of a literary language. Even before the Greek Revolution, many Greeks had already joined various competing camps: the Attic or archaic, the demotic, and the purist. The latter, headed by Adamantios Koraes, attempted to serve as a compromise between the first two.¹

It was in such a domestic linguistic controversy that the British and Foreign Bible Society entered the scene with the introduction of its editions of the Scripture translated into what can be described as a kind of demotic Greek.² In fact, it was

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¹For a very useful summary account of the language question, see Peter Bien, *Kazantzakis and the Linguistic Revolution in Greek Literature* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 13-27, and the older study by Manoles Triantaphyllides, *Νεοελληνική Γραμματική: Τόμος Πρώτος, 'Ιστορική Εισαγωγή* (Athens, 1938).

²For the various editions of the Scriptures translated into modern Greek, see T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scriptures in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 2 vols (London, 1911).

only three years after its founding in March 1804 that the British and Foreign Bible Society, whose purpose was the distribution of the Christian Bible in as many understandable languages and countries as possible "without note or comment,"³ turned its attention to the Greeks for the first time. Within two years, reacting favorably to a report made by the Reverend John F. Usko, chaplain to the British Station in Smyrna, the Society ordered the printing and distribution of five thousand copies of Maximos Kallipolites' modern Greek translation of the New Testament (first printed in 1638 in Geneva, with the approval and support of Patriarch Kyrillos I Loukaris (1620-1638) from the edition prepared by Anastasios Michaelos of Naousa, in Halle, Saxony in 1710.⁴ Encouraged by what it considered to be a favorable response to its efforts, the Bible society proceeded with another printing in 1814.

Meanwhile, some opposition to this activity was noted, especially among clergymen and monks due primarily to the absence of any patriarchal approbation. Patriarchal approval was therefore sought by the Reverend John Lindsay, chaplain to the British Embassy at Constantinople. Patriarch Kyrillos VI (1813-1818) not only issued a letter in support of the translation (unwisely omitted in the edition), but also applauded the work of the Bible Society.⁵

Kallipolites' translation, however, was by this time nearly two hundred years old. The man chosen to produce a new translation, in a language closer to that spoken by the people,

2, pp. 680-81; T. Xanthopoulos, "Traductions de l'écriture Sainte en néo-grec avant le XIX siècle," *Echoes d'Orient*, 5 (1903) 321-32; idem, "Les denrées traductions de l'écriture Sainte en néo-grec," *ibid.*, 6 (1903) 230-40. A more recent account is Helene Kakoukides, *Για τη μετάφραση της Καινής Διαθήκης, ιστορία, κριτική, απόψεις, βιβλιογραφία* (Thessaloniki 1970).

³See my "The Translation of the Scriptures and the Ecumenical Patriarchate: The Translation Efforts of Hilarion of Tirvano," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 1 (1975) 142.

⁴For the history of these early translations, see my "Patriarch Kyrillos Loukares and the Translation of the Scriptures into Modern Greek," *Ἐκκλησιαστικός Φάρος* 60 (1978) 227-41.

⁵Vaporis, "The Translation of the Scriptures," pp. 145-46.

was the learned Archimandrite Hilarion of Mount Sinai, later Metropolitan of Tirnovo in Bulgaria.⁶ Hilarion was acceptable to both the Patriarchate and the Bible Society, represented by the Reverend Charles Williamson, the new chaplain of the Levant Company in Smyrna.

The election of Patriarch Gregorios V (for the third time) on 14 December 1818, did not bring about any change in policy. Despite his very conservative and traditionalist stance, his opposition to the New Learning challenging the Greeks since the middle of the eighteenth century, and his almost fanatic opposition to the ideas of the French Revolution, Patriarch Gregorios was a firm advocate of religious education, which included the translation of the Scriptures and their reading by ordinary folk in their spoken language.⁷

Articles of agreement for the translation of the entire Bible, including the books commonly called Apocrypha by Protestants but retained by the Orthodox, were, therefore, drawn up and approved by Patriarch Gregorios and the Reverend Robert Pinkerton on behalf of the Society in April 1820. The Patriarch also approved of the translation of the New Testament in Albanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish.⁸

Early in April of the next year, a group of Turks burst into the grounds of the Patriarchate where they arrested Patriarch Gregorios, together with a number of hierarchs and other clergymen, and did considerable damage to various buildings and their contents. Also damaged was the Patriarchal Press which at the time was beginning to print the Gospel of Matthew in the modern Greek translation of Hilarion of Tirnovo.⁹

On April 10, the Ottoman government carried out the execution of the Patriarch together with many clergymen and lay leaders of the Greek people, many of whom were state

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 148-49.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 152 and T. Gritsopoulos, «Γρηγόριος Ε΄ ὁ Πατριάρχης τοῦ Ἑθνους,» *Δελτίον τῆς Ἱστορικῆς καὶ Ἑθνολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας Ἑλλάδος*, 14 (1960) 182-84.

⁸Vaporis, "The Translation of the Scriptures," pp. 155-56.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 158-60.

employees. These actions inaugurated a reign of terror against the Greeks of Constantinople and of other areas of the Ottoman Empire. All this was in response to the outbreak of the Greek Revolution, first in Moldavia (22 February 1821) and a month later in the Peloponnesos.

These events naturally not only affected the political future of the Greek people but also significantly altered the relationship between the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Ecumenical Patriarchate in general.

Specifically, the events of April 1821 removed a patriarch who, although a traditionalist, supported the aims of the Bible Society to make available the Scriptures to the Greeks in their spoken language. Second, the printing of the translated Scriptures by the Patriarchal Press, which alone constituted a kind of imprimatur, was permanently halted, though it did later print other translations of the Scriptures, notably Turkish. And finally, the events of April 1821 caused the Church of Constantinople to return to traditionalist policies as an effort to restore the *status quo ante* as it existed before the Greek Revolution. This meant a retreat from the use of demotic Greek, no translated Scriptures, and the severing of all relationships with the British and Foreign Bible Society which was now viewed as a foreign and outside element.

I am not suggesting that in the absence of the Greek Revolution, the cooperation between the Bible Society and the Patriarchate would have proceeded without difficulty, but only that the printing of the translated Scriptures on the Patriarchal Press would have served, by and large, to remove the Greek Church and many of its clergymen from the ranks of those who would later violently oppose spoken Greek as the national, literary, and official language of the Greek people. The publication of the translation of the Scriptures—the most sacred of texts in the Greek language—by the Church of Constantinople would have greatly weakened, if not eliminated, the argument that the translation of the Bible into modern Greek was contributing to the corruption and destruction of the Orthodox faith and the Greek language. In the very least, the language

controversy would not have taken the very disputatious, turbulent, and at times, violent course that it did take, leading to public demonstrations and even deaths in the streets of Athens as late as the beginning of the present century over the translations of the New Testament by Alexander Pallis and that sponsored by Queen Olga of Greece.¹⁰

Meanwhile, in Constantinople, Hilarion's translation was rejected and permission was refused for it to even be printed elsewhere. Although not all the bishops went along with this negative policy, for some continued to welcome the agents of the Bible Society and the Scriptures in translation as late as 1827,¹¹ the opposition became nearly unanimous when the Bible Society implemented two decisions taken earlier. These would contribute to ending the effective activity of the Bible Society within the Patriarchal See of Constantinople and would have dire consequences when the Society shifted its attention to the newly founded Kingdom of Greece. In short, the Bible Society decided to exclude the so-called Apocrypha from its editions of the Old Testament, an action, by the way, also protested by the Bible Societies of Berlin, Stockholm, and Saint Petersburg, and to employ the Hebrew text as a basis for its translation instead of the Septuagint, in use among the Greeks since the first century.¹²

ALTHOUGH THE GREEKS WERE nearly unanimous in their enthusiasm over their liberation from the Ottoman Turks, Greek leaders were far from united as to the direction of the new state and the orientation of its people.

There were those who wished to set Greece upon a secular Westernizing course, reaping the fruits of the Enlightenment.

¹⁰The story of the controversy over translating the Scriptures into modern Greek in the twentieth century is told by Emmanuel Konstantinides, *Τὰ Εὐαγγελικά. Τὸ πρόβλημα τῆς μεταφράσεως τῆς Ἀγίας Γραφῆς εἰς τὴν Νεοελληνικὴν καὶ τὰ αἰματηρὰ γεγονότα τοῦ 1901* (Athens, 1976).

¹¹Vaporis, "The Translation of the Scriptures," p. 170.

¹²On the controversy over the Apocrypha, see George Bourne, *The History of the British and Foreign Bible Society: From its Institution in 1804 to the Close of its Jubilee in 1854, Compiled at the Request of the Jubilee Committee*, 2 vols. (London, 1859), 1, pp. 94, 97, 101.

while others turned for their source of inspiration to the more traditional and spiritual resources of the Orthodox Church. Among the issues raised were the separation and independence of the Church in Greece, the validity of the Orthodox (Byzantine) tradition, the nature and breadth of Greek nationalism, and the question of the Greek language.¹³ Only the first issue—that of the Church—was a post-Revolution subject; the others had their origin as early as the middle of the eighteenth century. All these and many others would be vigorously and acrimoniously debated, especially during the first two decades after independence.

Just as during the Revolution, so too after it, the Greeks initially welcomed all foreigners who had something to contribute. This welcome included agents of the Bible Society as well as American Protestant missionaries. All at first appeared to have subordinated their denominational religious views and emphasized general Christian principles that appeared acceptable to many Greeks both from the pulpit and the classroom. There developed in fact what we could describe today as a genuine spirit of ecumenism: Protestant literature in “demotic” Greek translation was widely and freely distributed along with the New Testament; Protestant clergymen established a number of schools; they were invited to Orthodox services where they preached, while Orthodox clergymen participated in funerals of deceased Protestants.¹⁴

But this situation changed dramatically when the activities of the agents of the Bible Society and of the missionaries did not remain acts of pure philanthropy. The home offices expected converts,¹⁵ and the Bible Society’s decision to exclude

¹³Vaporis, “Neophytos Vamvas and the Translation of the Scriptures in Greece” in N. M. Vaporis (ed.), *Post Byzantine Ecclesiastical Personalities*. The Byzantine Fellowship Lectures, Number Three (Brookline, MA, 1978), pp. 37-38.

¹⁴For an excellent account and appraisal of Protestant missionaries and agents of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Greece, see Georgios Metallinos, *Tò ζήτημα τῆς μεταφράσεως τῆς Ἀγίας Γραφῆς εἰς τὴν Νεοελληνικὴν κατὰ τὸν Ι΄ αἰ.* (Athens, 1977), pp. 70-119, 345-95.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

the Apocrypha and to reject the Septuagint as the text for the new translation it had initiated and funded to be translated by a team headed by the clergyman Neophytos Vamvas betrayed, according to many, the denominational prejudice of the “deceitful Anglo-Americans,”¹⁶ as the agents of the Bible Society and the missionaries were characterized.

According to the clergyman Konstantinos Oikonomou, the leader of the traditionalists in Greece, Greek children in schools run by Protestants were not taught “either to make the sign of the cross, or about icons, or the names of the saints, or their intercession, or concerning memorial services, or about fasts . . . so that just by silence the children unlearn the traditions (*ta patria*) while all truths of the faith are restricted only to the text of the Sacred Scriptures, as they are interpreted by the missionaries.”¹⁷

Although the work of the Bible Society and that of the missionaries was not exactly similar, the traditionalists saw very little difference between them, for the former supplied the missionaries with one of their chief tools, the vernacular Scriptures. The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece was willing, for a moment, to concede that the circulation of the Scriptures in the vernacular by the agents of the British and Foreign Bible Society was a good thing, but it could not ignore the fact that the Scriptures were accompanied by a flood of other books, pamphlets, and tracts, written in modern Greek, similar to the language used in translating, which openly and directly challenged Greek Orthodox traditions, services, and basic doctrines.¹⁸ Especially objectionable were four titles, cited specifically for their pro-Protestant and anti-Orthodox bias: Samuel H. Wilson’s *The Young Minister’s Companion*,¹⁹

¹⁶Vaporis, “Neophytos Vamvas,” p. 56.

¹⁷Konstantinos Oikonomos, *Tà σωζόμενα ἐκκλησιαστικά συγγράμματα*, 3 vols. (Athens, 1864-1865), 3, pp. 297-98.

¹⁸For the text of the Synod’s memorandum, see Oikonomos, *Tà σωζόμενα*, 2, pp. 303-04.

¹⁹Τοῦ κλήρου ὁ ὁδηγός (Malta, 1929).

Timotheos Philokleros, *Palaionomia, An Epistle to the Reverend Clergy in Greece*,²⁰ John Tillotson, *A Discourse Against Transubstantiation*,¹⁹ and Andres Dunn, *History of the Latin Church in Ireland*.²² Moreover, the Synod appraised the circulating of the translated Bible as having one purpose, the spread of heterodoxy. The Synod dismissed the concept that the Scriptures could be taught "objectively." Protestants, the Synod was convinced, could only teach in a Protestant manner.²³

Clergymen like Neophytos Vamvas and Theoleptos Pharmakides, disciples of Koraes, tried to defend the Bible Society and even the Protestant missionaries.²⁴ The latter, Vamvas argued, had as their purpose education and enlightenment. Moreover, he tried to make a clear distinction between the missionaries and the Bible Society. Vamvas denied the charge that the Bible Society hoped by its circulation of the translated Scriptures to change the faith of the Greeks. On the contrary, Vamvas believed that their work was motivated only by the desire to help the Greeks who lacked the financial resources required to publish the Bible. The work of the agents of the Bible Society, Vamvas argued, was also due to the honor they held for the illustrious ancestors of the Greeks and to the sympathy they felt for the trials of slavery suffered under the Turks.²⁵

Both Pharmakides and Vamvas also came out in support of the use of the Hebrew text for the translation. Both had been to school in Western Europe and were certain that they

²⁰Παλαιονομία, ἥτοι ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς τὸ ἐν Ἑλλάδι σεβασμιώτατον ἱερατεῖον καὶ ἀπαντας τοὺς Ἑλληνας . . . (Malta, 1927).

²¹Λόγος τοῦ περιφήμου Τίλλτσονος, ἀρχιεπισκόπου τῆς ἐν Ἀγγλίᾳ Καντερβούρεως, κατὰ τῆς μετουσιώσεως . . . (Malta, 1927).

²²Ἱστορία τῆς εἰς τὴν Ἱρλανδίαν Λατινικῆς Ἐκκλησίας (Malta, 1927).

²³Οἰκονομου, Τὰ σωζόμενα 2, p. 304.

²⁴See, for example, in Vamvas' Σύντομος ἀπάντησις πρὸς τὸν ὑποκρυπτόμενον ὑπὸ ΖΑΡ πατέρα τῆς πρὸ ὀλίγου διαδοθείσης ἀνασχύντου ἐπιστολῆς περὶ τοῦ 'Τις ὁ ὑποκρυμμένος σκοπὸς τῶν εἰς τὴν Ἑλλάδα ἱεραποστόλων τῆς Βιβλικῆς Ἑταιρείας, κ.τ.λ. (Athens, 1836), pp. 13-14.

²⁵Σύντομος ἀπάντησις p. 14.

were right since their opinions were also shared by many in "enlightened" Europe. This fact alone was enough for them to insist on their views. In addition, the Septuagint was the traditional text, the one approved and sanctioned by the Patriarch of Constantinople with whom all relations had been severed with little or no desire for the resumption.

Although not articulated in so many words, the attitude of those represented by Pharmakides and Vamvas toward the "old" and "traditional," synonymous for them in many instances with "Byzantine" and with "Turkish," represented by the Church of Constantinople, clearly contributed to their holding fast to the Hebrew text. There was present among the liberal-minded Greeks in the decade after liberation a spirit that sought to make a fresh start in as many areas as possible. The Church and its traditions were not to be exceptions.

When Koraes was cited as a witness in support of the Hebrew text, the traditionalists acknowledged the respect in which Koraes was held by the entire Greek nation, praised his learning, his profound knowledge of literature, and his work in education, but labeled him a novice in religion. A "layman," declared Germanos the preacher, a traditionalist spokesman, "has no right to dare intervene in the Church regardless of how learned he is and what office he holds. He remains a sheep always and not a shepherd."²⁶ "Even the King," Germanos argued in another edition of the newspaper *Evangelike Salpigx*, "does not dare to perform sacerdotal duties; to ordain or celebrate any of the sacraments or services, so he must not dare to order or to govern spiritual matters which are not any less holy."²⁷ In fact, he went on to say that any Greek who found himself in disagreement with these principles was not in fact a true Greek and was unworthy of his ancestors.

Although Koraes was not alive during the translation controversy in Greece, his work *Synekdemos Hieratikos (The Priestly Companion)*, republished in 1835 by the American

²⁶Εὐαγγελικὴ Σάλπιγξ, No. 33, August 23, 1835, p. 267.

²⁷Ibid., No. 35, September 7, 1835, p. 274.

Press in Malta, provoked a great uproar in Greece, especially among traditional circles. Not only did *The Priestly Companion* contain two modern Greek translations of the Pastoral Epistles (Maximos Kallipolites' and Koraes') but a lengthy introduction and commentary. In the introduction, Koraes attacked, among other things, "superstition" among the Greeks, the length of services, the emphasis on fasting, the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, the love of the clergy for vain and empty titles, and the distinction between the offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon, and the neglect of the Church to emphasize the fulfillment of Christ's teaching on equality, peace, justice, and equal rights.²⁸

The reaction to Koraes' book was violent. The traditionalists could not and would not make the distinction between doctrine and discipline, and looked upon Koraes' ideas as advocating Presbyterianism and as an attack on the entire ecclesiastical, if not doctrinal, tradition of the Orthodox Church. Nor did it go unnoted that his criticisms were in a volume containing a translation of a part of the New Testament. Thereafter Koraes' reputation could no longer be invoked with any success in promoting the translated Scriptures.

In the final analysis, both the Church of Greece and the Patriarchate of Constantinople rejected the translated Scriptures. Later liberal and westernizing Greeks, who normally would have supported the translation and the efforts of the Bible Society, found themselves in opposition, caught up as they were in the revival of classicism, which advocated among other things a turn toward classical Greek, and in the fervor of the *Great Idea*.

In conclusion, it can be said that the advocacy and support of the British and Foreign Bible Society for the Scriptures in the vernacular did not contribute to the advancement of demotic Greek as a literary language but contributed greatly to its being discredited. The opponents of the translated Bible were successful in identifying it and many of its supporters

²⁸See pp. ix, xi, xviii, xx.

with heresy, that is, Protestantism, with the effort to destroy the unity of the Orthodox Church, its faith and traditions, and with the vulgarization of the Greek language. Finally, perhaps their most weighty argument of all, for it spoke directly to those who ran the Greek state, they accused their opponents of supporting a restricted and parochial view of the Greek state and people and opposing the broader national aspirations, that is, the implementation of the *Great Idea*. The adoption of demotic Greek as the official and national language would have differentiated the Greeks of Greece and those of the Ottoman Empire and, therefore, would have undermined the unity of Hellenism.