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Writing the Slavic Bible Commentary: History and Approach

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RÉSUMÉ

La production d'un commentaire sur l'ensemble de la Bible par des auteurs appartenant à la communauté évangélique d'Europe de l'est paraissait à beaucoup une entreprise impossible, mais en octobre 2016, un tel commentaire a été présenté à Kiev en Ukraine. Il s'intitule « Le commentaire slave de la Bible » et est le produit de 94 contributeurs issus de l'ancienne Union soviétique. Cet article résume l'histoire de la production de cet ouvrage en exposant le besoin qui l'a suscitée. Il explique pourquoi ce commentaire s'adresse aux prédicateurs et aux responsables laïcs et comment il s'efforce

de répondre aux questions qui se posent actuellement dans le contexte européen de l'est. Il présente l'intention d'ensemble et l'approche herméneutique élaborée par dix représentants de diverses parties du monde évangélique. Il accorde une attention particulière à l'herméneutique orientée vers la communauté et basée sur une approche canonique. Il analyse aussi les faiblesses de ce commentaire et indique des perspectives pour son devenir futur. On peut s'attendre à ce que la communauté herméneutique qui a travaillé à la réalisation de ce projet pendant six ans puisse contribuer de manière importante à l'épanouissement de la théologie évangélique dans cette partie du monde.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Nicht viele haben an die Möglichkeit geglaubt, dass einheimische Autoren aus dem evangelikalen Spektrum Osteuropas einen Kommentar zur gesamten Bibel schreiben und herausbringen würden. Doch im Oktober 2016 wurde ein derartiger Kommentar in Kiev (Ukraine) vorgestellt. Es ist der *Slavic Bible Commentary* (SBC, Slawischer Kommentar zur Bibel), und er weist über 94 einheimische Autoren aus der früheren Sowjetunion auf. Der vorliegende Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die Geschichte des Projekts und erläutert dessen Notwendigkeit. Er erklärt, weshalb dieser Kommentar für Prediger und Prädikanten geschrieben wurde und

wie er zeitgenössische Fragen, die im osteuropäischen Kontext entstehen, zu beantworten sucht. Herausgestellt werden das Gesamtkonzept und der hermeneutische Ansatz, der von zehn Vertretern verschiedener evangelikaler Gruppierungen entwickelt wurde. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit wird einer Hermeneutik gewidmet, die auf Gemeinschaft und Kanon basiert. Die Schwächen des Kommentars wie auch die Möglichkeiten künftiger Entwicklung werden erörtert. Es besteht die Erwartung, dass die hermeneutische Gemeinschaft, die sich im Lauf der sechsjährigen Zusammenarbeit an diesem Projekt gebildet hat, in der Lage ist, wesentlich zur künftigen Entwicklung evangelikaler Theologie in diesem Teil der Welt beizutragen.

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SUMMARY

Not many believed that the writing and production of a commentary on the whole Bible by national authors from the evangelical community of Eastern Europe was possible, but in October 2016 such a commentary was presented in Kyiv (Ukraine). It is called the *Slavic Bible Commentary* (SBC) and it has 94 national contributors from the former USSR. This article provides an overview over the history of the project and explains the need

for it. It will explain why this commentary is designed for preachers and lay ministers and how it attempts to answer contemporary questions arising in the Eastern European context. The overall concept and hermeneutical approach developed by ten representatives of various evangelical groups will be highlighted. Special attention is given to the community-based and canon-based hermeneutics. The commentary's weaknesses as well as prospects of further development are discussed. It is expected that the hermeneutical community formed

during the six years of working on this project will be able to contribute substantially to the further development of

the evangelical theology in this part of the world.

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1. Introduction

The year 2016 was the year when the first commentary on the whole Bible by national authors from Eastern Europe, the SBC, was published. The event received good publicity in Ukrainian evangelical and academic circles; the reaction of society in general and government officials was also positive. As the head of the Ukrainian Committee for Religions, Andrey Yurash,¹ said at a press conference on 30 September 2016:

The publication of this book is definitely an important event in the spiritual, theological and religious life of our entire society. It is not just a book. It is a foundational, encyclopaedic, and expository collection of texts that will be widely used by pastors, religious studies scholars and all those who are interested in [religion].²

In his speech at the academic presentation of the commentary in the Ukrainian National Dragomanov University, the leading expert in religious studies, Anatoly Kolodny,³ stated: ‘...with such a commentary, a minister of any denomination is able to prepare a high-quality lesson for his Sunday school.’⁴

This short article seeks to elucidate for the European theological community the context, the history and the overall philosophy of the SBC and to highlight its main hermeneutical principles. It also shows the opportunities and the future directions for the research and for the development of the written theological tradition in this part of the world.

2. Bible translation and commentaries

The need for a Bible commentary was felt practically immediately after the publication of the so-called ‘Synodal Translation’ of the Bible in the nineteenth century.⁵

The history of the vernacular Bible translation into Russian is complicated and somewhat dramatic.⁶ The translation began as the result of an edict of the Russian Emperor Alexander I in 1816. Sabotaged several times,⁷ the process was only completed 60 years later, in 1876, when another Alexander (II) was the Emperor.

In 1881-1882 in St Petersburg the first Bible without the Apocrypha and inserts from the Septuagint was published. In 1994 the Russian Bible Society revised this canonical text and published it with a modernised spelling. The Synodal Translation was by far the most widespread Bible version in the Soviet Union and in the countries that emerged after its dissolution. Since the 1990s, many translations into the national languages of Eastern Europe have appeared, among them as many as ten new Russian translations!⁸ Yet the Orthodox, Catholic and most evangelical churches still mainly use the Synodal translation; for the evangelicals it has practically become a liturgical text.

As soon as this translation was published, the need for a commentary on it became obvious. First of all, the biblical text – written in the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures – required interpretation for an audience living in a Slavic context. As Eckhard J. Schnabel explains, readers need an explanation ‘if and when the text is removed in time and culture from the original context’.⁹ Secondly, the Orthodox mentality tends to ‘sacralise’ texts, which creates certain hermeneutical barriers for understanding.¹⁰ The sacred text is held to be qualitatively different: unlike other books and magazine articles, it is not perspicuous, but requires a commentator to explain its meaning. This tendency is strengthened by the fact that all Eastern theology of the post-patristic period is based on commenting on the Church Fathers rather than on independent development. This way of doing theology teaches readers to interact more with commentaries than with the original text.

And indeed, immediately after the publication of the Synodal Bible the Holy Synod issued an edict about creating expository notes to the text. This task was assigned to Kyiv Spiritual Academy. As early as January 1877 its professor A. A. Olesnitzky presented the rules and principles to be followed in writing such a commentary, but the first commentary on the Synodal Bible only appeared more than 25 years later – in 1903.¹¹ Called ‘The Expository Bible’, it was compiled by Alexander Lopukhin who oversaw the work of at

least nineteen authors.¹²

After the 1917 revolution the Soviet Union became an atheist country. The Bible was banned and no writing of commentaries was possible. Only in 1985, the World Council of Churches succeeded in translating and publishing William Barclay's commentaries.¹³ The evangelical Christians in the USSR had only one journal (*Bratsky Vestnik* – 'The Brethren Harbinger') and once in a while it was allowed to publish commentaries on some of the books of the Bible.¹⁴

3. Western commentaries

After the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' Eastern Europe was soon flooded with translations of Western Bible commentaries.¹⁵ Among the most popular authors are William McDonald, John Stott, Donald Carson, Craig Keener and John McArthur. But those books were mostly written in an Anglo-Saxon context and focus on issues relevant to it. Besides, most of these commentaries were written from a reformed perspective and some from an Orthodox or Catholic standpoint, whereas in the Slavic churches the Anabaptist tradition dominates. There are still hardly any commentaries that reflect the Anabaptist perspective in the Russian-speaking environment. This situation created some tension and it limits the acceptance of Western commentaries.

The evangelical churches in this region have a great need for textbook-type materials for pastors, Sunday-school teachers, preachers and other ministers, but there are practically no commentaries designed for this audience. Here one should note an important feature of the worship service in the Slavic churches that differs from what is practised in Baptist and other evangelical churches in the West. In East-European churches, pastors' sermons are unusual and rather rare. Normally the two-hour worship service includes three or even four sermons by lay preachers. These are usually people who are employed outside the church and who do not preach often. As a rule they have only a basic theological education and time constraints prevent them from preparing any high-quality sermons. Besides, many of them find it difficult to connect the biblical message with real-life situations. They do not analyse contemporary social and moral issues from a biblical perspective. The problems of urban life, the social, cultural and philosophical challenges often escape their attention. This is understandable since preaching is not their main

occupation. However, strange as it may sound, most of the translated commentaries contain deep theological, exegetical and/or historical analyses of the text; they seem to be meant for seminary students, teachers and theologians, rather than for the lay preachers in the East-European churches.

4. Into the gap

In the current situation there is an obvious need for a holistic commentary oriented toward a wide audience of East-European readers with a post-Soviet mentality who live in the third millennium, but no-one had offered to write such a commentary. This is why from the beginning of the new millennium the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (EAAA) was considering the idea of a Slavic Bible Commentary as a part of a global project to encourage contextual reading of the Bible. This project was initiated by the *Langham Partnership International* for different continents.¹⁶ The main goal of this series of regional commentaries is to help preachers and ministers of the Church to bear witness to Christ in their own context.

On 11 October 2008 the Board of the EAAA decided to create a committee that would prepare the general concept of the SBC, and in January 2011 the Editorial Board for the project was formed with as members V. Alikin, T. Diatlyk, A. Geichenko, M. Mokienko, P. Penner, G. Pshenichny, F. Raichinets, S. Sannikov and R. Solovyi. Later on, a literary editor, Y. Ustinovych, joined them. Sannikov was selected as the Chief Editor.

The Editorial Board began working in close cooperation with the head of *Langham Literature*, Pieter Kwant; throughout the process, he kept helping with advice and fundraising, and he kept sharing his experience of working on a similar project – the *Africa Bible Commentary*.¹⁷ The Board met twice a year in various cities (Kyiv, Jerusalem, Moscow, Minsk *et al.*) and held monthly Skype-meetings. During the first year of the work guidelines for the authors were developed. They specified the principles and the requirements the authors were to hold to. The biblical text was to be divided into paragraphs, not on a verse-by-verse basis. The entire size of the SBC was calculated to be two million words.

The selection of the national authors began in March 2012; more than 120 candidates applied, who had to meet certain criteria (education,

interest in theology, church membership) and to submit sample texts. The Editorial Board selected 43 authors for writing the commentaries on the books of the Bible and 51 authors for writing articles on ethical, theological and socially significant themes. Altogether there were 94 contributors representing various evangelical traditions (Baptists, Pentecostals, members of other evangelical churches) who had grown up in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and other countries where the Synodal Translation is used.

The work on the commentaries and the articles took some 4½ years. The process involved multiple meetings and consultations with every author. Draft texts were meticulously analysed, discussed and reworked in cooperation with the theological and literary editors, proof-readers and the Chief Editor. On 29 August, 2016, the manuscript went to print and on 1 October 2016 the academic presentation of the book was held in the Kyiv National Pedagogical M. P. Dragomanov University.

5. Concept of the Commentary

The concept, the goal and the task of the SBC were specified in the Guidelines for Authors. The main idea is expressed in its subtitle, ‘Contemporary Evangelical Perspective’. The two adjectives describe the nature and the general direction of the volume. The SBC is ‘contemporary’ because it aims to show ways of practical application of the text to people who think in a postmodern way: indifferent to absolute truth claims, limited by time-constraints and often influenced by materialistic thinking. The authors were to take into account the issues in which a modern person is interested and to express their thoughts clearly, concisely and objectively. The 84 articles, embedded in the text in strategic places, turned out to be helpful for reaching this goal. Most articles discuss ethical and theological issues relevant for contemporary East-European readers, such as bribery/corruption, depression, counselling, conflicts and peacemaking, conformism, domestic violence, neo-paganism, suicide and social ministry. Some of the theological themes are likely to be relevant to the evangelical churches in a predominantly Orthodox environment: apostolic succession, theological virtues, magic and the occult, worship and liturgy, etc.

Making a contemporary commentary meant more than merely formulating contemporary questions and giving biblical answers. The idea of the

SBC is above all to show how the biblical text can be used by third-millennium readers. The authors were to focus on what the biblical text says to the people of twenty-first-century Eurasia rather than on what it said to the original audience. As Luke Timothy Johnson noted, discussing the approach used in his commentary:

The task of interpretation must begin with establishing the text, elucidating the Greek language, and identifying the cultural and historical contexts that make the compositions intelligible. A commentary ought not, however, end with that descriptive task, even though it is constrained by format and convention to provide help most directly in those matters. Occasionally in the commentary, I have tried to recapture the sense, once natural to all readers of 1 and 2 Timothy, not only that they speak for Paul the Apostle, but that through them Paul the Apostle speaks to us for God.¹⁸

The other important direction marker is the term ‘evangelical’. The Editorial Board aimed at producing a commentary for a variety of evangelical groups. The majority of them stem from the so-called ‘Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists’, the only Protestant association which was officially allowed in the Soviet Union.¹⁹ The SBC, however, was to demonstrate to adherents of other traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Catholic etc.) the characteristically evangelical view of Scripture.

The evangelical identity was defined not only by membership in a particular denomination, but also by a set of theological criteria that, on the one hand, correspond to the principles of the global evangelical movement. According to David Bebbington, these principles are conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism.²⁰ On the other hand, the guidelines for the authors were the Lausanne Agreement²¹ and EAAA’s statement of faith.²²

Judging from this perspective, the SBC represents the variety within the evangelical movement. Out of the 94 authors, 43 are Baptists, 22 Pentecostals, 20 Evangelical Christians. The rest of the authors represented the Mennonite, Presbyterian, Anglican and other evangelical groups. This representative sample reflects the real-life growth of the evangelical communities.

Seeking to create a commentary that would be relevant to readers from various evangelical groups, the Editorial Board was faced with the difficult task of approaching those texts that are

interpreted differently within the evangelical community; these differences resulted in divisions and separation within the group. Many previous commentaries had either not focussed the readers' attention on those texts at all or given a very general, irenic interpretation, avoiding the theological issues involved. Yet the Editorial Board decided not to ignore the difficult passages, but to offer the readers a variety of interpretations whilst trying to be as objective as possible and refraining from criticism. Thus the authors were to elucidate conflicting opinions by showing their strengths rather than attacking their weaknesses.

This decision implied a high level of trust in the readers, since the absence of the 'bottom-line' in discussing a biblical passage makes the readers judges of various opinions and encourages them to make the final decision in accordance with their tradition, context and the hermeneutical lenses adopted in their community of faith. The Board believes that the churches in East Europe are mature enough theologically to enable the reader to evaluate and select interpretations. The decision also implies a high level of trust in the authors, who are seen as mature enough to understand and analyse different opinions, thus creating a space for dialogue instead of vulgar, counterproductive arguing.

The goals of the SBC were clearly defined as 'a holistic literary-theological reading of the Holy Scripture with application of biblical truths to various aspects of Church and society'. These goals stem from the mission statement of the project: 'reading the biblical text in the light of relevant issues, helping the churches to hear in a new way the crucial truths of the Holy Scripture and to be renewed in the power of the Holy Spirit in order to bear witness to the Kingdom of God in the cultural context of the Eastern Europe in the third millennium.'

6. Hermeneutical approach

The entire hermeneutical system of the commentary is text-centred; therefore the issues of the hermeneutical context were only discussed briefly. The authors were not expected to give a historical, exegetical or theological explanation of the biblical text. This was not because the commentators neglected the historical-grammatical method, but rather because enough commentaries already exist which have been written from the classical exegetical perspective, analysing the historical context

of the biblical books; such commentaries do not always give satisfactory answers to questions relevant in Eastern Europe.

It is commonly known that the task of the historical-critical or historical-grammatical method is to discover the original authorial intent and to clarify historical and cultural issues 'behind the text'. The text itself is treated as a normal literary work written by different authors in different times. In spite of the advantages of this approach, scholars are not always able to reconstruct the true historical situation related to the text in question. In this case the commentator reconstructs the hermeneutical, rather than the authorial content. In other words, he/she reconstructs the environment in which the author of the biblical passage allegedly lived, but there is no way to tell whether such an environment existed and whether the author held the opinion ascribed to him by the commentator.

According to I. Howard Marshall,

The grammatico-historical method establishes by exegesis what Scripture was saying when it was originally written, and very often the message to be expounded and applied to us is essentially the same. More recent approaches examine Scripture from different viewpoints (e.g. a concern for the oppressed) and this may reveal new facets of its message, although some writers tend to judge Scripture and find it wanting and subordinate it to a secular authority. Evangelical theologians generally recognise that the precise application of Biblical teaching may need to be adapted to different social and cultural situations.²³

Aware of the limitations of the classical method and trying to avoid unnecessary speculation about historical and cultural aspects of the biblical books, the Editorial Board chose a text-centred approach in which the commentators sought to discover the meaning of the text itself, rather than in speculative 'behind the text' reconstructions. Thus the author-centred side of the classical historical-critical reading was not the main component of the Commentary's exegetical concept. This means that introductory questions of authorship, target audience, dating and the historical/cultural context were either reviewed only briefly or bypassed altogether, since the biblical text is treated as a whole in its canonical form. *The entire canonical text was treated as the one Word of God transmitted via different authors.*²⁴

The focus on the text, the emphasis on the canon as the object of interpretation, made possible the accent on the interrelatedness of the different parts and books of the canon as a single narrative. The Editorial Board believed it was important to show the unity of design and development of the biblical thought in order to help the readers base their understanding of the biblical truth in the context of the whole Scripture, rather than in single parts or fragments. The biblical focus was understood as *Christ-centred* and *mission-centred* reading, rather than trying to single out some doctrinal plot.

Christ-centredness was seen as an attempt to see the messianic meaning of the Old and the New Testament narrative through the lens of Jesus' divine nature and as intent to interpret the Old Testament from the perspective of the New. This corresponds to one of the main principles of Anabaptist hermeneutics – which is popular in the Slavic milieu – and runs contrary to the contemporary tendency to emphasise the chronological precedence of the Old Testament and, therefore, to affirm its independence from the New Testament. In the SBC Old Testament passages are interpreted from the standpoint of their theological essence as revealed in the New. The Christ-centred interpretation, traditional for the Church, was emphasised.

The mission-centeredness of the SBC comes from the Editorial Board's conviction that Bible and mission are inseparable. Thus the authors were advised to use three interpretative lenses, the first of which is the *missio Dei* revealed throughout the canon. The second lens was related to the missions of individual characters and the third one emphasised the role of the reader who, being at the centre of the interpretative process, is invited to participate in the mission of God. These messianic and mission-centred hermeneutics are based on the example of the interpretation that Christ himself gave after his resurrection, when he explained Old Testament prophecies to his disciples (Lk 24:27, 44). This approach allowed the commentators to see what is central in the biblical text and to focus the interpretation of each book of the Bible on this centre.

Naturally, the issues of unity and diversity within the biblical text were treated with regard to modern achievements in biblical studies, but the discussions in that area are not reflected in the SBC itself. Different interpretations (without referencing the sources) are only given in cases where they can help the reader to understand and apply a particular text better – to hear its message as one

of the voices in the orchestra, a voice that is of special importance and leads to a deeper understanding of the canon as a narrative whole.

7. Translation, transformation and community

Since the commentators were mainly interpreting the Russian Synodal Bible, in cases when this version differs from the critical editions of the Greek New Testament or the Masoretic text, the Editorial Board recommended to avoid polarisation and instead to broaden the interpretation of the Synodal text with the help of information from the manuscript evidence. Alternative readings were to be presented as options, without rejection of the traditional ones.

One of the most important tasks set before the authors and editors was to make the SBC *transformational*. Actually, this is a goal of almost any literary work: to influence potential readers so that they may act in a certain way. This aspect is even more important when it comes to God's truth. Therefore the explanation of every biblical paragraph, its literary-theological understanding and practical application were directed toward transforming the readers' worldview and values.

Since Holy Scripture does not only inform the readers about the events of biblical history, but also forms a biblical worldview, the commentators' task was to lead the reader by the way of literary-theological interpretation – not so much toward direct answers, but to a deeper understanding of the spirit of Scripture; thus readers are encouraged to find their own answers based on biblical principles. Therefore the commentators' objectives were three-fold: first, to discern the basic meaning of the passage (logical unit as a whole); secondly, to offer its theological interpretation; thirdly, to show how the passage can be applied to the contemporary Eastern European context. This is why the Commentary does not suggest any specific solutions; it contains only models and examples of applying the biblical truth. This type of commenting is expected to lead to the transformation of the daily life of the readers and of the entire Christian community – to a process in which both love and justice are revealed.

It is important to remember that the evangelical community in Eastern Europe was originally an oppressed minority, alienated from the rest of the society. The Bible was often read through the prism of the 'holy remnant' theology and the

theology of suffering. Mindful of that, the commentators seek to present a broader view of the interaction between Church and society in the context of the global evangelical movement: the Church is called not just to self-preservation but also to an active participation in God's transforming mission in the world.

Another important hermeneutical principle had to do with the *hermeneutical community*. The biblical text is canonical for the community and it requires a communal understanding. The idea of the hermeneutical community is rooted in the triune approach which affirms the unity of the text, the commentator and the reader. It was necessary to unite individual commentators into an entity that uses unified approaches, principles and methods. The hermeneutical community also means the readers' involvement. The biblical text becomes a sort of axis around which the authors are gathered, together with the editors and the readers with their diverse views and approaches.

In order to achieve this unity, the commentators and editors spent considerable time discussing the drafts of the commentary during face-to-face meetings and Skype-calls. These discussions resulted in numerous corrections. The individual contribution of each author, as well as his personal preferences and views, were taken into account, but all first drafts of comments and articles underwent several rounds of editing. Therefore, the final version is not a collection of individual texts, but the result of the collective effort by all the participants in the project, including the literary editors, the corrector, the technical designer and many others. This approach reflects the communal interpretation developed in the Eurasian context rather than the skills and expertise of individual commentators.

To help the readers enter the hermeneutical community, the commentator was to meet them where they were: the interpretation of the text was to take into the account their post-Soviet mentality, interpretative traditions and their communities' framework. But the next step consisted in carefully leading the readers away from their habit of reading into the text the accepted stereotypes and doctrinal convictions.

Sometimes worldview, traditions, history and other contextual factors will influence readers to see the biblical text only in a certain perspective and even to bring into it what was never there. Readers who see the text through the 'glasses' shaped by their community and context often need to have

their understanding of the text broadened and, in some cases, even corrected in order to understand what it is that the text seeks to transmit to them and to their communities of faith.

This approach means that the modernist presumption that the reader can be given 'the objective and the only true meaning' of a passage is replaced by the acceptance of the fact that the depth of every interpreted biblical text allows one to see a variety of mutually complementing aspects of meaning. Readers do not passively receive the only meaning of the biblical text, but become active participants in the process of interpretation. They analyse those multiple meanings and select what is perceived the most fitting one. God – the Author of the original plain meaning – reveals it in different ways in different contexts. A classic example is Psalm 22, in the way it is read in the Old Testament (verse 1) and the New Testament contexts (Mt 27:46).

8. Future development of the project

Among the strengths of the Commentary are its contextual and holistic nature, the contribution of the national authors, the literary-theological interpretation of the text, and the community-based hermeneutical discourse involving the reader. There are, however, weaknesses that indicate the direction for future development.

The most apparent weakness is the lack of theological analysis of the text. This has to do with the general level of theological education in Eurasia. Theological schools in this part of the world have too short a history to have developed their own theology. Most of the authors studied theology in the United States, and only several in Europe. Nearly all authors have a good knowledge of the Bible: they can study it in original languages, exegete passages and describe the historical context. Usually they are at home with the historical-critical method and the critical apparatus, but their theological training more often than not involved only studies in Systematic Theology.

Lack of background knowledge in the historical theology and even biblical theology turned out to be an obstacle for switching to the second stage of the work on the SBC. The Editorial Board defined that stage as discerning in the text theological principles that are above the cultural and historical context. Unfortunately, many authors to some extent lack philosophical-theological thinking – the kind of thinking that can generalise and

analyse the divine revelation given in Scripture, in the natural world, in society and its history. Commentators often failed to demonstrate this kind of thinking which would be capable of leading the reader to spiritual realities. It means that much effort still needs to be made in order to develop various forms of theological thinking in the former USSR.

Another weakness is the difficulty of applying the principle of the collegiality, which is vital to forming an effective hermeneutical community. The authors often suggested just one (sometimes, quite original) interpretation of the passage and were reluctant to accept its traditional and plain meaning. This position, quite understandable by itself, hardly fitted with the requirements of the Editorial Board. It has to be admitted that the post-Soviet mentality is not always open to being corrected; having one's interpretation enhanced and supplemented is not a painless process for some Eastern Slavic authors. Collegiality is still seen as an ideal that is to be achieved. In some cases, the commentators presented rather rigid opinions and their uncompromising attitudes became obstacles to a deeper understanding of the text.

The principle of the hermeneutical community also implies an extended and positive discussion of various opinions on difficult passages of Scripture. This turned out to be a rather complicated task. Naturally, the commentators had their own opinions and theories, but they were often critical of all opinions other than their own, whereas the Editorial Board insisted on the objective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of every interpretation mentioned in the Commentary. For a number of authors, the task of an intellectually honest presentation of different opinions was very difficult. Not all succeeded in carrying it out.

Some authors exhibited a lack of advanced planning;²⁵ as the result, the Editorial Board had to process an unexpectedly large amount of text during the last stage of working on the project. Due to such time constraints, some texts received less attention from the Editorial Board than they deserved. This, in turn, limited some advantages of the collegial approach and created additional difficulty for the literary editors and correctors. This is why some stylistic and orthographic irregularities made their way into the Commentary.

Evaluating these and many other factors, one has to admit that some texts are stronger than others. This means that the Editorial Board is to continue working on the Commentary in the

framework of a large translation project. This project includes translating the Commentary into the Georgian and Kazakh languages, developing re-worked English and Ukrainian versions, and publishing a second, revised and enhanced edition.

9. Conclusion

The publication of the SBC was a response to the challenges faced by the Christian community of the Eastern Europe with its need for interpretation of the biblical text. Although the Slavic evangelical movement is characterised by hermeneutical optimism – the belief that every person can read and understand the Bible –, the need for a high-quality commentary has been obvious.

Serious interpretation of the Bible requires a sophisticated, multifaceted hermeneutical system which takes into account the contextualisation of the Bible and its multiple meanings. The authors of the SBC, aware of contemporary tendencies in hermeneutics, have attempted to offer such a system. Its main features – holistic and canonical approach, contextual and community-based hermeneutics – give readers an opportunity to see the Bible beyond the 'there and then' interpretation, discovering its transformational potential and application 'here and now'.

The SBC is an important step in the interpretation of Scripture by East-European authors. Several aspects are in need of development and improvement, but its publication itself makes one hope to see similar commentaries written by adherents of other traditions. It is quite possible that something like 'Slavic Bible Commentary: A Contemporary Orthodox (or Catholic) Perspective' will soon be available.

It is important to note that this project resulted in creating a group of evangelical authors from Eastern Europe. For some of them it was their first experience in producing academic texts. This has created a potential for writing commentaries on individual books of the Bible and there is also hope for another community-based project: 'Theology in the Slavic Context'.

The SBC project did not fully achieve all the goals set before it and requires further development. The publication drew criticism both from liberal and fundamentalist circles, but that motivates the Editorial Board to carry on. In spite of the above-mentioned weaknesses and taking into account the fact that it is the first attempt, the project can be judged a success. This conclusion is

in part supported by the sales figures: in spite of a rather high retail price (by the Eastern European standards), two-thirds of the ten thousand copies printed were sold within two months after the date of publication.²⁶

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Endnotes

- 1 Andriy Yurash is the Head of the Department for Religions and Ethnicities in the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine.
- 2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBrrp6-I4z8 [accessed 18-12-2016].
- 3 Anatoliy Kolodnyi is the Director of the Religious Studies Department in the Skovoroda Institute of Philosophy at Ukraine's National Academy of Science.
- 4 www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7YFirZ1xIQ [accessed 18-12-2016].
- 5 This translation was called 'Synodal' because it was approved by the Holy Synod, which was the highest governing body in the Russian Orthodox Church. See Metropolitan Ilarion (Alfeyev), 'Istoriya I znachenie Sinodalnogo perevoda Bibliji' [History and meaning of the Synodal translation of the Bible] at <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/97562.html> [accessed 17-01-2017], a paper in Russian presented on 4 October 2016.
- 6 I. Chistovich, *Istoriya perevoda Bibliji na russkij yazyk* [The History of Translating the Bible into the Russian Language] (St Peterburg: Tipografiya Stasyulevicha, 1899).
- 7 Tompkins describes the resistance in the Orthodox circles and the legal acts against the translation. See Stuart R. Tompkins, 'The Russian Bible Society – A Case of Religious Xenophobia', *American Slavic and East European Review* 7.3 (1948) 251–268.
- 8 For a review of modern Russian translations, see the presentation by Metropolitan Illarion (Alfeyev) at the International Theological Conference, 26 November 2013, at www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3394042.html [accessed 18-12-2016].
- 9 Eckhard J. Schnabel, 'On Commentary Writing' in Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel (eds), *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries. Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) 3-31, here 3.
- 10 See the PhD thesis (in Ukrainian) by T. V. Kostenko, *Filosofsko-religieznavchyi analiz osmyslennia fenomenu sakralnogo v traditsijnij ta suchasnij pravoslavnij teologiji* [Philosophical-religious analysis of the phenomenon of sacrality in the traditional and contemporary Orthodox theology] (Kyiv: National Medical University of Bogomoletz, 2015).
- 11 Ten volumes of this commentary were published from 1903 to 1913. See the introduction to the fourth edition of A. P. Lopukhin, *Tolkovaya Bibliya ili Kommentarij na vse knigi Sv. Pisaniya Vekhogo i Novogo Zaveta pod [Expository Bible Commentary on all books of the Old and New Testament Scriptures; seven volumes, in Russian]* (Moscow: Dar, 2009) 8-9.
- 12 The names of many contributors to the Expository Bible are still unknown.
- 13 William Barclay taught New Testament in the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and authored a series of popular commentaries on the New Testament in 1952-1958. His *Daily Study Bible* (a set of 17 NT commentaries) was published by Saint Andrew Press.
- 14 For example, Shatrov's commentaries on some NT books; his commentaries on Matthew and Acts were re-published in Saint-Petersburg in 2001: P. K. Shatrov, *Komentarij k Yevangeliju ot Matfeya* [Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew] (St Peterburg: Bibliya dlya vsekh, 2001); *Komentarij k knige Deyanija Svjatykh Apostolov* [Commentary on the Book of Acts of the Apostles] (St Peterburg: Bibliya dlya vsekh, 2001).
- 15 The Internet store 'Christian Book' offers 246 commentaries on the whole Bible or parts of it in Russian and Ukrainian.
- 16 The *Africa Bible Commentary* was published in 2006, the *South Asia Bible Commentary* in 2015. The *Latin American Bible Commentary* and *Arabic Bible Commentary* are scheduled for printing in 2017.
- 17 Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary* (Nairobi, Grand Rapids: WordAlive Publishers, Zondervan, 2006).
- 18 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (Yale: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 19 Since 1944, all evangelicals in the Soviet Union were allowed to exist only as members of the one organisation allowed by the government, 'The Union of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists'. By the 1960s it included Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals of various traditions, Mennonites and other groups. See Walter Sawatsky, 'Protestantism in the USSR', in S.P. Ramet (ed.), *Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia: The Communist and Postcommunist Eras* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).
- 20 According to David Bebbington, 'Conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism form the defin-

- ing attributes of Evangelical religion.’ See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain. A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 4.
- 21 See ‘The Lausanne Covenant’ at www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant [accessed 18-12-2016].
- 22 See ‘EAAA Statement of Faith’ at <http://e-aaa.info/2010-11-28-21-54-41/statement-of-faith.html> [accessed 18-12-2016].
- 23 I. Howard Marshall, ‘Evangelical New Testament interpretation within the contemporary scene’, *European Journal of Theology* 20.1 (2011) 13.
- 24 This is similar to Brevard Childs’ canonical approach to the Bible. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1974, repr. 2004); Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).
- 25 Some authors missed the dead-line specified in their contract by more than a year.
- 26 6,500 copies were printed in Ukraine and 3,500 in Russia.

When Faith Turns Ugly

Brian Harris

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Brian Harris, who is the Principal of Vose Seminary and Pastor at Large for the Carey Movement in Perth, Australia, is also the author of *The Tortoise Usually Wins* (Paternoster, 2012) and *The Big Picture* (Paternoster, 2015)

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