



Tanya Prokhorova

# Glimpses of the Glassy Sea

*IBT Russia — 25th Anniversary Edition*

**Tanya Prokhorova**

# **Glimpses of the Glassy Sea**

**Bible Translation  
into a Multitude of Tongues  
in the Post-Soviet World**



**Institute for Bible Translation  
Moscow  
2020**

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# Preface

The book of Revelation presents us with the beautiful image of God's heavenly throne standing next to "something like a sea of glass, like crystal" (4:6). Next to the throne and this glassy sea is "a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language" (7:9), all worshipping God.

This powerful glimpse into the inner workings of heaven is also a reminder to IBT staff of why we do our work. It is not ultimately about producing a good translation of the Bible into many languages (although this is undoubtedly a key part of the process), but about serving people — many people, different people, from a large variety of backgrounds, who happen to speak many different languages. In other words, the final goal of our work is human-centric, not book-centric. And this translation work is not only done for people, but by people — once again, many people, different people, from a large variety of backgrounds.

The present volume is a compilation of IBT newsletters dealing with our various Bible translation projects, written by IBT staff member Tanya Prokhorova over the course of the past decade based on her interviews with project workers. The golden thread that runs through all of these newsletters is Tanya's focus on the human face of IBT. We are a scholarly organization, and we love accuracy and systematicity of language data, but at the same time all of the scholars who work with us are humans first of all, with different talents, different strengths, different ideas, different interests. Putting these newsletters together in a single volume gives a stunning view of IBT's work in its very human dimension. The newsletters deal with IBT's translation projects in 27 languages and are arranged in alphabetical order according to the English spelling of the language name. Newsletters that deal with a broader category and not a specific language are grouped together at the end of the volume. Alas, we cannot include photographs of many of our translators for security reasons, but we hope that you will be able to "see" them at least partially through the text itself.

This year we at IBT Russia are celebrating our silver anniversary of being a full-fledged Russian organization: we were officially registered in the Russian Federation in 1995 (though our founder Borislav Arapovich operated the organization primarily out of Stockholm since 1973.) We hope that this anniversary volume will give our readers an additional vantage point from which to better appreciate the complexity of Bible translation in our part of the world, as well as the personal sacrifice that is part and parcel of all successful translation projects. The vast crowd from every tribe, nation and language gathered around the glassy sea includes the peoples of Russia and the other post-Soviet countries, and each has a different face, and each sings the songs of heaven somewhat differently, but all in perfect harmony.

"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

Blessing and honor and glory and power  
belong to the one sitting on the throne  
and to the Lamb forever and ever" (Rev 5:13).

*Vitaly Voinov*  
*IBT Russia Director*

## “The Abkhaz Bible translation should not resemble lumpy dough”

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There is an old Abkhaz legend about a widow. Her husband was killed, and she raised their three sons alone. When the sons grew up, the time came for them to avenge their murdered father according to their ancestral law. But who of them would become the avenger? The widow suggested casting lots to determine this. She would bake several pieces of flat bread and hide a small piece of wood in one of them. Whoever got this piece of wood would be the one to take revenge. However, the wise woman deliberately put the lot in the piece of bread that she herself received. Then she appealed to her sons to forgive their enemy. This old legend laid the foundation for a new tradition in Abkhaz culture. Every year, on the eve of the Lenten fast, when Orthodox Christians around the world celebrate Forgiveness Sunday by forgiving all the grievances inflicted upon them and asking for forgiveness from those whom they may have offended over the past year, the Abkhaz bring their unique custom into this celebration: all Abkhaz families, even those who profess Islam – Muslims are also numerous among the Abkhazian population – bake cakes and recite the story of the wise widow and her forgiveness, unprecedented for a society dominated by blood feuds.

This legend was recounted to us by a longtime member of the Abkhaz Bible translation team, Arda Ashuba. There is no doubt that such a folk tradition could take root only among a people permeated with Christian morals. And indeed, Christianity came to Abkhazia at the beginning of the 4th century. The Abkhaz writing

system dates back to 1862, and 50 years later, in 1912, the first translation of the Four Gospels was published. As for the translation of the entire New Testament into the contemporary Abkhaz language, this was the achievement of a single person: the well-known Abkhaz poet, translator and philologist Mushni Lasuria. In 2005, Mushni Lasuria and IBT signed an agreement of cooperation on translating the Bible into Abkhaz in accordance with modern international scholarly standards. This means numerous exegetical checks and verification of the text against the original languages. Recently, a new exegetical checker joined the project and is now taking his first steps in working with the Abkhaz text. Preparing an edition of Parables from Luke and drafting Jonah are the two immediate tasks on the Abkhaz translation team's agenda.

Arda, the current translator, is a professional scholar: he is a professor of philology and the director of the Institute for Humanities Studies in Abkhazia. His experience with translation into Abkhaz is considerable and includes significant Christian texts. He also took part in editing a draft of the recently published translation of the Koran into the Abkhaz language, since, though a Christian himself, he respects the other religious tradition practiced by his people. In addition, he worked on translating the subtitles for the Jesus Film, which was recently released in the Abkhaz language. The idea to produce an Abkhaz version of the Jesus Film caused such an enthusiastic response that the actors who did the dubbing worked until 3 a.m. every day and completed the recording in ten days, even though most of them were not religious. Arda commented, "It was evidently God's will that this film should be produced in Abkhaz: the actors bent over backwards to do this, and didn't even ask for any payment – just for God's blessing." The film was warmly received by the Abkhaz audience. People shared that they experienced the Gospel events in a much deeper fashion by watching the film in their native language than when they read the Gospels in Russian. A desire also arose to make a children's version of the Jesus Film.

Arda has already produced translations of several short Old Testament books on his own, following his heart's inner urge. During this work he noticed that "the Near Eastern way of thinking (including that of the Old Testament Hebrews) is very close to the Abkhaz mindset." And he concluded that "the real translator is distinguished by seeking not the quantity of translated pages for which he will get paid, but the quality of each translated word. His task is to take hold of the life that vibrates in each word of Scripture so that it would be living, not dead, when it passes from the translator's pen onto paper. This demands a lot of toil."

After starting work with the new exegetical checker, Arda expressed the essence of the Bible translation process in several vivid metaphors:

"When flour arrives from the mill, it is not yet ready to be kneaded into dough. The flour must be sifted first, so that there are no lumps left. Only then will the dough turn out soft. Bible translation is like kneading flour into dough. When I am drafting the text, it's like wholemeal flour. We do not want the Abkhaz text to resemble lumpy dough. When we search for the proper word together with the exegetical advisor, it's like sifting the flour." The exegete immediately picked up the comparison and clarified



his role: “I can help with the sifting, but only the translator can say when the flour has reached the desired degree of softness.”

Sometimes it is extremely difficult to remain true to the original text and at the same time make the translation sound natural. For example, the phrase that means “the Lord God” in the Abkhaz language is an established term literally meaning “the One who has power over us.” To say “my Lord,” however, would require changing the very form of the Abkhaz word into “the One who has power over me”, and this would sound as though we are not talking about the one true God, but about some kind of a lesser god, like that of the pagans. So what should the translator do if he needs to emphasize the personal attitude of a believer towards his Creator? How can he convey the words from the book of Jonah (2:1) that “Jonah prayed to the Lord his God?” The team has yet to solve this problem and many no less difficult ones, but the translator has already proclaimed his major principle of work: “I don’t want to artificially complicate the text for the reader. You can compare the translation process with buttoning a shirt. If the button is too large and the buttonhole too small, I cannot button my clothes properly. The word and its context are like a button and a buttonhole. They should fit each other. Or you can compare it with the shoemaking process. I need to wear boots that are my size, otherwise I will have a hard time walking. In the same way, the reader will have difficulty understanding the passage if any words do not fit their context.”

The newly formed Abkhaz translation team is at the very beginning of a long journey, but their attitude toward Bible translation is promising. “If I can be of any use to the Bible translation work, I will do whatever I can with great joy,” Arda says. “To tell you the truth, this is exactly the work that I would like to devote myself to. I want everybody to be able to praise the Lord in his/her mother tongue.”

*Winter 2019–2020*

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*ABKHAZ (population: 133,000)*

*Location: Western Caucasus*

*Language family: Northwest Caucasian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: 4 Gospels from 1912 (reprint IBT 1975),  
NT (2004, rights now belong to IBT)*

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## They all call themselves “Adyg”

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Don't biblical texts sometimes seem contradictory? And isn't it these very contradictions that make them relevant to all people, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic or historical contexts? The Bible is not abstract ideology, but rather a practical source of life, springing from God Himself, who is Love. Whoever reads the books of Job, Ecclesiastes or Proverbs as ideology may be at a loss. Whoever reads them from within real human situations may taste their all-embracing character. Likewise, when the Adyghe and Kabardian translation teams gathered at the recent training seminar on the Wisdom and Poetic books of the Old Testament, the messages received from them at first seemed contradictory. However, this was an informal conversation, and the very topic of the seminar helped to explain that impression.

The first thing that worried our two teams was whether their names would be mentioned in the interview. If so, they would rather have kept silent, though love for their native land and fellow countrymen urged them to speak out.

“The situation for Christians in the Caucasus is very hard. Of my entire family, only my father and mother know what my work is. I have to choose between my project and my relatives all the time,” one young woman sighed. “It was when I converted to Christianity that the persecution was greatest, and one of my closest relatives came

to my church with a gun in order to kill me. I lived in an atmosphere of constant fear... There is a difference between our situation and the situation of Central Asian Christians. They suffer from their governments, while we suffer from our families. We do not have problems with the authorities, but we are not accepted at home. If a girl is not married and dares to go to training seminars such as this, it is considered ridiculous. She is looked at as if she were mad. Therefore nobody knows that I am here.”

Changing the subject to her translation team and the relations within it, all of a sudden she forgot the tensions of being a Christian in a patriarchal Muslim culture, and she shared excitedly, “Our team spirit makes me happy despite all the differences between our faiths and confessions. These aspects do not really matter for the Caucasian people. What really matters in my land is one’s humanity. None of us will ever say, ‘I am a Christian, while you are a Muslim, thus we do not have anything in common.’ It is much more significant for us to see what sort of a person you are, what you do, how you work, and what your character traits are. If you deserve respect, you will be respected and listened to. In the West you may come up to a person with the Scripture and suggest that he read from it. If he reads and converts, he will find out from the Book itself what he needs in order to start a new life, and he will look upon you with new eyes, the eyes of a believer. It is not so in the Caucasus. People will first look at you, at your manner of life and behavior, and if you deserve their respect, they may become interested in your Holy Scripture and accept it from you.” Such was the portrait of the Caucasus she depicted, revealing a very different facet of the region from the one in her first disclosure a few minutes earlier.

The second person I interviewed was from a translation team in a closely related Caucasian language. She spoke from her life experience: “My relatives are non-believers, though they are nominal Muslims or nominal traditional Christians. They think that I am crazy. They say, ‘She was studying and training until she went out of her head,’ and this expression sounds proverbially precise in Adyg.”<sup>1</sup>

Once we started speaking about her countrymen, this lady forgot her own troubles in the very same manner as did the first one. Her words now reflected deep and selfless love. And again it was a proverbial expression that first came to her mind, “We have an interesting expression. When you ask a person, ‘Aren’t you Adyg?’ by this you mean, ‘Do you have a human heart? Are you able to show human kindness?’ This is how we respect the word ‘Adyg’ and understand the importance of being ‘Adyg’ not only by nationality, but in the depth of one’s inner being.”

The Christian members of our Adyg translation teams showed affection and empathy towards their Muslim colleagues. “I’m glad that we’re unanimous in our work. We

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<sup>1</sup> *Although both women call themselves Adyg, they belong to different projects and different but closely related peoples, Adyghe and Kabardian. Unlike the word “Adyghe,” which describes one of those two IBT projects, the word “Adyg” is the self-designation (endonym) used by several Circassian groups now scattered throughout different parts of Russia. The two teams form a sort of “macro-team” in which the Adyghe and Kabardians read and comment on each other’s translations before publishing them.*

serve the same God, but we have already understood whom we serve, while they are still on the way. I walked this path myself, so I would never try to rush anyone.” The verse from Song of Solomon came to mind that we should not stir up love until it so desires, not to rush anyone, until their own love awakens. “Our Muslim translators are God-fearing people. And for me it is most important that the person fears God. Not everybody gets the knowledge of God whom he venerates from the very beginning,” the woman continued, and her words strikingly echoed another verse, this time from the book of Proverbs, which had just been mentioned at the previous session of the seminar: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7).

The last person I interviewed was a male translator who declared that he was still on the way, though already a believer in Christ. For him, coming to faith does not mean that he has stopped moving, but rather that he has made a start. He concluded the whole discussion with the following words: “Spiritual growth has its stages. Today we understand one layer of biblical meaning, but in a year we will understand more. When several Adyg teams unite to work together, we may exchange words and terms, because when there are more people working with a unity of purpose, more layers of meaning will be opening up to us. The more translations are made into our languages, the more meanings are revealed to us. We should translate in such a way that the rich variety of meaning in the original becomes evident in our mother tongue.”

*Spring 2014*

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*ADYGHE (population: 125,000)*

*Location: Western Caucasus*

*Language family: Northwest Caucasian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (1991, 1992), 1–2 Samuel (2002), Genesis (2005), Esther, Ruth & Jonah (2006), Psalms (2007), 1–2 Kings (2009), Proverbs (2014, reprint 2016), Exodus (2015), Daniel (2017)*

*Audio: Esther, Ruth & Jonah, Psalms, Proverbs, Daniel*

*KABARDIAN (population: 517,000)*

*Location: Western Caucasus*

*Language family: Northwest Caucasian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (1993), Ruth and Jonah (2009), Proverbs (2017), Daniel and Ruth (2018)*

*Audio: Ruth, Jonah, Luke*

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## “These words can’t really be from the Bible, can they?”

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Good Bible translation is not a simple process. Each translated text goes through at least four drafts with various checks at each stage (exegetical checking, internal reviewing, philological editing, field-testing, consultant checking, external reviewing, etc.) But even after the translation is completed and the book has been published and delivered to the region, it still needs to be somehow distributed among its potential readers, which is also not an easy task. Distributing the Bible in areas with a predominantly Muslim population may be dangerous because many people are prejudiced against the Bible and see it as a tool of westernization or russification – a real threat to their traditional culture and to the worldview foundations of their community. “We decided to be creative in our approach to distribution,” the Adyghe project coordinator shares. “There is a well-known Muslim holy day called Kurban Bayram. It is devoted to the Prophet Ibrahim’s sacrifice of his son (though Muslims think that this was Ishmael and not Isaac) who was to be given to God as a burnt offering until God sent a ram in place of the son. Thus, during the celebration of Kurban Bayram we organized a celebration and presented the Adyghe translation of the book of Genesis, where Abraham’s offering is described, to our Muslim friends and neighbors. Besides Genesis we distributed Exodus, Psalms and Daniel.”

It is especially valuable when representatives of the society into whose language the Bible is being translated become ardent readers of the Bible of their own accord.



“When I started working in the project more than 20 years ago, I was not a believer, but I got to know and love God through this work,” the Adyghe translator testifies. “I am especially happy to work on the Old Testament. I fell in love with the book of Deuteronomy to such an extent that I myself asked for permission to translate it. In the process of working on Deuteronomy, I discovered that this book was like a key to understanding the whole Old Testament. I love Israel and I love the people of God, who suffered so much throughout their whole history to stay true to their faith. During my study-tour in Israel a few years ago, I realized that Jewish history is a mysterious phenomenon that still remains unsolved. And the Caucasian peoples have a lot in common with the Jewish people. For me, Jewish history feels like my own element. Some ethnographers have suggested that the Adyghe are descendants of the Hittites, and indeed, I see much in common with Biblical characters in the Adyghe mindset and heart, in our attitude to other people. For example, the Old Testament tradition of hospitality is very similar to the Adyghe tradition. We associate blessing with honoring our parents, just like in the fifth commandment (Ex 20:12 or Deut 5:16). The traditional Adyghe attitude towards someone else's property reveals the law given in the eighth commandment: do not steal. I personally was taught from an early age that to remove a neighbor's property boundary marker is considered shameful.”

The Biblical texts translated into Adyghe often become seeds that fall on fertile soil. Here are several episodes from the Adyghe project coordinator's own experience that she shared with IBT:

For Christmas, the Adyghe Christian community decided to hold a celebration for people from their neighborhood. As part of this celebration, guests were offered to take turns reading a passage from the Bible in the Adyghe translation. People who consider themselves Muslims found these “Adyghe texts” exciting. They wondered where they came from and expressed their amazement that they had never heard or read such texts before. They immediately recognized them as the Word of God. Many expressed their wish to have such a book at home at their own disposal and to continue reading it. Of course that celebration was an organized event, and at least the guests knew beforehand that they had been invited by a Christian community, so the very fact that they accepted the invitation signified their open-heartedness and readiness to establish contacts and learn something new. It is even more spectacular and joyful, when the first contact with the Bible happens spontaneously, as in the following situation: One Adyghe Christian woman used to listen to Proverbs in Adyghe while driving her car, and one time she left the CD in the car. The next day her son was driving, and the CD started playing from the beginning. The young man's ride that day was long, and he therefore listened to everything that was recorded on that CD. He was deeply impressed. He came home and asked his mother where she got that CD from. He was shocked to learn that the text was from the Christian Bible. He was a Muslim and his previous attitude to the Bible was rather hostile. After this, his attitude changed and he has expressed eagerness to listen to more Scripture portions, though he still paradoxically refuses to read the Bible texts himself.

Another Adyghe Christian woman greeted her elderly neighbor who was sitting on a bench near the house totally engulfed in reading. “What are you reading?” she asked. “I am reading the Adyghe Bible,” the old lady replied. The younger woman rejoiced to hear that, but then suddenly realized that this could not be true, since the full Bible had not yet been translated into Adyghe. She expressed her surprise, and the elderly lady explained that by “Adyghe Bible” she meant the Koran. The woman returned home, got a copy of the book of Proverbs in Adyghe and brought it to her elderly neighbor. “Look, here is a text from the real Bible, if you want to know what the real Bible is,” she said. When she met her neighbor next time, the elderly lady couldn’t help but express her great amazement: “These words can’t really be from the Christian Bible, can they?” she repeated. “It is so similar to our Adyghekhazbe (the ancient Adyghe Law), many things are absolutely the same! Could you bring me more books from the Bible?” So the Christian woman brought her other books of the Old Testament that she had in the Adyghe translation.

Over the past decade, the translation team has published several OT books and is getting closer and closer to producing a full Bible in their mother tongue. The Adyghe team members are very creative in their approach. Thus, the book of Proverbs was audio recorded by professional actors, and beautiful videos with Adyghe landscapes and ethnic music were produced for five Psalms in the Adyghe translation. A bilingual Adyghe-Kabardian edition of Ecclesiastes was published in 2019, accompanied by an audio recording and decorated with a traditional ornament on the cover. We hope that the Bible will truly be treasured by this Caucasian people, whose traditional culture seems close to the Biblical world in so many respects.

*Summer 2019*

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*ADYGHE (population: 125,000)*

*Location: Western Caucasus*

*Language family: Northwest Caucasian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (1991, 1992), 1–2 Samuel (2002), Genesis (2005), Esther, Ruth & Jonah (2006), Psalms (2007), 1–2 Kings (2009), Proverbs (2014, reprint 2016), Exodus (2015), Daniel (2017)*

*Audio: Esther, Ruth & Jonah, Psalms, Proverbs, Daniel*

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## Daughter of God and of her own people

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The place-name ‘Altai’ likely comes from a Turkic phrase meaning ‘golden mountains’. Most probably this ancient name was given thanks to the extreme beauty of the land, but by curious coincidence gold mining has recently become an important industry in the region. This southern Siberian region borders on Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia. The pristine nature of the high Altai mountains is recognized as a World Natural Heritage site by UNESCO. The traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Altai was transformed into a settled one only in Soviet times.

Bible translation into Altai was initiated by Orthodox Church missionaries before the Russian Revolution, with the Four Gospels first published in 1912, but contemporary Altai is very different from the language of this first missionary translation. Our New Testament translator, a well-known Altai writer, says, “We are blessed, because several Christian terms which are absent in other Turkic languages were artificially created by the 19th century Orthodox missionaries and were successfully assimilated into our language. Such is the word ‘holy’ which is a combination of two Altai words: ‘pure’ and ‘white’. On the contrary, the word ‘Kairakan’ for ‘God,



Lord, Supreme' has come right now as a result of our joint work. It replaced the previously used word 'Kaan', which means 'king'."

The majority of the Altai consider themselves Orthodox Christians, but in reality their faith is mixed with elements of shamanism. A lot of people are baptized and bring their children to church to be baptized, but many of them lack any knowledge of the Christian faith due to the lack of biblical texts in their native language. Among the Altai in northern regions who are mixed with the Kazakh population, Islam is rapidly gaining popularity. 87% of Altai regard Altai as their mother tongue. Many do not understand the Bible in Russian.

"I have become a true Altai thanks to the Bible translation!" proclaimed our Altai reviewer, Chechek.

The Altai New Testament has a long, complicated and exciting history, which is still ongoing. The IBT group had been working selflessly and devotedly since the mid-1990s, and as a result the Altai NT was first published in 2003. However, the book has never been claimed or recognized by its potential readers as their own Scripture. In a bold attempt to comprehend the reasons for such alienation, our project coordinator, together with representatives of local churches, initiated a fundamental revision of the text. Now, at the final stage before the publication of the revised Altai New Testament, Chechek is excited to share the entire story of her relationship with the Bible. Or was it actually her relationship with her own people? With her mother tongue? With her ethnic identity?

"We used to live according to the norms of our own Altai religion, but human life seemed like a dead end without any way out. We made guesses and consulted fortune tellers, and I thought that only after death would I find answers to the vitally important questions in my life. But when I opened the Bible, I learned what was to be done right at that moment, during my lifetime. Joy and confidence entered my life. It was not a concrete answer, but rather confidence that knowing God meant that you would dig up whatever you really need. The Bible made me dig into my own life. I realized that previously I had lived at a surface level. I had cared only for material things; I had been worrying and fussing in vain. I used to think that as an educated person I ought to read prominent philosophers to seek out answers to the ultimate questions of life. Praise God that I did not start wasting my life on this. When I opened the Bible, I saw plenty of similarities to my own life and the life of my people.

Our wounds were opened and the roots of our sufferings and dissatisfaction became clear. And although my first Bible was and still is in Russian, while reading about the lives of biblical characters I started to think about the Altai: 'Well, we too are a nomadic nation, we are shepherds, we have so much in common.' I wanted to know the details, and I started to learn more and more about our own culture. It was such a shock for me that I had not known my own traditions before! Living at a surface level, I had not been interested in them until I started reading the Bible.

I had also been of the opinion since my school years that I knew my mother tongue very well, but when I started to work with biblical texts I was totally upset to see that my real knowledge was next to zero. I faced so many problems and difficulties that

I remembered the verse from Revelation, ‘You say, “I am rich and have prospered, and I want for nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, naked!’ I applied this verse to myself, as I realized that in my own mother tongue knowledge I had been poor, blind and naked. From that very moment onwards, the process of my true recognition of myself as an Altai began. The Word of God showed us the ultimate necessity of preserving our own language.

The next step in my self-knowledge brought about by the Bible was the sudden discovery that my attitude towards my own people and mother tongue had been rather disdainful. ‘Oh, we are goners,’ I used to think subconsciously. ‘Our language is only good for day-to-day life, in speaking to our kids, at home.’ This is how I had been judging.

Paradoxically, it was through my Russian Bible that I started speaking pure Altai. I stopped mixing the two languages, and people around me wondered, ‘How do you manage to speak such a beautiful Altai language? Where do you get these words of wisdom from?’ I saw that it was the Bible itself that started speaking Altai through me. Through biblical research, through our work with the biblical texts, we acquired skills to speak about the vital questions of life in our own language.

Now I may assert with full confidence, ‘I was not a true Altai before. I did not have love towards my own people. But now I am a zealous Altai. I am an Altai who loves my people. From a wretched, miserable and naked Altai woman, I was reborn as an Altai daughter of God and a daughter of my own people.’”

*July-August 2013*

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*ALTAI (population: 74,200)*

*Location: Southern Siberia*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2003), revised NT diglot (2017)*

*Audio: NT*

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## “We’ve found the lost book!”

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In Altai historical epics, we frequently come across the following plot: people who have been enslaved and are being driven into a foreign land hang a cradle with a baby on a tree branch in hope that someone will find and raise their child. Does this sound similar to a well-known story from the Bible? We do not know whether the ancient Altai ever heard about Moses, but the earthly life of their national hero Kogudey-Mergen begins exactly like this in the epic tale “Maadai Kara.” Later, in his adult years, Kogudey-Mergen descends into the underworld to fight Erlik (the Altai version of the devil), and defeats him. Freed from the bondage of the underworld, people thank the hero for rescuing them from death. What is this? Is it just a random piece of ancient folklore, or is it an intuitive perception of the kingdom of heaven that had already come into the world by the time this epic tale appeared?<sup>2</sup> Or could it be that echoes of Christian preaching had somehow reached the Altai mountains and were reinterpreted by folk storytellers? “Here we have a story which is very similar to the Gospel. The idea of the Messiah is quite obvious in it,” says the young Altai woman who has recently started developing a Scripture website in her mother tongue. She was inspired to create this website when her heart started burning with the desire to share the newly translated New Testament

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<sup>2</sup> *The 6–8th centuries A.D., according to scholars.*

with other Altai young people. “What should we start with?” she wondered. The new edition of the text was fully ready, the audio recording was completed, but the potential audience remained completely unprepared for the Bible’s message. The Bible is not easy to understand, and many Altai people who are seeking for spiritual truth would rather turn to their ancestors’ traditional faith, Burkhanism, a.k.a. “the white faith.” Shamanism and Tengrism are alternative spiritual paths that many Altai are also willing to follow, as one can see by the large number of webpages devoted to these religions on the Internet.

Our Altai webmaster wondered again and again, “How can we make the Bible closer to the hearts of the Altai people? In fact, it is not alien to them in its essence. The nomadic lifestyle and the practice of sacrifice are quite similar and quite recognizable from the Old Testament. People in the mountain villages of the Altai today in many ways live like the Old Testament patriarchs lived. Even the Altai name Madai, which gave the name to the abovementioned epic ‘Maadai Kara,’ sounds very similar to one of the names found in the book of Genesis, the one that is listed among the names of the founders of tribes in the Table of Nations (Gen 10:2).”<sup>3</sup>

She decided to consult her uncle, a master of Altai throat singing, who created a contemporary biblical epic called “Eshua” that relates the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation in the style of Altai poetry. Her uncle gathered the whole local church together in order to choose an appropriate name for the newly created Altai website, and the name that they finally suggested was one dear to the Altai ear: “Sudur Bichik,” or “The Prophetic Book.” For his niece, hearing this name instantly brought her back to the depths of her childhood. It was as if an old legend heard from her mother and later forgotten had re-entered her consciousness.

According to this ancient legend, in the distant past the Altai people possessed a certain prophetic book, and whoever read from it could find the answer to any question, understand the course of events, and attain the mysteries of the universe. There was just one problem: the book was lost. The Altai nomads joked that the book had been swallowed by a cow, since the internal organs of a cow that are used in Altai cuisine look exactly like a book. Well, the book itself may have been swallowed, but where the wisdom of the prophetic books had gone, no one knew. And so the local church decided to name this site “Sudur Bichik” (sudurbichik.ru). As soon as the name was given, the concept became very clear – we’ve found the lost book! “That’s precisely the point!” the Altai webmaster exclaims. “The Bible is exactly this prophetic book that the Altai and all other people on earth have been seeking from time immemorial.”

For this young lady the secrets of the lost Altai prophetic book have already started to reveal themselves through the study of the Book of books, especially through the prophetic parts of the Bible. “I’m very much interested in the book of Daniel,” she says. “In the first beast from the vision of Daniel (Dan 7:4), if you read carefully, you can recognize the emblem of the Republic of Altai! Our emblem depicts a griffin. It is a symbol of the ancient Pazyryk culture, which coincides with the time of the Babylonian empire. For me the appeal of Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar was like a revelation: ‘Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and

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<sup>3</sup> *We have noticed many times that for many ethnic groups such chance coincidences help make the biblical text sound closer to their own cultures.*



power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed all mankind... Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all' (Dan 2:37-38). It's possible that the people of that time were speaking in accordance with their limited knowledge of geography, but we can also interpret these words in another way, that there was indeed one 'head of gold' – that single Babylonian Empire that had spread to the most distant corners of the earth, including Altai. And the remains of the Pazyryk culture on the plateaus of Altai indicate how much Altai was connected with Persia and India."

But this was not all. In the prophetic books of Scripture she also found a response to the specific needs of her church: "In the book of the prophet Haggai I clearly see a message for my church community, a call for us to direct our efforts on building up the house of the Lord."

On the new website one can find a video with the performance of the epic "Eshua" accompanied by pictures of Altai's pristine nature. The site already hosts the New Testament in the revised Altai translation together with its audio recording and a parallel Russian text. This is available in a variety of formats, including those suitable for mobile devices. The site solicits active feedback and participation from visitors: one may study the Bible online, or upload one's own poetry, music, or life testimony in the Altai language. Studying the biblical text is the true fulfillment of Altai spiritual aspirations found in their belief in the ancient prophetic book "Sudur Bichik." But this is something that people can only do together. The "Sudur Bichik" website thus welcomes both Altai tradition and a living stream of ideas. Age-old hopes and urgent questions of today take shape and find their specific answers in the pages of the Book of books – the lost prophetic book, which has been found anew.

*Autumn 2016*

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*ALTAI (population: 74,200)*

*Location: Southern Siberia*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2003), revised NT diglot (2017)*

*Audio: NT*

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## Two lives that changed radically

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**I**BT, which translated the Balkar NT in the 1990s, has recently restarted its involvement in the OT translation project.

The Balkars, a Turkic-speaking people whose ethnogenesis remains unclear, currently constitute approximately 10% of the total population of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic in southern Russia. Balkars and Kabardians are not ethnically related. The Balkar language belongs to the Turkic language family, while Kabardian belongs to the Circassian family. The Balkars have lived in their current area since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, while the Kabardians arrived 300 years later from the Circassian lands on the Black Sea coast. In 1944 the Soviet government accused the Balkar people of treason and unwillingness to resist the Nazi army. On Stalin's orders, the entire Balkar population of 37,713 people, 52% of whom were children, with no exception even for war heroes and veterans, was deported from their native land in the Caucasus Mountains, mainly to Central Asia. Kabardino-Balkaria was renamed the Kabardian Republic. After Stalin's death, the Balkars were allowed to return and the former name of their

republic was restored, though the full political rehabilitation of the Balkars took place only in Gorbachev's time.

Alim was born in 1950, which speaks for itself: he was a child of the Balkar deportation. His family lived in Kyrgyzstan. It was there that Alim got acquainted with marijuana, since cannabis grew naturally in this area and was freely available at local markets. When the Balkars were allowed to return to their native land, Alim's father left to work in the mines, trying to provide for his large family. Alim missed his father's love and authority and became a drug addict. His life went from bad to worse. He added theft and alcoholism to his drug addiction, and one imprisonment followed another. Meanwhile, he managed to marry and have several children, but his family life was ruined by another prison term, and his wife returned to her sisters' house. Neither Alim nor any of his relatives believed that his life could be restored. All that followed resembled the story of the prodigal son. Alim's liberation from the abyss of sin and despair, subsequent reconciliation with his family, and total restoration occurred in several stages, but the very first glimpse of hope was given to him by another native speaker of Balkar, one of the few existing Balkar Christians, who by God's providence visited Alim's prison in the early 1990s and addressed him in his mother tongue. From this person Alim received his first Gospel (still in Russian, of course), read it and came to faith in Christ, who came "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk 4:18). Now Alim is an evangelical pastor and, like his heavenly Master, is a vivid illustration of the verse in Hebrews which states that "because he himself suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." Indeed, Alim is successfully helping people to be healed from drug and alcohol addiction, and even Muslims from his neighborhood turn to him for advice and prayer. The very small group of Balkar Christians struggles to practice their faith in a culture where every aspect of life from birth to marriage to death is governed by folk-Islamic and Balkar traditions. Their church is a shining example of warm family relations throughout their whole neighborhood. Such is Alim, the local coordinator of the Balkar Bible translation project.

Another hero in our story, Makhti, has a completely different personal background, but he too is one of the very few Balkar Christians, and also a pastor. Alim was the first to recognize Makhti as a potential translator and gave him his first assignment, a trial translation of the book of Daniel. Alim brought him to Moscow for IBT's introductory seminar in February 2017 and introduced Makhti with the words, "It was our tremendous fortune to find such a precious pearl in the Caucasus." Indeed, Makhti is a budding scholar with a good command of NT Greek and full of desire to serve the Lord in his native land. Being an ethnic Balkar, he is a perfect candidate for being a mother-tongue translator, but more than this, he is constantly learning. His seminary education, his Biblical studies background and his knowledge of Greek made it absolutely clear that he was skilled enough to become either an independent translator (one who doesn't need the help of an exegetical advisor), or an exegetical advisor for other translators in the Balkar project and possibly even in other projects in the Caucasus in the future.

Makhti's university education was at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, the top university in Russia and the former USSR in the field of physics. After

graduation, Makhti had excellent prospects for professional advancement in Moscow. However, the Lord had another plan for him. At seventeen, Makhti had a personal encounter with Christ. This is how he describes the influence of this conversion upon his life:

“In the next year and a half my values changed radically. I found the true meaning of my life in serving God and people. I can’t call it anything other than a new birth. From the very beginning of my spiritual life I have been praying about reaching my fellow Balkars with the Good News, and for this I gave up all my prospects in Moscow and returned to my homeland. It was also at this time that I first started thinking about translating the Bible into Balkar, but until recently this remained a mere interest and I couldn’t find any ways of putting it into practice. It was when I got acquainted with the Institute for Bible Translation in Moscow that I became involved in the translation process itself.”

Makhti then earned a Master’s degree in religion from the Adventist Theological Seminary in Zaoksky. Currently, he is studying in the long-distance D. Min program at Andrews University (USA). The church he pastors has 83 members and is active in social service and evangelism. He has a leading role in the Adventist denomination in the North Caucasus, being responsible for education, global mission and Christian-Muslim dialogue. He has three children, and the youngest is just 8 months old.

Despite his other responsibilities Makhti has made time to train in exegesis for his new IBT involvement, but he also needs to study biblical Hebrew. By the time that his IBT involvement began, he had already received a week-long crash course in Hebrew from his seminary. With IBT’s encouragement, Makhti started an online course of biblical Hebrew, and he successfully finished two levels, so that by August 2017 he had gained enough knowledge to pass an entrance exam in elementary Hebrew grammar to the Hebrew University’s program in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Center for Bible Translators (<http://eng.bibletranslators.org>) is ready to accept him as their student for this half-year intensive course in Israel in 2018.

In the meantime, Makhti continues his active involvement in IBT’s Balkar translation project, currently working on the book of Numbers. He shares, “My burning desire is to bring the Word of God into the homes of my fellow countrymen in our mother tongue. I want to take part in translating the Bible into Balkar until the full Bible is finally published. I try my best to work on the translation every day, and to improve my mastery of the Biblical languages. I see this opportunity to study at the Jerusalem Center for Bible Translators as an important resource for conveying the message of God’s Word to my people as accurately as possible and a chance to bring the full Balkar Bible closer to publication.”<sup>4</sup>

*Winter 2017–2018*

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<sup>4</sup> *Makhti completed his semester-long intensive course in Biblical Hebrew with excellence and is presently working as an independent translator on several OT books.*



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BALKAR (*population: 108,000*)  
*Location: Kabardino-Balkaria, North Caucasus*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Scripture publications: NT+Psalms (1994, 2000), Proverbs (2000),*  
*Genesis, Exodus (2008), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Jonah (2011)*

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## “The Injil is the book of life”

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If we take a look at the history of the Bashkir or Bashkort people (a Turkic people numbering over 1 million native speakers mostly in central Russia), we see that what the Bashkirs themselves think about their roots is sometimes contradictory, with a mix of facts and legends. Some Bashkirs are convinced that the first mention of them as a people is found in the records of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who called their ancestors Argippeans, “who live at the foot of the mountains.” Others are more cautious and note that the ethnonym “Bashkort” first appeared only in Arab-Persian chronicles in the Middle Ages. Previously, Bashkir tribes led a nomadic life on the steppes, but were subsequently pressed from the south by other nomads and moved to the forested areas of the southern Ural Mountains, where they have remained for the past millenium.

Bashkirs are famous for being devoted to Islam since the 11<sup>th</sup> century and for their fierce resistance to all attempts at Christianization by the Russian Empire. However, they have preserved many pre-Islamic customs and practices, another apparent contradiction. One Bashkir website states, “There is no real conflict between a resolute support of Islam and the lack of Muslim fanaticism, because if you look deeper, both reflect the Bashkir age-old love of freedom. Bashkirs, in their boundless steppes and sky-high mountains, are not accustomed to any limitations.”

Bashkir loyalty to Islam was historically rewarded – in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims in Russia was opened in their capital city, Ufa, by decree of Catherine the Great. Since that time Ufa has been both the official centre and the undisputed heart of religious life for Muslims in the European part of Russia. In the present post-Soviet period of national revival, there are already over 400 active mosques in Bashkortostan, and hundreds more are being opened. This, in brief, is the background in which IBT's work on the Bashkir NT has been going on for the past two decades, despite many hindrances and setbacks, such as the death of the main translator and a full changeover in the translation team.

The long-awaited New Testament in Bashkir was published in early 2015. Truth be told, there were many concerns and precautions (as in all Bible translation projects in Muslim environments), including a heightened level of confidentiality in regard to the translation team members. Both the team members and the IBT staff assumed that the official presentation of the NT would be a local event for a narrow scholarly audience, and that the main readers of the book would be Bashkir Christians, both Protestant and Orthodox, who were actively helping to read through drafts of the translated NT portions, but who are quite few in number. All of us were therefore amazed and overjoyed at the instant and wide-ranging public response to the NT publication. First of all, the official book presentation, originally planned as a round-table discussion, turned into a full-scale conference with 200 people present. Three Bashkir TV channels reported on this great event in the evening news, both in Bashkir and Russian. And very soon afterwards, letters of gratitude started pouring in. They were not from Bashkir Christians, nor were they from Bashkir scholars and linguists. They were from average Bashkir Muslims, who received this book with a surprisingly full awareness that this is the Good News! Here are extracts from a few of these letters.

“I was incredibly excited upon hearing on Bashkir TV that you've published the Injil in the Bashkir language. I had already known from TV in 2007 that this work was in progress and was eagerly awaiting the completion. I'm tremendously grateful to your diligent staff and I praise our Allah, who sees your valuable work and rejoices in finding such unselfish people! I have no doubt that the Injil in Bashkir will help quench the spiritual thirst of many people and help them to attain true knowledge of the Creator. It's a shame that often the mere performance of customs and traditions is equated with spirituality, since customs and traditions have nothing in common with the Giver of Life.”

“Thank you for your immediate response to my SOS signal about wanting to receive your invaluable work. The desire burns within me to show it to other Bashkirs and explain to them that the Injil is the book of life, that it can help everyone develop kind relationships with each other, to find the meaning of life, to create an atmosphere of love in one's family, to teach children to respect their parents, etc. Once again, I'm very grateful for your sacrificial labors and thank Allah that He inspired you and supported you in this sacred work. May Allah bless you richly for your invaluable contribution to spirituality.”

“Twenty-five years have passed since the day when I was studying the Koran and suddenly realized the connection between the Koran and the Bible. A thinking person should never reject the Bible, because at each stage of human society, Allah through His prophets was giving people guidelines for how to live in order to be at peace with everybody and to be happy. No part of the Bible can be considered in isolation from its other parts and even more so from the Koran... I studied the Koran and the Bible and wrote out on a sheet of paper all the parallel places in order to show them to people and to explain to them that we should not oppose one people against another one, because Allah gave the same principles to all... In order to find a common language with another human being we should focus on our common views and not on our differences. Mutual understanding will be the result... I am praying for you that you would always have a clear and precise position on spiritual matters, based on the knowledge of the Word of God.”

The next extract was very emotional (all of the exclamation marks are preserved in the English translation): “Yesterday I at last got the Injil!! Thank you and all the translators who worked on the Word of God! I have already started reading, it’s simply wonderful!!! Thank you once again!”

One more person wrote that he had been waiting for the Bashkir Injil for five years. Our staff member contacted him in order to learn whether he was a member of a Christian church, in which case he could receive a copy of the book as soon as it was delivered to the churches. But he was not. He was, so to say, a private Gospel devotee, and had been faithfully but impatiently waiting for the book for five long years. Now his faithfulness has been rewarded.

In June 2015 there will be a seminar on Scripture Engagement in Moscow.<sup>5</sup> Please pray that we will find Bashkir Christians who would come and take part in this seminar so that, in the words of the first letter above, the Injil would truly quench the spiritual thirst of many Bashkirs and help them to attain true knowledge of the Creator. This would be an ideal resolution to the many contradictions in Bashkir society.

*Summer 2015*

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BASHKIR (*population: 1.6 million*)

*Location: Bashkortostan, between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2014)*

*Audio: NT*

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<sup>5</sup> See article from autumn 2015, page 110.

## The Bible and its translators

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**I**t was an ordinary working day at the IBT office. Two translation teams had come to Moscow for consultant checking sessions. For both teams it was the final stage of their work. Both of their Bibles were already fully translated. In one case the Bible was almost ready to be submitted to the publication department, and the last technical details were being discussed. In the second case, the team was working with the third and fourth drafts of different Bible books. I was intrigued by the similarity of these two situations and I wondered how the translators representing two different ethnic groups, one from the Caucasus (Chechen) and the other from Crimea (Crimean Tatar), feel after their tremendous labor. So I asked both translators for a short interview, and my first question was how it happened that they decided to connect their lives with Bible translation.

“When it was first suggested that I should try to translate the Bible text, I felt embarrassed. ‘Why do we need it at all?’ I asked. ‘We have our own religion and that is Islam. I do not need the Bible! And my people have absolutely no need of it!’ That was my firm conviction at that time,” said our Chechen translator. But he accepted the book out of mere cultural interest and in order to have some further basis for his



arguments. That book was the Gospel of Luke. “I went on reading and something in me was turning upside down,” he continued. “Such was the effect of this book that I became a completely different person. I started to translate little by little. Six years passed, and I became a Christian believer, but that is too personal to be told.”

The Crimean Tatar translator started speaking in a low voice, very humbly. “Well, I do not know why I was invited to the project. Probably they just lacked people... Why me? Could it be because I am a specialist both in my native Crimean Tatar and in Russian, and besides that also in Turkish, Uzbek, Kazakh and all the rest of the Turkic languages? Nothing special.” “Do you have a favourite Bible book?” I continued to inquire. “Oh, yes,” he said with sudden enthusiasm, “the book of Revelation!” “But this book is among the most difficult,” I said rather doubtfully. “But it is so interesting!” he replied quickly and then smiled and shared a translation problem that he confronted in the process of his work. “We have one and the same word in Crimean Tatar for a ‘scroll’ and for a ‘drill’, but as for the first meaning, nobody now remembers it. When I first translated that verse from Revelation where it says that ‘the heaven was removed as a scroll when it is rolled up,’ all the readers took it to mean that heaven was being compared to a drill and were greatly amazed. I had to change the rendering for ‘scroll’ to ‘folded paper’”.

“And have you ever had to produce a similar, descriptive sort of translation?” I ask our Chechen translator. “Yes,” he said, “people of Muslim tradition are not used to the word ‘Messiah,’ and we had to translate ‘Christ’ as ‘God’s very specially Blessed One’.

“Your people are Muslims,” I started to formulate my next question. “Do you nevertheless hope the Bible will find readers among your people?”

“I have no doubt that the Bible will make its way to Chechens. If not immediately, if not now, when the situation in my country is too dangerous for anyone who dares to have his own opinion, then it will happen later in the future. It is bound to happen! God Himself will find readers for it, and it is for Him to decide when and to whom to give it. There is simply no other way around, just because the Bible is unique and should be in the hands of anyone who is concerned for his spiritual growth,” our Chechen translator said, sharing his heart.

The Crimean translator seemed rather surprised by the very question of finding readers. “Our readers have been ready to receive the Bible for a long time already,” he said. “Whoever knows the Crimean Tatar language, be he Muslim or Christian or an unbeliever, everybody is reading Bible texts eagerly. Our Muslim authorities were against the translation, as they thought the readership was unprepared for it, but practice has proven the opposite. The Bible is universal. I even came to know my own native land better after translating the Bible.”

“How could that be?” I wondered.

“I never had any idea that the cedars of Lebanon are found in Crimea as well. I came across the name of this tree for the first time while translating the Bible, and then I learned that these very trees are growing in Crimea. Now I want to go to the botanical garden and find out which tree is the cedar of Lebanon. This is my dream.”

*June-August 2012*

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CHECHEN (*population: 1.4 million*)  
*Location: Chechnya, Northern Caucasus*  
*Language family: Northeast Caucasian*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Bible (2012)*  
*Audio: NT, Psalms, OT (in progress)*

CRIMEAN TATAR (*population: 262,000*)  
*Location: Crimean peninsula, Kherson region (Ukraine), Kyrgyzstan*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Bible (2016)*  
*Audio: Bible*

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“When the buds burst forth...”

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“**T**he Gospel of Luke has been translated into the Chukchi language. The translation team includes experts and native speakers from this indigenous ethnic group. Their purpose is to make sure that the translation is clear and intelligible to readers, and what is even more important, that the proper meaning, power, and spirit is conveyed by the text.”

These words were spoken on the local TV news broadcast in Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka. But these simple words of a short TV report do not give us the full picture of what strenuous creative efforts and intellectual agony the task demanded. It does not show how many months and years first the translation and then the revision of a relatively small text, the Gospel of Luke, actually required.

“Proper meaning, power, and spirit...” A true statement indeed, but how can it be achieved if, for example, there is no word meaning “God” in Chukchi? (The only existing term is “Creator.”) Or if there is just a single word for both “angels” or “demons”? It is only with the help of additional explanations that one can distinguish one from the other, while the term in itself is altogether different from the reality described in the Gospels. In fact, the Chukchi word means neither “angel” nor “demon”, but rather some “personal spirit”. This is how the translator explained the meaning of this term



during our long interview: “In traditional Chukchi culture, it is believed that my spirits are good, because they are doing good things for me, but someone else may think them to be not so good at all.”

“Do you mean to say,” I wondered, “that if there is enmity between two people, I will call my enemy’s attendant spirit a devil and my own an angel?”

“It is like this indeed,” the translator agreed, as surprised as I was by this realization.

The translation project’s exegetical advisor struggles with many difficult tasks. The meaning of the verb “repent” may be rendered only as “change your shameful life”, while “do not judge” will sound as “do not think badly”. The Gospel expression “your sons will be your judges” had to be rendered as “your children will say whether you have spoken correctly”. The word “Savior” in Chukchi is literally understood as “the One who has granted life”. Of course, the question immediately arises, what then is the difference between “Savior” and “Creator” in Chukchi, but the translator patiently explains the shades and subtleties of meaning: “The Creator created, but people were perishing, while the Savior is the One who granted them life, which means He showed a different life to those who were perishing in their sins.”

“To bless” is rendered as “to send good words, to wish good”. What is completely absent from the Chukchi language is the notion of “casting lots.” If the original reads that the lot fell upon somebody, like in the book of Jonah, in the Chukchi translation we read that “the person was chosen”, or “found”, or even “appointed”.

When I listen to all this, I find myself thinking that if I were in the translator’s shoes, I would probably lose heart and feel utterly discouraged. Doesn’t the task sound impossible? But evidently the woman in front of me is much stouter of heart than I am. She speaks about her translation experience with ease. She neither backs down from challenges, nor looks terrified by their size. “Of course, when I agreed to become involved in this work, I had no idea what I was getting into,” she confesses. “This job turned out to be not so easy at all. But my translation experience is very useful, for if I read Luke in a Russian translation, I would have most probably failed to understand what it was all about, or even if I did, it would have been a rather vague understanding. Now, when I have not just read, but lived this text in my mother tongue, all its contents have become very close to my heart.”

And here is what the exegete said after a trip to Anadyr: “Whatever people do on their own initiative is likely to require serious revision, but it is so precious, because they want it so badly! They are burning with a desire to have these texts in their mother tongue! It’s amazing that at the initiative of a local church, one honored teacher, an elderly woman, launched into a full translation of our Children’s Bible, and has already drafted the entire book! In order to help in the field testing of Luke and Jonah, local women were coming in pairs or groups of three, never one by one. This was not surprising: usually, one of them knows the language better, but can’t read Chukchi, while another member of the group can read it, but her knowledge of the language is poorer. So the participants were helping and consulting each other. It would have been impossible to work with them otherwise. Among all of the people who took part in the field testing, only one woman was able to provide her email address and cell phone

number. Another one only gave her two landline phone numbers, with the following comment: ‘You can call at this place, as I go there from time to time, or you can call at that place, because at other times I also go there.’ I insisted, ‘You’d better give me your cell phone number as well.’ ‘Oh, the cell phone is not in the least reliable,’ she responded, and pocketed the phone as if it were a toy.”

In order to come to Moscow for a checking session with a translation consultant, Chukchi project workers sometimes have to sacrifice their summer vacation, even though in Chukotka they say that “the summer day feeds the year,” and summer is desperately short. When the translator, whose Russified name is Larisa, shared an exciting story about the secrets of the Chukchi language, she also mentioned that her true Chukchi name is Ryskyntonav. “When a child is born,” she said, “we give a name in connection with what is happening at the moment of his or her birth. I was born in the summertime, when the buds burst forth and fresh leaves appear, and this is precisely what my name means.”

“In the summer, you said?” I asked in amazement, not sure that she really meant that and ready to correct her Russian. “Do plants bud in Chukotka during the summer, and not the spring?!” It turned out that I had understood her correctly. The buds burst forth in June. Such is the climate of this northern land. July is the time for fishing, closely followed by berry-gathering season. This is the time of year when all the Chukchi project members disappear into the forest to pick berries, with no communication with the outside world. During the rest of the year, people who know their native language well are in high demand for various other jobs and can’t afford to go on a long trip to Moscow.

It is therefore hardly possible to hold working sessions on the Chukchi Bible translation more frequently than once a year. Each such meeting is worth its weight in gold. The schedule is tight, and the time is short. In 2016, right before the appointed consultation time, the translator fell ill with pneumonia and was taken to the hospital. It was only because of her tremendous enthusiasm for the translation project that she overcame her condition and came to Moscow. However, the text proved to abound in difficulties. The book of Jonah was completed, but only part of Luke was covered. Only now, during the additional consultant check in 2017, was the team finally able to complete all remaining work on the revision of Luke as well.

The process of Bible translation into languages where no Scripture texts have previously existed, such as Chukchi, is always slow and complicated. The first translation is inevitably rather clumsy and sometimes literal. It is often full of lexical borrowings from the language of wider communication. But if this first biblical text becomes part and parcel of the people’s life, it awakens the dormant resources of their language, becomes thought-provoking, and brings forth new life, just like buds that burst forth in the summertime.

*Spring 2017*

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CHUKCHI (*population: 16,000*)  
*Location: Chukotka Peninsula, Far East of Russia*  
*Language family: Paleoasiatic*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Luke (2004, revised 2017),*  
*Jonah (illustrated diglot, 2018)*  
*Audio: Luke, Jonah*

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## Translation is like a seed that blossoms into a flower

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What is needed to become a Bible translator? Among very small ethnic groups that speak an endangered language, sometimes it is enough to simply have a good command of one's mother tongue, even if it is only the spoken form of the language. But for larger languages with a well-developed literary tradition, IBT's translators are usually professionals in the spheres of linguistics or literature. Such is the situation in IBT's Dargi (or Dargwa) project. The team presently consists of two translators and a third, potential translator, all of them specialists in their language. But professional language interest alone is not what leads someone from a different religious tradition into a project to translate the Bible. What motivates those who become Bible translators to choose this path?

Several years ago the translator who was first to join the present team (let us call him Ibrahim) shared his attitude to IBT's work as follows: "What is most interesting for me in this work is the translation process itself. Second is the opportunity to see how the world's languages have a similar, miraculous capacity to express even the most difficult meanings found in the Bible, although they do this in very different ways. It's a pity that I don't know English, but praise God, I do know Russian well, and still greater praise to God that I know Dargi well enough to pass on to my people the powerful texts of this

Scripture. And the third reason is my own self-interest, since I am a scholar specializing in lexicology, and am working on the Dargi-Russian dictionary. Bible translation helps a lot in this work. Thanks to my Bible translation experience I have found dozens of old Dargi words and archaic expressions; this work helped our team to start using Dargi vocabulary more extensively. And we even coined several new terms. Why not? After all, translation work is an art form of sorts. In the IBT translation process, I especially love field-testing. I personally did my post-graduate work in Dargi studies, but there are many people who don't know the Dargi literary language very well and who don't know the Bible either. Moreover, they don't know Scriptures at all, whether Muslim or Christian ones! And when these readers discover the very existence of such translations, it's like a revelation for them. They get excited. They get acquainted with these texts for the first time in their lives and wonder how such a thing could even exist."

Two years ago a second translator joined the team. Let us call him Sulaiman. He is a philologist who had been working for a Dargi literary journal for many years and was thus no less proficient in literary Dargi than Ibrahim, but at the beginning of his work with IBT he had no experience with the Scriptures. The project's exegete watched the new team member's first reaction upon reading the Bible, and was delighted to describe it: "He plunged into the text and started exclaiming, 'This is where the real thing can be found!'" Two years have passed, but this translator's initial joy has not gone away. During these two years Sulaiman succeeded in translating Jonah and Ruth and has recently been working on Esther. He demonstrated his newfound passion for these texts: "In Esther the characters don't mention God directly, but you feel His presence throughout the story. Why did I never know these things before? What a pity indeed that earlier I was not aware of the significant things that I see here. If only I could have come across these texts 20-30 years ago to study them then! This is the spiritual nourishment for which I've been thirsting many, many years. This gives me wings to fly!"

Interestingly, at the recent training seminar on the Pentateuch where this conversation took place, Ibrahim felt just as elated as his colleague, but for him the reason was purely professional. His deepening involvement in Bible translation work made him thirst for learning the languages of the original: "During the past two years together with our new exegete we've done a large amount of work on revising the books of the New Testament. We checked each sound in the text, each and every letter, and we found terms that are even more precise, more fitting and clear to the reader than the terms in the first version of the translation. For example, in the previous version the Dargi text said that John the Baptist was 'purifying' people with water, but now he is 'immersing them in water'. During field-testing, people found the new version of the text easier both for reading and understanding. Their approval is a high evaluation of what we've done. Due to our intense work I came to the conclusion that translators are in dire need of mastering the original languages of the Bible. I found that Greek syntax is much closer to the Dargi syntax than Russian is. Of course we do have exegetes with a good command of Greek, and we have a special computer program (Paratext) for Bible translators, but if I could read the words of the original directly, without intermediaries, it would be easier for me to

translate. We need a methodology for studying the basics of elementary Greek, and then we will be ready to proceed independently – we will fly towards our goal fast, like birds!”

Since the topic of our most recent training seminar was the Pentateuch, which is in the Dargi team’s plans for the near future, from Greek we naturally went on to Hebrew. “Of course we will not coin artificial new terms for words that everybody knows from the Koran,” Ibrahim continued. “For example, here at the seminar we had the task of finding terms for expressing the ‘clean/unclean’ distinction in our languages, and for Dargi these terms are evident since everyone already knows the words from the Koran. Some Biblical names are also well-known by all Muslims, such as the name of the prophet Noah. But there are also words which we simply lack in our language. For instance, there is no such word as ‘parable’ in Dargi. When we were working on the Gospel Parables edition, we took the Dargi word for ‘proverb’, which doesn’t reflect all the needed shades of meaning in this context. But later I found out that the Turkish Bible translation uses the word ‘mashal’, which is related to Hebrew מָשָׁל. It struck me that we also have this word in Dargi, though it sounds a little bit different. It came into our language from Arabic and literally means ‘for example’. Now I have the idea that we could make a compound term from both of these together that will mean ‘proverb, which serves as an example’. This could be used when we translate the Old Testament book of Proverbs.”

This is when the third team member, a potential new translator (let us call him Ismail), joined our conversation and shared his vision of the Bible translator’s task: “The main task of the translator is to be honest. Without an editor, one may stretch a point, but this is a sin against one’s readers. If you sow a cucumber seed, you should water it enough and fertilize the soil. Otherwise it will not grow. The same is true about translation: you should sort out all the words of your language and produce such a good environment for the seed that it would be able to blossom into a flower and not wither prematurely.”

So what motivates one to become a Bible translator? In each project the answer may differ. But for all three Dargi team members, their work is an attempt to follow “the way of truth” (Ps 119:30) in their lives, whether by striving to know the essence of the original languages, through seeking out and recognizing “the real thing,” or by pursuing honesty in one’s translation.

*Winter 2018–2019*

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DARGI (population: 590,000)  
Location: Central Dagestan  
Language family: Northeast Caucasian  
Main IBT Scripture publications: Mark (2002, reprint 2007),  
Luke (2010), Matthew (2013)  
Audio: Matthew

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“Oh, Lord!  
Help my people to acquire Your Word!”

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The Dolgans were recognized as a separate ethnic group only during the 20th century. Their language is closely related to Yakut, and although culturally and ethnically these two peoples of the North are distinct, for many years the Dolgans were used to calling themselves “Yakut.” Only in the 1960s did scholars decide that the Dolgan language was sufficiently different from Yakut that it could be considered a separate language and not just a dialect. Thus, the Dolgans were finally recognized as a distinct people.

However, this was not a “happy ending,” but only the beginning of a difficult struggle to survive as a unique northern people with its own history, culture and traditions. The reality is that the newly recognized Dolgan language is on the edge of extinction. Like the majority of other peoples of the Far North, the Dolgans had had reindeer herding as their traditional livelihood for centuries. But after the Russian Revolution the reindeer herders’ freedom to roam came to an end. Collective farms and settlements were set up and Dolgan children were sent to boarding schools where they were taught only in Russian. This resulted in a gradual dying out of the spoken language. Dolgan did not have its own writing system prior to about 30 years ago, when in the final years

of Soviet rule a Dolgan alphabet was worked out and the first written texts in Dolgan appeared. Now the language is being taught at schools, and there is a chance for its revival. There is a great need for Dolgan texts.

“My colleague in Taimyr said that the peoples of the Far North are still preparing to say their word to the whole world,” our Dolgan translator shared. “As far as I understand her, she means that the peoples of the North still preserve very high moral standards for living amid the chaos of contemporary life and we have our own ways of transmitting these traditional values to the younger generations. And now just imagine! If the peoples of the North, many of whom still cherish their pagan beliefs, receive the Christian message wholeheartedly, not only will they survive, but they will transmit this message to the new generations that are still to walk upon the earth!”

Furthermore, among the peoples of the North, the Dolgans are specially known for their gentle ways and warm hospitality. What they lack is the message of Christ in their own language so that it could be heard and received and cherished. But there was a time in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Dolgans were Christians, having acquired faith through missionaries sent by the Orthodox Church. Before the Russian Revolution, every large Dolgan village had a church in it. After 1917 all of them were destroyed. But never, either in post-Soviet Russia or even in those pre-revolutionary days, did the Dolgans have the Bible in their mother tongue.

“A new wooden church building is now being built in Hatynga, which is in our Dolgan region,” the translator says proudly. “And it is our Dolgan populace which now comprises the majority of its parishioners.”

When asked if all the necessary terms and biblical names have been preserved in the language from pre-revolutionary times, she responded as follows:

“Ah, when very old people are praying, they use these special words, and they even call the apostles by their Dolgan names! But nobody among the young people knows either these words or these biblical names. Why, how could we learn them if there were no written texts? You know, one of our cultural peculiarities is that the Dolgans never pray aloud. Our elderly people all pray silently. We’ve just never had a chance to hear! I can draw a simple parallel. When a Russian family is gathered together for a dinner, if they are a family of Christian believers, they say their dinner prayers aloud at the table, while Dolgans in the same situation pray silently; everyone is praying deep within himself.

From the mid 1990s to the early 2000s, I was working at the radio station. And once we had a guest on our programme with whom we were discussing on the air how hard life is, and how the Dolgan people are dying out, and the language is in danger of extinction, and traditions are irretrievably lost and reindeer herding is no more, and so on and so forth, with the inevitable conclusion, ‘Everything is getting worse and worse.’”

The book “Jesus Friend of Children” was first published by IBT in Dolgan in 1997 and has now been revised in order to be published as a Dolgan/Russian diglot, which will be a great help to children in their study of the native language.

The Dolgan translator tells the background story: “Our Orthodox priest, Father Evfimi, who received the first IBT editions in Dolgan, tried to distribute them very widely, wherever he could. He said that at first, people were very glad to have a book



in their mother tongue, but later as the years passed they complained that it was too difficult for them to read. Those first editions were translated by a very old and prominent person (now deceased), who was the best specialist in Dolgan and had a really good command of the language, but for ordinary native speakers who are not scholars, many words that he used in the texts were lost and long forgotten. Thus, we had to make a full revision, and Father Evfimiy came up with the idea of making it a bilingual edition, so that people would open the book and find half of the text in Dolgan and half of the text in Russian. Such diglots are in heavy demand in Taimyr now, and all the books and textbooks are now published as diglots.”

This autumn, a missionary trip is planned to the furthest settlements of Taimyr. The Evangelical missionaries always take IBT publications with them in order to distribute them among the local population of the Far North. This time it is going to be a very complicated project. The missionaries will have to take a flight to a certain settlement, make their camp there, and then divide into three teams and fly to the three most distant villages by helicopter. The total distance between the settlements is about 1,000 km each. It is impossible to visit them one by one, because it is too expensive and too far. The majority of the population in these settlements is Dolgan, and they are waiting eagerly for the new editions in their mother tongue!

*September-October 2012*

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*DOLGAN (population: 7,875)*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Location: Taimyr Autonomous Area, North Siberia*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Mark (1996),*  
*Jesus Friend of Children (1997), Luke (2002)*

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## Oh, at last I understand the Bible!

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The audio recording in Moscow of the Children's Bible in the Evenki language has been completed. To find anyone who could read the text turned out to be a hard task, even though Evenki is the mother tongue of many people scattered over large areas from the Yenisei River in the west to Sakhalin Island in the east, and from the Taimyr peninsula in the north to the border of China in the south. People are simply illiterate in their native language. The salaries of teachers of Evenki language are so small that even elementary schools lack such specialists. For all these reasons it would have been meaningless for IBT to print and distribute the Children's Bible without also providing an accompanying audio recording.

Evenkis are thirsty to hear the Word of God in their mother tongue. Father Timothy, a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church in the capital town of Tura, says that the majority of his parishioners are Evenkis. The hardships of life in the Far North push them towards seeking God. People participate in church services and are eager to learn about Christ, but in most cases they start reading the Bible in Russian only to find that they do not understand it. With their traditional animistic beliefs, they lack the fundamental biblical background which is needed to grasp the message of the New Testament.

One elderly woman, who is a true believer and a committed churchgoer, rejoiced at hearing the Evenki text of the Children's Bible during a comprehension testing session. "Oh, at last I can really understand what it is all about!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. Unfortunately, she is among those who can't read for themselves but need the audio recording.

Elena Petrova is a new person in the project. She came to Moscow to take part in the audio recording of the Children's Bible and is very enthusiastic about this undertaking. "I always had a Bible in Russian, but to tell the truth I didn't read it," she confesses. "But now, when I am getting acquainted with the text in Evenki, I am for the first time in my life discovering the Bible for myself! I can't find the proper words to say how interesting it is! All of my ancestors were baptized and married in the Russian Orthodox Church. They had great reverence for sacred things. My grandfather lived in the taiga. In the Soviet years he had an icon on the wall and a portrait of Lenin next to it. He used to explain that he kept Lenin's portrait there for a special reason: to escape persecution for the holy icon! But my relatives didn't know the basics of their faith. The same is true with respect to many generations of the Evenki people."

"In fact, the Children's Bible is not simply a children's book," claims one of the translators, Nadezhda Bulatova. "For the moment it is simply THE Bible for my people. The main biblical stories are reaching the Evenkis in their mother tongue for the first time. They are presented in the most accessible form and accompanied by the most beautiful illustrations. There is simply nothing written in our language comparable with the Children's Bible!"

*June-July 2011*

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*EVENKI (population: 38,000)*

*Location: Evenki Autonomous region, Siberia*

*Language family: Tungusic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: Luke revised (diglot Evenki/Russian, 2013),*

*Jonah (diglot Evenki/Russian, 2018)*

*Audio: Children's Bible, Luke, Jonah*

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## A winter in a hunting cabin

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The Evenkis are spread out over a huge part of the Siberian taiga. According to the 2010 census of Russia, the total number of ethnic Evenkis is about 38,000, but it's very hard, if not impossible, to estimate the exact number of actual speakers of the Evenki language. Some people name Evenki as their mother tongue just because they feel a connection to it, not because they actually speak it. Others actually speak Evenki fluently, but for some reason they say that their first language is Russian. A young linguist named Karina from the Moscow-based Institute of Linguistics spends much of her time in field expeditions in the northern regions where the Evenkis live and says that their language is seriously endangered due to the fact that there are few places where the Evenkis live compactly. There are about 50 dialects and sub-dialects of Evenki spoken over vast territories. "Only reindeer herders, who follow their reindeer in the tundra for half a year away from such major language influences as Russian or Yakut, have a real chance to preserve their mother tongue," she concludes from her experience in linguistic expeditions.

And this is exactly what another young linguist, Matt from the United States, attempted to do: first, to follow the reindeer; and second, to spend a winter in a hunting



cabin, in order not only to start learning the language, but to experience the lifestyle. Here is what Matt shared about this: “The lives of Evenki reindeer herders are so far removed from anything that people in the U.S. or in Moscow have ever experienced. Their world has its own rules, knowledge, and hierarchy. It’s not like anything I’ve ever been a part of prior to this. I met a woman from Krasnoyarsk who now lives in California and told her about my own life in Krasnoyarsk and about traveling with the Evenki. I was explaining to her their traditional way of life and saying some still live in chooms (tepees) and travel around with their reindeer herds. And she said, ‘No. There is nobody in Russia who lives in a choom.’ I responded, ‘But I myself have been with people who live in a chum.’ ‘No, this doesn’t exist anymore. Such things were a hundred years ago,’ she stubbornly insisted.”

Matt continued, “The Evenki people have immense knowledge and skill sets. I know what hunting is, and I thought: hunters are uneducated, simple people. I am a smart guy, I have advanced degrees, it’s going to take me only a few weeks to learn everything possible about hunting. And I got out there on invitation from a local man to spend a winter in his hunting cabin with him and one more guy, and I quickly realized that I was never going to compare with what these guys know.”

The cabin was located in the vicinity of a town called Baykit on the bank of Podkamennaya Tunguska, a large branch of the Yenisei River. The average annual temperature +6.3 degrees Centigrade, and the lowest temperature in winter sometimes drops down to -56 degrees.

“No heat, no electricity,” Matt described their living conditions. “We were cutting down trees and chopping them up, and at night somebody had to get up once every three hours and put more wood into the fire. In Evenki culture it’s considered bad luck to let the fire go out, so they are very attentive to keeping it going all night long. And they are very good at it. When I was in charge of the fire, I often had to relight it, because I didn’t start it up again soon enough.” It’s not at all surprising that Matt, being a modern man, was not an expert in survival.

One of his two companions, let us call him Gennady, happened to be an atheist, and whenever Matt did something wrong, he always complained, “Your prayers don’t work.” Whenever he saw Matt reading his English Bible, he would say, “You are wasting your time on your prayers again” and would make fun of him. The life of these three men with very different worldviews isolated from society in a cabin in the harsh conditions of a forest in the Siberian winter had the potential to become very confrontational (though Matt recalls it very fondly):

“The owner of the land on which the cabin stood, Georgy (name changed), is an Orthodox Christian and kept a beautiful Russian-language copy of the Gospels with an icon of Christ on the front. Typically, the icon stood on top of a doily and leaned against the wall, the only decorative element in an otherwise primitive cabin. When I arrived at the cabin with Georgy, the Bible had been laid on the table face down. He asked Gennady, ‘Why is my Lord and Savior face down? He should be standing up, where we can see Him.’ Gennady murmured a response and busied himself with something else. Some days later Georgy left again for a remote job. Gennady and I

were repairing skis on the table. He motioned to the Bible. ‘Get rid of that.’ He said it so harshly I suspected something more than inconvenience. ‘You don’t like the Bible?’ I asked. ‘No.’ ‘Why not?’ He thought for a time and said, ‘I get it. I’m a sinner.’ I put the Bible on the shelf, but that wasn’t enough. A few minutes later he threw down the ski, took the Bible and buried it under a stack of old newspapers in the far corner, where he wouldn’t even see the spine of the offending book.”

So Matt didn’t have high hopes for getting Gennady to engage with Evenki Scripture when they got back to town a few months later. They had been talking about the Evenki language and looking through books on local Evenki history, and Matt decided to try showing Gennady IBT’s Evenki Children’s Bible to see his reaction.

“I brought it out, expecting a bad reaction, because the Evenki word for Bible is *Biblia*, which is very recognizable from Russian. And so I thought I would get the same very negative reaction, but he opened it up and started reading the story of creation. And he read the first few words in Evenki and looked at me with a big smile and said, ‘Wow! This is ours!’ And we were reading it for an hour and a half, though tired and hungry after all our long time in the woods. We read page by page, and he was explaining the story to me, explaining what was going on. He often laughed with joy as we read together, working through passages and talking about word choices. We only quit because it was time to eat. Sitting and reading with Gennady for those few hours has been the highlight of my time in Russia. It drives home the point that there is value in Bible translation work, even for those whose language is dying, even for those who prefer Russian in nearly all domains (as Gennady seemed to), and even for those whose understanding of the material being read is imperfect.”

*Summer 2020*

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*EVENKI (population: 38,000)*

*Location: Evenki Autonomous region, Siberia*

*Language family: Tungusic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: Luke revised (diglot Evenki/Russian, 2013),*

*Jonah (diglot Evenki/Russian, 2018)*

*Audio: Children’s Bible, Luke, Jonah*

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## “The mill turns as the wind turns”

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“**T**he mill turns as the wind turns” was a proverbial expression that Fr. Cosmas, an Orthodox monk from the USA, could not make any sense of when he first came across it in a Gagauz story that he was reading. Fr. Cosmas’s life story is in itself worthy of attention, but what is important for us here is that Fr. Cosmas is now an exegetical advisor in training for the IBT Gagauz project. Indeed, his first trip to Gagauzia this past March was a meeting between an unusual personality and an unusual culture. Fr. Cosmas has had a very special interest in the Turkish language for many years. After gradually becoming a Christian, then an Orthodox Christian, and finally a monk, he suddenly learned that there is an entire people of Orthodox Christian faith and a language that is very similar to his beloved Turkish. These are the Gagauz, an ethnic group located primarily in southern Moldova. Over the next two years, Fr. Cosmas established contacts with two Gagauz-speaking Christians who are dedicated workers in the Gagauz Bible translation project – IBT translator Viktor Kopuschu and his brother, IBT field-tester Fr. Sergiy Kopuschu (an Orthodox priest). Fr. Cosmas studied their language and started earning a reputation among the Gagauz as a foreigner who writes stories and articles in Gagauz.

Fr. Cosmas continues his story about the intriguing folk expression: “When we visited a real mill that was preserved in the town of Beshalma in Gagauzia, the mill

happened to be a whole building like a small house on a central pole. The building rotates 360 degrees, and there is a long pole at the back of it and a number of stakes pounded into the ground. They move the whole building to face the wind, because in Gagauzia the wind can come from any direction, so the entire building is rotated to face the direction the wind is blowing that day, and then they tie the end of the pole down to the stakes, so that it stays there. The meaning of the expression is that in the course of living we have to adapt ourselves to different things that happen in life. So it is not just about the blades of the windmill turning. It is people who have to make an effort and turn the mill.”

This expression seems to reflect the very situation in which the Gagauz people find themselves nowadays. As Fr. Cosmas puts it, “The Gagauz look very favorably on the time when they were part of the Soviet Union.” Now many are confused about their own identity, and they have to make special efforts to recognize it. “I would say they don’t feel they receive any respect from other peoples: among Turks they are looked down on for not being Muslims, and among Orthodox Christians they think they are looked down on for being Turkish. So when somebody appreciates them, he gets an extravagant response.” Fr. Cosmas continues: “A prominent Gagauz author in her poem describes her conversation with a young boy. She asks him, ‘Are you Gagauz?’ and he replies, ‘My mother and father are Gagauz, but I am Russian.’ This is a situation that actually comes up in reality; young people think of the Gagauz language and the Gagauz culture as something that belongs to their grandparents, to old people and to people in the villages, but a young, modern, up-to-date Gagauz person is going to try to be like a Russian person or actually move to Russia to get a job. And they study Russian, they study Bulgarian, they study Moldovan, they study French and German and other languages, but most of the time they do not study their own language.”

It is only people themselves who can make an effort to “turn this mill.” Such are language enthusiasts like Fr. Cosmas or one of his new Gagauz friends, who has multiple talents as a painter, sculptor, singer and a recording engineer. This Gagauz man has his own studio and produces albums of young Gagauz singers solely and deliberately in their mother tongue. In order to encourage a promising singer in her early twenties to value the language of her ancestors, he set up a meeting between her and Fr. Cosmas. She was utterly surprised that this American (and an Orthodox Christian at that) spoke Gagauz but no Russian! Fr. Cosmas shares his impressions of their meeting: “She sings in Gagauz, because she memorizes her songs, and so she sounds like a native speaker, but she doesn’t speak the language either with her friends or with her parents. She did that when she was very young. But now she was in agony during our conversation. So embarrassed, because she couldn’t think of how to say anything. Once it was time to leave, she couldn’t even remember how to say ‘goodbye’ in Gagauz.”

During his trip to Gagauzia, Fr. Cosmas received an enormous amount of attention and was even awarded a medal by the governor for his service to Gagauzia. “When things like this happen, this is not about me. This is about them and about their feelings of themselves. I do not let it inflate my ego,” Fr. Cosmas humbly comments. “They were very eager to meet me, just because they felt that an honor was given to their country,

language and culture.” A local woman shared that when she addressed Fr. Cosmas in Gagauz and heard him respond in her mother tongue, her whole being was filled with the utmost delight. What a contrast this foreigner was with many Gagauz young people. They are eager to study foreign languages in order to get a better job, while he is eager to study their heart language just because he loves it.

But the most unexpected surprise that came as a result of Fr. Cosmas’s visit was that he somehow managed to persuade an audience of 80 or 90 very critically-minded priests that Bible translation in Gagauz is really needed. “The local bishop came up with the idea that I should attend the meeting devoted to the Bible translations into Gagauz. I am a monk, so I am under obedience, and the next day I was taken to that meeting. I did not know how to read the audience because I was meeting that enormous group of people for the first time. They were asking questions and making objections in Russian, and it was translated to me into Gagauz. I was speaking Gagauz and it was translated back into Russian. So it was very difficult for me simply to know what was going on, because there were several layers of language and I did not know how serious the objections were going to be,” Fr. Cosmas recalls. “To my astonishment, the next day I was told that the bishop wrote a letter to my bishop in California, and it turned out that in this letter he gave his blessing.”

In a local Gagauz newspaper there is an article about Fr. Cosmas, although it is written in Russian. The journalist concludes, “When we forget our mother tongue, we forget our history. But all of a sudden, somewhere on the other end of the world, there arise people who accept our language and our culture as though it were their own.”

Let us hope that the wind is blowing favorably for the Gagauz-speaking Christians at last. And let us pray that the mill has already begun to turn due to the efforts of mother-tongue enthusiasts, like those mentioned in this story, who are devoting their lives to translating the Bible into their heart language and also all those that are ready to support them.

*Summer 2014*

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*GAGAUZ (population: 197,000)*

*Location: Southern Moldova, Ukraine*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2006, 2009), Children’s Bible (2010),*

*The Six Psalms (2012), Ruth and Jonah (2017)*

*Audio: Children’s Bible, NT, Ruth, Jonah*

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“Before I even speak a word,  
You know what I will say,  
and with Your powerful arm You protect me  
from every side”

(Ps 139:4-5)

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In this newsletter we would like to share with you a fascinating story, which truly happened in one of our Muslim-environment projects. We will not name this group explicitly, so that the lives of our protagonists would not be endangered. Right now we have two translators in this project, let us call them Eve and Joseph (not their real names). But it was not always like this. Many years ago Eve was the only translator. She devoted 15 years of her life to Bible translation, though she is not a Christian. There are no known Christians among her people. Not even a single one. Like the majority of her kinspeople, she is from a Muslim background. She is a journalist and a specialist in her mother tongue.

A year and a half ago Eve came to Moscow for a working session in her project, and I asked her what made her so dedicated to Bible translation. She answered, “When you’re producing a translation, you confront life itself. You start comparing the text with your own life, and you see that there are no exceptions in our world: we live now the same way people lived in olden times, and what is right or

wrong is the same for any historical period. These interesting comparisons push me ahead in my work. Very often I wish that my official work day would end as soon as possible so that I could come home quickly from my main job, take care of the needed housework, and then sit down and with great pleasure start writing down my translation of the Bible. The more peaceful you are, the quicker you get ahead, chapter by chapter. All the books that I worked on – Ruth, Jonah, Esther, Genesis, Luke – are equally fascinating for me. I am translating them with pleasure!”

A month or two after we talked, this dedicated translator, who was so much in love with the Bible, had to leave the project. She was confronted with real danger because of the negative attitude to the Bible in the society where she lived, and had to choose the safety of her loved ones. But during this crisis in the project, we found another scholar and linguist, whom we call Joseph. Not intimidated by anything, Joseph felt how important the Bible was for his language and culture. He picked up the mantle and launched into Bible translation work with zeal and fervor. A year passed, and a miracle happened! Eve returned to the project. As soon as I met her at a seminar for Bible translators in Moscow, I asked her what made her find the courage to return. She told her story with humor, and it was clear that God's providence played a major part in it.

She was working at the local television station and received an assignment to visit a certain educational establishment to conduct an interview with a prominent specialist in their language. She had known this person very well for 20 or 30 years, and it was a pleasure for her to go. While she had been a Bible translator in the IBT project, she had often been asked to find one more translator. This was her own great desire too, but she was afraid to speak to anybody about Bible translation. And of course she dared not speak to this very person, whom she knew so well and valued greatly as an expert in their mother tongue. How could she approach him about Bible translation, if two years ago he had made the hajj to Mecca? Impossible!

So she knocked at the door of his office. They greeted each other with joy, and his very first question to her was, “Eve, do you know a person named so and so?” (and he said the pseudonym which she uses for her Bible translation work). “Yes, I do,” she answered simply. “This is me. But how do you know?”

“I’m exchanging letters with this person through my Bible translation coordinator, and I never knew this was you,” he exclaimed.

“Are you also in the Bible translation project, Joseph?” It was Eve’s turn to be surprised.

“Yes, I am,” was his answer. They laughed a lot. He shared his plan to go to the Bible translation seminar soon. She expressed her readiness to join him in her favorite work again, since by this time she had managed to talk to certain people in authority and convince them of the importance of the Bible for their society. They had promised her safety in her work. And now she was no longer alone, but with a longtime colleague and friend whom she could trust.

“Since we began working together, the atmosphere in the project has become warmer and more interesting,” she shares, “though we do argue a lot, and these can be heated debates, indeed. But working now feels like coming out of hibernation after a long winter. You wake up, you get out into the open air, and blissful spring is here!”

*Spring 2016*



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“My mother tongue is created by God too.”

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Our Kabardian translator's lifelong interest in Bible translation started when he was studying linguistics. He took a special university course in the translation of foreign texts into his mother tongue. And the task given by his professor was neither more nor less than to attempt to translate the Koran and the Bible! So he decided to start with the Bible. He translated several books from the Bible into Kabardian, and since that moment he has never stopped. Recently, he started working with IBT, and although the team's method of work, with several stages of testing and checking, has its particular difficulties in comparison with his previous solo attempts at Bible translation, his work with IBT has already borne its first fruit. The translation of the book of Proverbs into Kabardian has now been completed.

“I greatly hope that the number of people who will work on the translation of the Bible into my mother tongue will increase over time. This is because I am greatly interested in giving the full Bible to my people. The first reason for me to engage in Bible translation was my heart's deep desire to preserve our native language for future centuries, so that it would not be lost. In this way, my fellow countrymen whom I love dearly would always speak their own mother tongue. Because I am sure that my mother tongue was also created by God, like Russian, or Greek, or Hebrew. And it is endowed with a natural right to have the Bible speak it, because the Bible is the Book of books.

You see, we have a target audience. We have a group of Kabardians, who are called the Mozdok Kabardians. Some of them live in the Stavropol region, and others in the Mozdok region of the North Ossetia-Alania Republic. They have been Christians since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They have churches and they worship God in their mother tongue. It would be very interesting and important for them to have a Bible translation in their own language. Unfortunately, they are completely unfamiliar with the Kabardian writing system. Although they have some Kabardian language classes at school, the major classes are all in Russian, and thus although they speak very good Kabardian in their everyday life, their literary tradition is not developed in comparison with us, the Kabardians who live in our own republic. Of course I took the trouble to bring some books to them! When I came into the Bible translation project, I saw that several biblical books had already been translated into Kabardian. I took all those books and made a trip in order to bring them to these people. Many of them liked the books and are looking forward to having more translated books!

We should try our best to foster our people's interest in the Bible, and we should help them to understand that through the biblical texts God speaks the truth to us too. We should work hard to underline the similarities between our traditions, and not the differences. I think this is the reason why God created us! We are all children of God."

The Bible is the most translated book in the world, and it is no surprise when Christians of different denominations feel their personal responsibility to answer the call of the Lord to "go and make disciples of all the nations." The surprising thing is when a person whose heart is set aflame with enthusiasm for the Bible translation is a Muslim! Everything you have just read came from one and the same person, our translator in the Kabardian project, a Muslim, devoted to his own faith tradition. Let us praise the Lord of the harvest, that He is sending out labourers into His harvest in every nation and does not show partiality to man, no matter how unexpected His ways may sometimes appear to us!

*April-June 2013*

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*KABARDIAN (population: 517,000)*

*Location: Western Caucasus*

*Language family: Northwest Caucasian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (1993), Ruth and Jonah (2009), Proverbs (2017),  
Daniel and Ruth (2018)*

*Audio: Ruth, Jonah, Luke*

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## They had five copies of the New Testament, and all were gone!

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**T**he Kalmyks are the only Buddhist people in the whole of Europe, and are contemplative in comparison with other Europeans. They have deservedly earned their reputation as a calm and peaceful people who are never in a hurry. They are also known for being an intellectual people because they have adopted chess as their national game, and this is taught even to little children from the very first years of schooling. The Kalmyks are famous for their Kalmyk tea, a very special drink with cream, salt and spices, but no sugar. You drink a cup of this tea for breakfast and you do not have to eat any food till lunch time. Kalmyks boast of their keen eyesight and good teeth thanks to this sugarless diet. The Kalmyks really know and cherish their traditions.

“I heard you say that the Kalmyk language is being lost, but this is a very superficial view indeed,” argues our Kalmyk translator. “Two years ago an audio recording of the Kalmyk New Testament was produced, and many people from different professions, predominantly actors, journalists and other prominent people were invited to take part in it. What a beautiful audio recording we got as a result! But what I want to tell you now is that when I visited the studio to listen to them reading the texts, I heard many exclamations of delight. It was their first acquaintance with the biblical text, and it

was in their native language, and they found it extremely interesting and incredibly beautiful. When I came to the studio, five copies of the New Testament were distributed among the readers, and when the recording was over, alas, we looked for these copies, but none of them remained. All five copies were gone! I had four more copies with me and I had to give all of them away as well.”

Now our translator is finishing her work on the book of Proverbs, and this is what she says about it: “The book of Proverbs is different from other Bible books because of its current relevance. It will be more accessible to the common reader than many other biblical texts. It will be easily understood by people with only a secondary education, and it will be clear even to children and to illiterate people of the older generation. It is because this book deals with our ordinary everyday life. Some examples from it are very close to our Kalmyk folk wisdom. For instance, ‘The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth!’ (19:24, NIV). There is a characteristic phrase in Kalmyk, ‘If you do little, you will get little,’ and it means the same as this proverb. Also the proverb, ‘As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another’ (27:17, NIV). We say that since you live among others, you should know yourself based on their attitude to you and your attitude to them. The Bible is a real masterpiece of global importance and it helps us to communicate.”

*November 2012 – January 2013*

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*KALMYK (population: 183,000)*

*Location: Republic of Kalmykia, Southern Russia*

*Language family: Mongolic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2002), Genesis, Ruth (2005), Psalms (2006), Proverbs (2013), Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs (2018), illustrated Jonah (2019)*

*Audio: NT, Bible Stories, Psalms*

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## The music of the Psalms fills the city that is full of idols

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Though the majority of the Kalmyk population are country folk who cherish their traditions and are far from politics, nevertheless the Kalmyks have experienced quite a few tragic periods in their history. More than once they have lost their land and their home and had to start all over again from the very beginning. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the envoys of this nomadic nation approached the Russian tsar and requested Russian citizenship, protection from the Golden Horde and some territory to practice their nomadic lifestyle. They were given lands in Siberia, but preferred to migrate to the European part of Russia and settled in the lower reaches of the Volga River. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century about 125,000 Kalmyks, unhappy with ever-increasing oppression from the tsarist government, made an attempt to move to China, but the majority of them died on the way. Since that time and until the Russian Revolution, the Kalmyks did not have any recognized official status in Russia as a separate people. At the time of the Revolution, they divided into two camps, with

one fighting for the Bolsheviks and the other supporting the Tsarist forces. After the defeat of the latter, many of the Kalmyks emigrated to the USA, France and other European countries, where their descendants assimilated with the local population. Those who stayed in the Soviet Union achieved a semi-autonomous status in the 1920s, only to lose it and their very home in 1943, when the whole Kalmyk people was forcibly deported to Siberia and Central Asia for 13 long years. After Stalin's death they were allowed to return and regained their semi-autonomous status, but one-third of the population died during that exile. It was there, in Siberia, that the childhood years of our Bible translator were spent. It was there that she got her Russian name Vera just because her school teachers were unable to pronounce the Kalmyk name given to her at birth. She took part in the translation of the first-ever New Testament in Kalmyk (published in 2002), the Psalms (published in 2006), and the book of Proverbs (published in 2013), the presentation of which took place in Elista in the autumn of 2013.

The chairman of the IBT board, Fr. Alexander, who visited Elista for this presentation, reminded us of the impression that St Paul's had from his visit to Athens (Acts 17:16). "If you want to see a modern-day city that is full of idols, do go to Elista," Fr. Alexander says. "You will see prayer-wheels and prayer-drums at every turn. There is also an interesting local tradition: whenever the city authorities want to erect a new monument, they announce a competition among the sculptors. For such competitions many small statues are made by the participants. One of them is chosen as a model for the future monument, while all the rest are put into city squares and parks as decorations. This produces a curious and most unusual impression, which only adds to the picture of a 'city full of idols.'"

The local Orthodox diocese is extremely poor. There are only ten parishes, and eight of them are situated in villages where there are no Russians, while the Kalmyks do not know Christ and do not have enough time or skill to read any books, be they in Kalmyk or Russian, because they are busy with cattle breeding, which is both physically hard and time consuming. However, it is not only the urban part of the Kalmyk population that has deservedly earned a reputation as a highly intellectual people. All the Kalmyks are wise with the wisdom of the heart, the wisdom of profound inward silence, and Buddhist contemplation. Therefore, we have every reason to hope that biblical wisdom, that of the book of Proverbs, will easily find its way into their culture and tradition. Taking into account the poverty of the local diocese, it was even more striking to hear from the local bishop that he is eager to find a person who would agree to translate further parts of the Bible as a full time staff member. The bishop is fired up with the good intention of finding resources and paying the salary of this Bible translator! And this is not the only good initiative that has come from this highly missionary-oriented bishop. As a musician himself (he plays the violin professionally), he arranged for the parts of the Orthodox Liturgy that consist of the Psalms of David to be sung in Kalmyk, which had never been done before. The verses of these Psalms were taken from the IBT translation, and their first performance in Kalmyk by an Orthodox church



choir took place during the presentation of the book of Proverbs. Let us hope and pray that the universal language of music together with the biblical tradition of singing these songs of praise and the full revelation of divine-human relations will awaken many hearts and start a new stage in the history of the city which is still full of idols.

*November 2013 – January 2014*

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*KALMYK (population: 183,000)*

*Location: Republic of Kalmykia, Southern Russia*

*Language family: Mongolic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2002), Genesis, Ruth (2005), Psalms (2006), Proverbs (2013), Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (2018), illustrated Jonah (2019)*

*Audio: NT, Bible Stories, Psalms*

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“To bring out of the storeroom new treasures  
as well as old”

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Galina, a member of IBT’s Khakas Bible translation and audio recording team began her story: “In the past, this is how Khakas funerals were conducted. The body of the deceased relative remained in the house, and the relatives called for a singer of heroic ballads. The singer accompanied himself on a seven-stringed Khakas musical instrument. This instrument is a matter of pride for the Khakas because we are the only Asian people who managed to preserve this instrument through the ages, though in antiquity it had been common for all Asians. So the singer sat down near the deceased person’s head and started to sing heroic ballads to him or her in order to help the soul as it transitioned to the other world. People gathered around and listened attentively. When they heard something funny, everybody laughed; when they heard tragic episodes, they showed sympathy for the heroes of the ballad; in any case, the audience would always comment on the narrative in some way. Nobody was supposed to show grief and shed tears at the funeral because the departed was ‘returning to his true home.’ There is even a special expression for this in the Khakas language. The ultimate send-off for a person should be conducted worthily of the fact that this person had earlier come to our earth and was now departing it. Death is a very important event in one’s life!”

Listening to Galina, I was especially impressed by this last phrase, which at first glance seemed to be an oxymoron. She said it casually, as something taken for granted, not as the fruit of lengthy philosophic reflections. Indeed, she sounded very Christian.

To hear such a maxim from the translator of the Gospels would not have been surprising but for the fact that she drew this wisdom not from the Gospel, but from ancient Khakas pagan traditions. Could it be that “death as an important event of life” was something intrinsic to the worldview of her pagan forefathers and still preserved in the Khakas culture and her own outlook on life, though this has been utterly lost by contemporary Western post-Christian society?

Galina continued: “We lost our funeral tradition during the atheistic Soviet period, and there is a huge need for creating something new in order to consecrate the moment of departure from life. People do not know how to see off their deceased relatives. I heard the story of an old woman from a distant village who was invited to a funeral to recite Gospel texts in Russian. She did it in a chaotic manner, incorrectly and without any understanding of the meaning, just because people wanted to hear something religious. It looked like a magic ritual and produced a miserable impression... The first translations of Gospel fragments into Khakas by Russian Orthodox missionary Shtygashev appeared before the Russian Revolution of 1917, but after the revolution these texts could not be further promulgated for obvious reasons. Thus, our people are quite aware of the Gospel. There are Khakas people who start coming to church, but they hardly understand the Gospel in Russian, especially people in the villages. When we offered our Gospel audio recordings to the radio station, we first did this very discreetly. It was Easter time, and we combined several fragments about the Resurrection of Christ from all four Gospels, and offered them this text. It was accepted with great enthusiasm, and the speakers on the radio program were very happy that they could talk about Easter and illustrate their Easter congratulations with a proper text on the topic. Afterwards, they promised that the audio recordings of the Gospels would be aired on all radio programs chapter by chapter till the end of all four Gospels. In reality, these Gospel programs stopped after Matthew. On the radio they didn’t understand why the same events should be repeated in four different ways. They asked for a ‘continuation’ instead. Modern consciousness is more accustomed to the genre of serials... I objected that so far we don’t have the audio recordings of Acts or the Epistles, and our partners at the radio station immediately got me to promise that they would be the first to get further audio recordings if and when we produce them.

As for the traditional Khakas religion, it too is being revived. One of my good acquaintances is a well-known Khakas singer. She is of quite a venerable age now. At the peak of her glory in Soviet times, her voice became famous not only in Khakassia and the USSR, but all over the world. Even during those atheistic times this amazing woman had fervent faith in our ancestors. She made libations to our ancestors and announced that she felt their presence. As we had very good close relations, many years ago I invited her to take part in the field testing of Gospel texts. She worked with our team for a day, but on our way back she took me aside and said, ‘Please, Galina, don’t be offended, I respect you a lot, but I will not come for the second time to do this work. This is not our faith. My mission is to revive the soul of my

people and to venerate our ancestors.’ She was devoted to her faith, and that episode did not ruin our warm relations.

I had another encounter with her one winter when I invited her to a meeting with her fans, who watched her performances on TV, at a ‘culture club’<sup>6</sup> in a very distant village. We planned a concert after our main program in order to make the event vivid and memorable for the villagers. She and her singing partner were never paid any money for such concerts. Now, winter frosts in Khakassia can be very strong, down to -30 degrees Centigrade or even colder. It was one of those frosty winters. We used to call village club directors beforehand so that they could heat the club building thoroughly the day before and hang up the posters announcing our visit. That particular time the director was somewhat negligent and when we arrived, there were no posters at all, and the inside of the building was covered with frost. Because of the director’s forgetfulness, we managed to gather just a few elderly women from the neighboring houses instead of all the villagers of different ages. All of them were sitting wrapped in fur coats, and we too spoke to them with our coats on. When we finished, the time for the concert came. And this internationally-renowned singer, the ‘golden voice’ of Khakassia, stepped onto the stage in a turquoise-coloured silk gown and sang for those few elderly women for quite a long time, giving of herself completely in each song... When I asked her afterwards how she could tolerate such cold and why she didn’t stay in her fur coat, she answered simply, ‘These are our grandmothers, whom I deeply respect. I sang for the Belgian royal family in this gown. Our grandmothers fully deserve to see the same thing that the royal family saw.’

When the New Testament in Khakas was published I gave her this book as a gift, in spite of that time with the field testing. Somehow, I had confidence in her. And my intuition was not mistaken. Many years passed. We met again recently, and one of the first things that my friend, who is almost eighty now, told me was, ‘Do you remember the book you gave me, Galina? I want you to know that I do read this book!’ And she quoted from the Gospels at length. For me this was very significant. She is the embodied soul of Khakassia for many, and if at this new stage of her life she starts thinking of what it will really mean for her to go to her true home, then this book, the New Testament, will surely become useful for many more people in my land.”

*Autumn 2017*

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<sup>6</sup> A “culture club” is typical for every village in the former USSR. This is a building, somewhat similar to a community center in the West, where people met after work or on the weekends to watch films, dance, or listen to lectures, performances, etc.

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*KHAKAS (population: 73,000)*

*Location: Republic of Khakasia, Southern Siberia*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2009), NT (Khakas/Russian Synodal diglot, 2011)*

*Audio: NT*

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“This man has prepared a treasure  
for our people!”

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The Kurds are probably the largest people in the world without a state of their own. They live scattered in many countries, but this life of dispersion in alien and often hostile surroundings makes them cling even more fervently to their historical roots and cultural identity. In the course of the centuries most Kurds have become Muslim, yet there are also Kurdish Yezidis, who follow a mixture of faiths, including elements of Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity and ancient paganism. This syncretistic religion dates back to a Sufi sheikh in Iraq in the Middle Ages. The Yezidi cult focuses on sun worship and the worship of angels, including fallen, evil angels. Kurds living in Russia are for the most part Yezidis.

The issue of religion is crucial for many Kurds, and their religious fervour recalls that of apostolic times. When members of the Kurdish community experience Christian conversion, it arouses a great spiritual struggle around them. Since the Bible translation process has started bearing fruit, many Kurdish families and whole clusters from different parts of Russia and the CIS have received Christ and become fervent members of either Evangelical or Orthodox Christian communities. One of our translators encountered Christ as a 12-year-old boy and his parents followed him in due time. This is a typical story of a family conversion starting with the children. A young Kurdish man who encountered Christ in the Orthodox Church gives his testimony of how he fainted at the very moment of his baptism and felt his soul freed from some force that



had previously occupied it. His parents, who had been against his decision for Christ, noticed a real change in him and were later baptized themselves. "The Yezidi god is very far from his worshipper," he says. "When I first read about Christ I fell in love with Him. I was reading the Gospel for 4-5 hours non-stop and it was not enough for me." Another of our translators, who is now a Pentecostal pastor, says that when he was reading the Gospel for the first time, he could not tear himself away from the book even while driving the car. He stopped at a traffic light, started reading the Gospel and lost track of the time and place. No wonder he was taken to the police station, where they counted him too tired to go on and forced him to get 2 hours of sleep. "I was absolutely happy," he shares, "as I got 2 additional hours for reading the Gospel!"

Now that the Pentateuch and several more Old Testament publications in Kurdish have followed the New Testament, they are becoming priority reading even for non-Christians, because in the Old Testament Kurds find stories similar to their folklore. Unexpectedly, they recognize Ruth and David as the heroes of old Kurdish legends. There is a well-known Kurdish writer who said, "I do not know what would have happened to Kurdish literature if it were not for your Bible translations! I think it would already have disappeared. Though I am not a Christian, I am going to support your translations in all possible ways!" There are more and more cases when Biblical texts are regarded as a precious wedding present among Kurds.

At the same time, there was recently a Yezidi religious meeting aimed at preventing further Scripture translations, since these are deemed to be a threat to traditional religion. The Yezidis were also looking for ways to get rid of the translator for propagating the Gospel. Then one of their leaders took the floor and said, "As religious leaders, what have you generally done for our people in terms of our culture and heritage? We are losing our language, we are forgetting our culture. But this man has prepared a treasure for our people. Through this book our language is actually being preserved! Old words, and a lot of idioms and phrases from our language are being preserved." And the meeting agreed that this precious book should be treasured and recommended to children.

All Kurdish books are printed both in Cyrillic and Roman script, as both traditions are equally widespread depending on the origin and location of each Kurdish community. This makes them more expensive but also more accessible to readers. The new translations are in heavy demand and are eagerly awaited in different parts of Russia and abroad. From year to year more and more Kurds become literate in their mother tongue thanks to their great interest in the Scripture translations, which are regarded as first-rate Kurdish literature. Now the book of Psalms is being prepared for publication. In its rhythms and style it resembles Kurdish poetry and will give a new impulse to the revival of the language and the poetic tradition. It will also open new ways for Kurdish believers to speak to God in their mother tongue from the innermost depths of their hearts.

*November-January 2011*

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KURDISH (KURMANJI) (*population: 190,000*)  
*Location: Caucasus, mainly Armenia, some regions of the Russian Federation*  
*Language family: Iranian*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2000), Ruth-Esther-Jonah (2009),*  
*Pentateuch (2010), revised NT (2011), Psalms + Proverbs (2015)*  
*Audio: NT, Psalms*

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## “When I converted to Christ, I started thinking in Kurdish!”

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When a guest comes into a Kurdish home, the hosts normally say, “You have come to step on my head.” Such were the words of our Kurdish translator in the Moscow IBT office when we asked him about the Kurdish tradition of receiving guests. To say that we were shocked is an understatement! The similar idiom in Russian would mean that we are extremely bothered with a person, annoyed by his behavior, and his actions cause terrible problems for us. Those who heard the Kurdish translator exchanged glances: what could he possibly mean? Did he mean to say that, unlike other people of the Middle East, Kurds do not have any tradition of hospitality? That they utterly dislike their guests? But everything fell into place when the translator deciphered his mysterious idiom. “To step on one’s head” in Kurdish indicates the utter humility of the host, who prostrates himself on the ground under the feet of his guest. It was quite the opposite of what we guessed.

This is exactly what happens when we speak a foreign language and when we listen to foreign speech. We start analyzing it with our head but can’t perceive it directly with our heart. So our analysis — the images we form in our minds, our psychological reflections — are sometimes quite different from reality. One of the Kurdish translation

team members, who lives in a village in a high mountainous region in Armenia, shares his testimony: “Before I became a Christian, the language I thought in was Armenian, which is not surprising. When we studied at school, the whole study process was in Armenian. And nowadays in our everyday life we read all the newspapers, all the books in Armenian. So it was only natural to think in Armenian. But when I converted to Christ, I started thinking in Kurdish!” Isn’t this an amazing testimony? His whole thinking process changed. This man used to live with his head, he used to live according to his mental state, but when he turned to Christ, he plunged into his inner self and started living his life with his heart. “When you read the Bible in Armenian, you perceive it with your head, but it does not reach your heart,” the same team member, who is now a local pastor, continued. “But in Kurdish it sounds completely different. When we read the Psalms in Kurdish, they sound natural.” This interview was taken by our audio technician when he visited the abovementioned Armenian village in order to make an audio recording of Psalms in Kurdish. And of course, during his visit he drank deep of Kurdish hospitality. Indeed, the members of the village church made him “step on their heads.” When he tried to sit in a distant corner of the back row of the church, the pastor took him by his hand and brought him to the velvet-covered front row, and proclaimed to the whole community that this was their dear guest from Moscow, and since that time parishioners have smiled at him cheerfully whenever they have met him on the streets of their village.

According to different estimations, there are between 20 and 30 million Kurds in the world. The majority of them speak the Kurmanji dialect, which is the language form used in IBT’s Scripture translation. In the post-Soviet countries, Kurdish communities are spread from Armenia’s mountainous villages to Siberia’s snowy plains. Another Kurdish pastor, who is IBT’s long-term translator, recently brought news from the Kurdish diaspora in Siberia to the IBT Moscow office.

“Since Psalms and Proverbs were published in Kurdish, I started receiving many telephone calls from Siberia. There are many Kurdish businessmen in Siberia, not only in the cities, but also in the countryside. They have shops and stores of various sorts there. Usually they are not religiously minded, but rather indifferent to religion. Some of them just heard certain religious ideas by word of mouth, some of them consider themselves unbelievers. But the rumor has spread that new texts are available in Kurdish, and they are calling and asking us to send them something to read in their language. So we sent them this edition of Psalms and Proverbs. They called back and reported that they are in love with the text. All these shop owners are sitting in their shops and reading Psalms and Proverbs! They say:

‘It feels like our own native literature of olden times has started speaking to us. As though these are the very stories that our parents and ancestors did not have enough time to tell us orally. It’s such a pity that our parents are no longer with us. They would have been pleased to hear the very phraseology of this literature. We do not know whether we’ll become Christians in the future, but our hearts are drawn to our mother tongue. We hear it so deeply woven into these words of wisdom, into these stories, into these plots.’

The book appears to be useful also to school teachers in several regions, including Armenia and Georgia. In some places they have school lessons in Kurdish, and these teachers are now extensively using both the New Testament and Psalms and Proverbs as resources for their own lessons.”

An interesting thing has happened. In the first testimony we saw how conversion to Christ revived one person’s heart, including the sources of inner speech in his mother tongue. This is the very thing that pushed several people to become translators in the Kurdish project. And now, in this recent testimony from unbelievers we see how the resulting translations impact the translation team’s distant kinsmen who are dispersed in other lands. And the process affects even Kurds who do not live in post-Soviet countries:

“I was at a meeting for Kurdish Bible translators living outside the CIS,” our translator continues. “They made a decision to take our Bible translation as a source text for their own future translations. Representatives of several Kurdish diasporas from Middle Eastern countries decided not to be in a hurry to produce their own translations ahead of our team. This is because in Turkey and several other places they have lost certain Kurdish grammatical features. Our language was simplified under the influence of Turkish or Arabic, the languages of the majority, the languages of education. Their written Kurdish has become poorer than the Kurdish preserved in CIS diasporas. But now, when Kurds from other places listen to the audio recording of Psalms, tears fill their eyes. No longer do they want to produce simplified texts. They say, ‘We are still using all these forms in our oral speech, but we had no idea that all the complexity and richness of our language could be rendered in written texts as well. Now we see the richness of our language and would like to restore and standardize its literary form in our countries as well.’”

Right now the IBT team is choosing Kurdish musical tracks for the second version of the audio recording of Psalms – with ethnic musical accompaniment. We hope that this audio recording will touch even more hearts in this people that is tragically dispersed all over the world – people without a homeland, but with a passionate love for their identity and a powerful search for their true self.

*Summer 2017*

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KURDISH (KURMANJI) (*population: 190,000*)

*Location: Caucasus, mainly Armenia, some regions of the Russian Federation*

*Language family: Iranian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT 2000, Ruth-Esther-Jonah (2009),*

*Pentateuch (2010), revised NT (2011), Psalms + Proverbs (2015)*

*Audio: NT, Psalms*

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“Christ was a true Kurd indeed!”

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In an old Buddhist legend, Prince Siddhartha Gautama (who became the Buddha) started his spiritual journey after he saw an old person, a sick person and a dead person for the first time. “What do we live for, if all are destined to die?” he asked, and his sincere questioning gave rise to one of the major religions of the world.

From several Kurdish testimonies, we see that for many Kurds who became followers of Christ, the very beginning of their life quest was absolutely the same. Both for our senior team member, who is the long-term translator, and for a younger team member, who has been a philological editor and an external reviewer of the Kurdish Scripture translation for several years, the path that finally led them to Christ started at the age of eight or nine with a realization that death awaits all. Our translator’s story was surprisingly similar to Prince Gautama’s: he saw a dead person being carried through their village to his funeral. The younger team member (let’s call him Alex) had a different life story: he was one of six children, and the only one who lived past childhood. At the age of four or five Alex lost his last remaining brother, and at the age of eight or nine his mind and heart became



restless, tormented and hypnotized by questions about the inevitability of death and the meaning of life.

Today, when Alex looks back at his life path from the perspective of his Christian faith and knowledge of the Bible, he finds much similarity between his people's modern-day society and Jewish society at the time of Christ. It was crucial for Pharisees to observe the foundations of their tradition, and this is no less crucial for contemporary Kurds. Not least because they are persecuted and feel that the very core of their national identity depends on maintaining the foundations of their ancient Yezidi religion.

But what kind of religion is this? Here the difference starts. Pharisees were the most educated representatives of Jewish society. On the contrary, "in our religion, receiving an education is considered one of the worst mortal sins," Alex shares. "If a person wants to get an education, it is seen as rebellion because it is believed that only the founder of our religion, Sheikh Adi, was worthy of holding a pen in his hands. But he has the status of a saint, and if an ordinary person wants to be educated, this means that this person has decided to be like a saint, to become a saint himself, to take the place of the one and only real saint! What a distorted perception! Since my youth I was very diligent in following the religion of my ancestors. You see, since the cultural identity of my people is based on our traditional values, on our religious and cultural heritage, if you tell us that our religion is wrong and founded upon misconception and idolatry, then you endanger the very existence of our whole people with its unique culture! That's how I saw the situation. I used to repeat to myself: 'Under no circumstances will I ever become a Christian or a Muslim, even on pain of death! I'll never betray the faith of my forefathers!' But all this time God was knocking on the door of my heart. With my constant reflections about death and the meaning of my own life, with my endless questioning about why God let me live when all my siblings died, one day I came upon the Bible's words that God is One and there are no other gods before Him. That's when I felt a strong desire to start reading the Gospel. From my reading I realized that I had finally found what I'd always been seeking. The paradox was that I used to lead a very bad life from the point of view of divine and human law, but I was very pious in sticking to traditional religious rites. Thus, at first nobody believed that I had become a Christian. People around me thought that I had simply invented my conversion in order to get people to trust me so that I could commit more crimes. But the change in me was real and evident. God changed my life totally. And later, people had no choice but to admit this. My own father had sworn to kill me if I converted to Christ, and after my conversion I waited for him to punish me severely even if he didn't actually kill me. But I was ready to die. Time passed, and nothing happened. Later he and my mother turned to Christ, too. Such a miracle!"

Alex has now acquired a lot of experience in working with the text of the Bible. "It's always a great advantage to know several languages and to be able to get acquainted with the Biblical text in parallel translations," he says. "This practice enriches your understanding because you notice many passages where the text sounds different in different versions." Alex shared several Bible passages that had been previously misunderstood by his Kurdish kinsmen. Thus, one Kurdish pastor was sure that in the

story of the miraculous cleansing of the leper in Mark 1, it was the leper, not Jesus, who could no longer openly enter into the city. During the audio recording of the New Testament, reviewers demanded that the reader put a question intonation after Paul's words, "I think that I also have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 7:40). They were certain that the Apostle Paul doubted whether he actually had the Spirit of God and was asking the Corinthians their opinion on this matter. Such situations prove that the first translation of the Bible into a new language is indeed a demanding and extremely difficult task. Even passages that seem obvious to those who are used to reading the Bible every day their whole life may be interpreted the wrong way by an audience that is encountering the Bible for the first time.

"My first Gospel was in Russian," Alex continues. "I lived in Armenia and I knew Armenian very well, but I also knew Russian since I had been coming to Russia time and again since childhood. I had no difficulty in understanding the Gospel in Russian, but the actual problem of understanding is secondary. The main problem is that many Kurds feel that Christ is for Russians, for Armenians, for European nations, but not at all for themselves. When I started reading the Gospel in Kurdish for the first time, I got the opposite impression – that Christ was one of us, that He was a true Kurd indeed!"

*Autumn 2019*

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KURDISH (KURMANJI) (*population: 190,000*)

*Location: Caucasus, mainly Armenia, some regions of the Russian Federation*

*Language family: Iranian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT 2000, Ruth-Esther-Jonah (2009),*

*Pentateuch (2010), revised NT (2011), Psalms + Proverbs (2015)*

*Audio: NT, Psalms*

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## Did you know that the apostle Paul was an “akyn”?

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Probably all nations and ethnic groups, or at least the majority of them, have their own heroic epics, but only a few of them can claim that their national epic is rooted in Biblical history. One of those few is the Kyrgyz people. A Kyrgyz translator working with IBT shares what he finds in common between Kyrgyz epic and the Bible.

“The Kyrgyz epic is the largest in the world and we have much pride in it. It is called ‘Manas.’ I’ve come to the conclusion that some storylines in Manas can be traced back to plots from the Bible. For example, we have an epic hero called Jakyb, whose name is actually the same as Hebrew Jacob, only with a slightly different pronunciation. He had two wives like the Biblical Jacob, and it was his son’s name Manas that gave the name to our whole Kyrgyz epic. But this name is nothing other than the Biblical Manasseh! As we remember from the Bible, Manasseh was Joseph’s son and therefore Jacob’s grandson, but was nevertheless blessed by Jacob on par with his own sons. Thus, the parallel with Manas, son of Jakyb, becomes more evident.

If we compare cultural traditions and lifestyles, both the ancient Hebrews and the Kyrgyz are nomadic peoples. Both are shepherds. When we cut meat from a lamb, we do it according to the same rules that we find in the Bible. Just like the Hebrews, we cut it into twelve pieces. Just like the Hebrews, we do not eat the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh. Just like the Hebrews, we should not break any of the bones. All these customs are found in the Biblical text. And it’s only when you

start speaking about Christ that you are confronted with mistrust, ‘Oh, no, do not say anything about Him, He is a Russian God.’”

Here I’d like to add that the same reaction is typical for plenty of IBT projects. “The Russian God.” People do not approach the Bible from a scholarly point of view unless they are professional historians. They see it through the prism of their attitude to the people who made the Bible known to them. And when these people come from another nation and culture, especially if historical contacts with that nation were complicated by wars and conquests, they start seeing the Bible itself as part of an alien culture, or even as an instrument of violence and domination. That is why it turns out that in different corners of the world for some people the Bible is “Western,” and for others it is “Russian.” In this case a strictly scholarly approach itself may cause a wonderful breakthrough.

Our Kyrgyz translator shares how he confronts such stereotypes with his scholarly approach: “At these words about a Russian God I present a completely different perspective: ‘Why, wait a minute, Jesus was not a Russian! He was a Jew! And Jews are very similar to us.’ And I start speaking about their customs and lifestyle, and then people agree that they see many things in common. And then from the customs I turn to literary styles that we come across in the Bible. In our poetic tradition we have the word ‘akyn’. An akyn is a poet who does poetic improvisations. We also have ‘manaschy’ – professional reciters of the Manas epic, in addition to the ‘akyns’, who improvise on any topic. They compose poetry right on the spot. Now, since we started working on the Old Testament translation, we decided to translate all the Psalms as poems. In the Kyrgyz New Testament translation, all the poetic sections are also taken into account. Many Old Testament quotations and those parts of St. Paul’s Epistles that are written in rhythmical prose sound close to poetry in our translation. For example, Philippians 2:6-11, where it is said that Christ became obedient unto death and God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, or 1 Corinthians 13. In the Kyrgyz translation, this chapter is translated poetically from the beginning to the end. Anything that is written in the genres of lamentation or praise in the book of Revelation is also translated in verse. In the Kyrgyz tradition, the genre of lamentation, called ‘koshok’, is well known, and it is also very similar to lamentation in the Biblical Hebrew tradition. Thus, when I speak to people, I pose a question, “Didn’t you know that the apostle Paul was an ‘akyn’?”

From Biblical literary styles the Kyrgyz translator proceeded to stories from his own life, and suddenly I felt that here was one more “akyn” speaking to me, because his two stories were brilliant improvisations dictated by his life circumstances and inspired by the Bible. Here is the first one:

“The main thing is the talent of listening. In my culture, people are very attentive to how one is praying, and any prayer should resonate in their hearts to be accepted. Once people gathered around me in a village and asked me to pray. They were testing me, as their great desire was to blame my ignorance, because they knew me to be a Christian and presupposed that I could not know ‘true’ prayers from the Koran. They were circling around me, they were all Muslim, and all their eyes were fixed on me.

Well, I started by reciting the first Surah from the Koran in Arabic by heart. There is nothing contrary to Christianity in it, as it speaks of God as Almighty and All-Merciful. And then I proceeded with praying in Kyrgyz in my own words and asking in my prayer for the blessing and protection of the people. When at the end I said ‘Amen,’ they all repeated ‘Amen’ in chorus, and one person said, ‘How excellent your prayer was!’”

And here is the second, even more personal, story: “I was recently in Moscow to take part in IBT’s Scripture Engagement seminar and decided that my trip would be a good chance for me to see my son, who’s been living in Moscow with his family for the past several years. When he and I got together, we had a talk and it turned into a sort of Bible talk, although this turn of events was by no means planned by me ahead of time. It just so happened that at the seminar we were given a homework assignment – to tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son to any person we met and then to ask our listener two questions about the story. I had no idea that the listener was going to be my own son! When we got together, I simply mentioned to him that I needed to find a listener to do my homework assignment, and my son offered himself as the listener. When I finished the story, he was deep in thought for some time and then said, ‘I now understand that it’s more important in God’s eyes for us to openly acknowledge our wrongdoings before Him than for us to think about and try to control our good deeds. I see that, on the contrary, I’ve always thought it right to constantly remind myself and everyone around me of my good deeds and righteous behaviour. In fact, I wanted to justify myself in my own and other people’s eyes.’ I looked into his face and saw that he really took this seriously. Thus, thanks to the Bible, we had a sincere father/son conversation of the sort that fathers and sons should really have.”

*Winter 2015–2016*

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*KYRGYZ (population: 4.5 mln)*

*Location: Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Non IBT Scripture publications: NT (1991, 2005), Pentateuch (1997), Jonah-Esther-Ruth (2016), Joshua (2017), Judges (2017), Genesis (2018)*

*Audio: NT (with National Drama Theatre actors, 2007), NT (2009, FCBH)*

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## To translate the Bible is to walk on water

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The Laks are one of the indigenous peoples of Dagestan. Their administrative centre is the village of Kumukh in the mountains, although nowadays most Laks live on the shore of the Caspian Sea in Makhachkala, the capital city of Dagestan. The Lak translator in the IBT Bible translation project is no exception. His ancestral home is in Kumukh and he uses this as a summer country home, while the rest of his time is spent in Makhachkala.

“Makhachkala is a black hole for languages,” he complained when I interviewed him. To me these words were unexpected, because previously I had heard quite the opposite description of his city. I remembered that many people called Makhachkala “a paradise for linguists,” because Dagestan is the most multiethnic region of Russia, with about fourteen languages belonging to four different language groups being spoken in the streets of its capital. But the translator explained his bitter words. “When so many ethnic groups are gathered on a small piece of land, people have to somehow communicate with one another, and their only common language is Russian. As a result, Laks who live in smaller communities far away from their homeland, such as in Tbilisi, Baku



or even Central Asia, manage to preserve their language to a higher degree than those who remain in Dagestan. And there is one more factor that has damaged our native speakers' competence. Paradoxically, it is our intellectuality. Laks have always valued education, and all the textbooks are in Russian, and all the literature is in Russian. That's why for many years it has been prestigious for educated people to speak Russian, while the knowledge of one's mother tongue remained on the level of market trade."

It is not only in educational matters that Laks have always been ahead of other Dagestani ethnic groups. The Laks were among the first in Dagestan to accept Islam as their national faith, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. They still enjoy a unique position of cultural and religious prestige among their neighbors because of this. And it was on their territories that the anti-religious campaigns of the first years of Soviet power were the most violent. So it is no wonder that today, at a time of cultural revival, the younger Lak generation has resumed its devotion to the traditional religion. Although there are some Christians who are ethnically Lak, it is very difficult to find a Lak who is both a Christian and has a good command of his native tongue. Our exegetical advisor, a Russian man of Evangelical faith who courageously moved to Makhachkala with his wife and children from a distant part of Russia with the sole purpose of translating the Gospel for the Laks, says that such Lak-speaking Christians can be counted on the fingers of one hand. So it is hardly surprising that, as in many other Caucasian translation projects, other team members belong to a Muslim culture if they are young or to a post-Soviet secular culture if they are of an older generation.

Such is the Lak translator, an open-minded person of broad cultural background and a real enthusiast for his mother tongue. "I want to address all Laks with these words: learn your own Lak language," he says fervently. "We encountered a most curious situation when testing our translation of Matthew. It is said of John the Baptist that he came preaching in the wilderness (Mt 3:1), but our respondents have a tendency to understand this text as if he 'stepped aside in order to preach'. This is because two Lak expressions – 'to go into the wilderness' and 'to step aside' – differ only by the case of the noun, and because people do not pay attention to such things, they have simply forgotten the first expression. We do not have any wilderness in our environment, so they do not know how to say 'wilderness' in Lak. They do not remember that there is such an expression in their language. All this is very sad, because in reality there is nothing that is impossible to render in Lak," he declared. "I have had many different professions during my life," he continued, "and it was only when I was already fifty years old that I engaged seriously in improving my level of Lak. At first I considered my knowledge of Lak quite satisfactory and I translated the Koran almost as a leisure interest, but today I understand much more than in those days. Now, each time that I start translating, I come across passages that make me strive for greater thoroughness and perfection. I wish my translation of the Koran had been tested in the same way as the field-testing of all the Biblical texts is being done by the Institute for Bible Translation. When people read the text, give their comments and express their misunderstandings, this is valuable experience indeed. The Holy Scripture is always a source of inspiration. You cannot learn it once and for all like the multiplication tables, and then put it aside

and simply recall it at need. When you come into contact with this Book, when you read it or look through it, you always see something that you have not noticed before. Now we are at the point of starting the translation of John. It will be difficult, but we have already entered the water. There will be hidden reefs, of course, but we will not tread on the ground – we shall walk on the water!”

I could not but smile at the end of this interview. There is no certainty that our translator, who is not a Christian, was consciously remembering Jesus or the Apostle Peter when he spoke his concluding words, but the influence of the two translations (Mark and Matthew) that he had just completed was clear.

Isn't this a good prayer for any Bible translator as he is getting into his work, full of unknown hidden reefs: “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water”?

*Autumn 2014*

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*LAK (population: 179,000)*

*Location: Dagestan*

*Language family: Northeast Caucasian*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: Mark (1996), Luke (2002, 2012),*

*Matthew (2016), Luke + Acts (2019)*

*Audio: Matthew (2016)*

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## A milestone in the quest for the Lezgi Bible: The New Testament

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By the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C., an alliance of 26 tribes was formed in the Eastern Transcaucasus (at present, the territory of Azerbaijan). They formed the multiethnic kingdom of Caucasian Albania, which in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. adopted Christianity as its state religion. Parts of the Bible were translated into the Caucasian Albanian, or Agwan, language, which belonged to the Lezgetic language family. However, this translation was lost during the early Medieval period, and parts of it were discovered only in recent times. In the 12–17<sup>th</sup> centuries Islam came to dominate the region, so nowadays the Lezgetic peoples are mainly Muslim. They practice folk Islam, but traces of their Christian past are still noticeable, and in folklore traditions one can still find remnants of ancient paganism.

It was a long-cherished IBT plan to translate the full Bible into one of the ten contemporary languages belonging to the Lezgetic group, and the recent Lezgi NT publication has become a decisive step towards the fulfilment of this dream. The project's translation consultant, Marianne Beerle-Moor, felt drawn to the Lezgi people and language 40 years ago, when she undertook her first sight-seeing trip to Moscow at the end of the 1970s. (Any other trips to the USSR except as a tourist were impossible

for a Swiss citizen in Soviet times.) In the course of that trip, Marianne found a small grammar of the Lezgi language in a bookstore. For anybody else, such a random find would have had no consequences at all, but Marianne was a linguist with a special interest in Caucasian languages, and therefore that little book was like a sign that illuminated her further path. Thus she embarked on a journey that she describes as “an adventure.” And the adventure became life-long. Marianne proceeded to write her doctoral dissertation on the Lezgi verb with the purpose of becoming an exegete for the Lezgi Bible translation project, but many more events followed and she had to start from the opposite end, heading up the whole Institute for Bible Translation in Moscow from 1997 to 2013. But that’s already a different story, so let’s plunge into the Lezgi project at its current stage of development.

The Lezgi translation team now consists of three mother-tongue translators, an exegete from Germany, and a field-tester. One of the translators is a gifted poet, who endeavours to reveal the poetic style of the original in his translation. One episode from the history of the Lezgi Bible translation project is especially worth sharing. Once, the above-mentioned Lezgi translator decided to leave the project, but the team didn’t want to lose his input and partnership. They started begging him to continue. “There are still so many untranslated poetic texts in the Bible; we won’t manage without you,” they complained, and to illustrate the point they named the book of Psalms. He asked for a Hebrew audio of Psalms in order to draw his own conclusion, whether these texts were really poetic. At that moment in the project’s history there was still no plan to start translating Psalms, but the team found the requested audio and gave it to their colleague. He took his time to listen to the melody of the unknown ancient language and then summed up briefly, “I’ve caught the idea how to translate the Psalms.” The immediate result was that he stayed in the project and everyone else heaved a sigh of relief. Nobody expected any other continuation. According to the IBT translation approach, translators don’t receive any further task until the exegete prepares the translator for the Bible book that is planned for translation. So what a shock it was for the Lezgi exegete when one day the above-mentioned translator-poet came up to him and said, “I’ve finished translating the Psalms.” No plan! No preparation! The melody of Hebrew speech itself became the needed “introduction” for the poet-translator to start doing his work. He didn’t need anything else. Even more surprising was that when the exegete read through this spontaneous translation, he was satisfied with its quality. Of course, the text was still at the first draft stage, with all other stages of editing ahead, but the fact remains that the Psalms were translated into Lezgi in a most unusual way, as if a modern poet heard his ancient Hebrew brothers calling him through the centuries, regardless of cultural and linguistic barriers.

Our translator hopes that several Psalms can now be printed in the old Caucasian Albanian script, which was deciphered by linguists at the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and digitalized in Unicode several years ago. This rebirth of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet resonates in the hearts of the Lezgi team members. Discovering the alphabet of their ancestors, one as ancient as the Georgian and Armenian alphabets, provided indisputable evidence of the ancient roots of the Lezgi people. It also gave new depth

to the Bible translation project because of the Biblical fragments that the deciphered Caucasian Albanian manuscripts contained.

The project coordinator, who is also the exegete, is a native German and an engineer by training. He draws all the project plans in the form of graphs, where he highlights in percentages and different colors how much has been done and how much remains to do in the project. His precise approach contrasts with typical life in Dagestan, where planning is altogether uncustomary. People in the rather patriarchal Lezgi society have a very different attitude towards time. They have other priorities: human relationships, including one's duty towards relatives and friends, are always in first place, while work comes second. That's why translation work hardly ever progresses as rapidly as planned. However, with human relations being a priority, it was always an evident goal for the Lezgi project team to make the text of the Lezgi Bible clear to speakers of Lezgi that live in a different linguistic situation than the translation team members, who speak the literary dialect. Thus, the translated texts are meant also for Lezgis in Azerbaijan, where their mother tongue exists primarily in oral form and is developing somewhat differently from the Dagestanian dialect. Azerbaijani Lezgis are more aware of the many Turkic borrowings in the language and try to find authentic Lezgi renderings. Being bilingual, they easily distinguish between Azeri and Lezgi words and try to guard the purity of their mother tongue. As a result, all the Bible texts translated by the IBT team were additionally field-tested among the Lezgis of Azerbaijan. In order to achieve this, two Lezgi Christian women from Azerbaijan joined the project as external reviewers. They initiated reading meetings in Baku, so that Lezgi believers in Azerbaijani churches would embrace this translation as the Bible they want to read. An atmosphere of mutual respect developed between them and the translators. High linguistic professionalism, on the one hand, and a deep knowledge of the Bible on the other have formed a solid platform for mutual enrichment and collaboration.

It's not a quick process, but the half-way mark has now been achieved: the Lezgi New Testament has now been published.

*Spring 2019*

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LEZGI (*population: 654,000*)  
*Location: Southern Dagestan, Northern Azerbaijan*  
*Language family: Northeast Caucasian*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Ruth, Esther, Jonah (2010), NT (2018)*  
*Audio: Children's Bible*

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“I have learned to think in my own language!”

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“The *choom* (teepee) is made of reindeer skins and covered with tarpaulin, so it is really warm inside even when it is very cold outside. You should always take your tame deer with you into the teepee, otherwise they go completely crazy because of the mosquitoes.” This is how Tatiana Lar, the translator in our Nenets project and a world-famous singer of Nenets songs and epics, starts her story. “You see, there are so many mosquitoes in summer that there is not enough space on the deer for all of them to sit, so those who come later have to sit on the mosquitoes who came first, so that the first layer of mosquitoes is sucking the blood of the deer, and the second layer of mosquitoes is sucking on their comrades from the first layer. No wonder then that the poor animals are going crazy.” (To tell the truth, I myself, while interviewing Tatiana, am starting to go a little bit crazy at imagining the poor deer and several layers of mosquitoes struggling for space on its back!) “And this is one of the main reasons why reindeer herders have to stick together at the time of grazing in summer,” Tatiana goes on. “Because when there are big herds of deer, the animals protect one another from the mosquitoes.”

“In winter the temperature may drop to as low as -60 degrees Centigrade,” she continues in a matter-of-fact way. “In that case you may have frostbite to such an



extent that your cheeks become black. The only protection is to rub your cheeks and nose non-stop.” I ask her whether a coat made of synthetic fiber can protect a person from this intolerable cold. She bursts into hearty laughter. “Synthetics are useless! All our clothes are made of two layers of reindeer skin with fur. The fur should be on both the outward and inward side. When you put on such clothes you become as clumsy as a bear cub. But this life in a teepee is very healthy. People who have lived all their lives in teepees will not exchange the teepee for an apartment in the city. If you exchange your teepee for a city apartment, what will you do with your deer? Take them into the flat? Impossible! My mother, who has lived her entire life in a teepee, is over ninety now, but she still looks young. Except for the cancer that so many people are dying of now because of those earlier nuclear tests in our region, we are a very healthy people indeed!”

Tatiana has been working in the Nenets project for 10 years now. Together with an exegetical advisor from South Korea, they form a really strong, hard-working team. In the course of these years two Gospels (Luke and Mark) have been published, and a children’s book with an audio recording has recently been reprinted following requests by readers. The Nenets people are eager to hear the Good News in the language of their heart and their culture, of which Tatiana with her folk singing is a unique and faithful promoter.

“I have turned into a completely different person,” she says. “When I started translating the Gospel texts, it was incredibly difficult. Although I could speak my language well, I had no idea of how to write this or that word or expression. I did not know the grammar or spelling rules of my own language. And I came to realize that my process of thinking was in Russian and not at all in Nenets, as I probably should have expected of myself. Well, it is hardly surprising that we are thinking in Russian! Our school education was in the Russian language, we read books in the Russian language and we watch TV in the Russian language, too. But as time passed, I continued to work and then another interesting thing happened. I discovered with amazement that during these years in the project I have learned to think in my own language! I started feeling my own people deep in my heart. One more thing happened to me recently. Do you remember those Nenets songs that I sang yesterday? Those are my songs, and they are prayers. I started composing prayers in my native tongue. I learned to pray to God in Nenets.”

Some missionaries to the Far North region of Russia reported, “On our trip we distributed more than eighty copies of the Gospel of Mark in the Nenets language with an enclosed CD that you had sent us. We developed very good relations with the director and teachers at the local elementary school. They are incorporating all that is written in the Nenets language into their educational program, for there are very, very few publications in Nenets.” Now IBT is working on translating the Gospel of Matthew into Nenets.

*February-March 2012*

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*NENETS (population: 45,000)*  
*Location: Northwestern Siberia*  
*Language family: Samoyed*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Luke (2004), Mark (2010),*  
*John (2014), Matthew (2018), Gospel Parables (2020)*  
*Audio recordings: Stories about Jesus, Mark, John*

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## Saved from the danger of death and given a new life in Him!

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One of the most recent IBT publications in Nenets is the Gospel of John together with an audio recording. The story of this publication is a striking example of how life in Christ inspires the establishment of links with people who may feel alienated due to their different cultural background, language or social position. Such relationships are, after all, the first fruits of the coming of God's Kingdom, where human barriers are irrelevant.

The native land of the Nenets is the tundra and the forest in the Far North of Russia (northwestern Siberia, the Arctic Ocean islands and the Kola Peninsula). This is a land of permafrost and vast marshy areas. The climate is very harsh, with snow falling up to 260 days a year. The temperature can fall as low as -60 degrees Centigrade in the winter. The distances between towns are vast, the population density is low, and in far northern towns alcoholism is often rampant. It's no surprise that under these extra difficult life circumstances people do not communicate much with those whom

they do not know well. Alas, sometimes even the few Christian communities prefer to live in isolation and not to know much about outsiders or strangers. Our translator, the renowned Nenets epic singer Tatiana Lar, remembers how she started seeking for God after her father's death. In the very first church she went to, having been invited by her Siberian Tatar friend, Tatiana felt so alien and frightened by the strict looks of the long-time parishioners that her only desire was to leave as soon as possible. Another Christian church in her city was well-known for its ultraconservative outlook and unfriendly behavior, so she did not even dare to go there and see. A sincere search for God is sometimes hampered by rigidity or fear, and a seeker may feel engulfed by his or her inner emptiness in the midst of a meaningless universe. That was just the case at that period of Tatiana's life, and her initial church experience merely reflected the usual situation in most people's everyday lives.

Here are several recent episodes that Tatiana shared and that occurred solely because people are hesitant to mingle with those who are different. Nenets nomads used to stock up on food in the city of Salekhard for the entire winter, which they would spend migrating around the tundra with their reindeer. One time, several Nenets reindeer herders bought several large bags of tea and crackers. When they returned to the same Salekhard grocery store next spring, they claimed that the food they had bought was spoiled from the start: "We put so much tea into our cups, but the water did not darken and it tasted like dry grass. We put in more and more until we all became dizzy. As for your crackers, we haven't even dared taste them since they were all covered with black mold!" It turned out that they had never heard of green tea or poppy seeds. At the same time, Russian youngsters sometimes buy powder made of birch fungus from the Nenets people, thinking that it can be smoked as a drug. "When they sell it, our people wonder what will happen to these young Russians, because in reality this powder is used in Nenets medicine as an antiseptic," Tatiana says. It seems that people often cherish their own pictures of each other's culture and civilization without any attempt to establish genuine communication.

In this cold land, where people live in isolated groups and are not used to socializing more than necessary, daring to establish relationships is a special virtue that demands strength from above. The story of our exegetical advisor Eunsub from South Korea demonstrates this: "When I came to Salekhard in 2000, the only way for me to hear Nenets speech was to listen to the Nenets radio. I listened to the Nenets program weekly, recorded it and listened to these recordings throughout the week. One of my favorite Nenets announcers was Raisa.<sup>7</sup> Her speech was clear and beautiful. Even though I had not met her yet, I started dreaming of an audio version of the Nenets Bible in her voice. Later I did meet her a couple of times at some Nenets social meetings, though it was not so easy for me to get close to her. She was deeply embedded in her own culture and very proud of it. It seemed that there was no room for me to talk to her. However, I never stopped praying for her to get involved in our Bible translation work."

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<sup>7</sup> A pseudonym.

At first there was no plan to publish the Gospel of John as a separate edition. It was to be published together with the other three Gospels and the book of Acts later on. But at the reindeer festival at the end of March 2014, people from the tundra were asking about Bible texts in Nenets, and some Nenets believers were giving their offerings for the next book to be published in their language. Eunsub was open to this new circumstance. This changed the translation team's initial plan, and they decided to print John as a separate book. Tatiana Lar said that while she was translating it, she felt the strong presence of the Holy Spirit surrounding her. She managed to complete the whole translation in a relatively short time while at a Christian conference helping with the recording of Christian children's songs in Nenets.

“As we were preparing for the consultant checking session on the book of John,” Eunsub continues her story, “I called Raisa with renewed courage, and she agreed to help! It turned out that a few years earlier she had almost been killed in a car wreck but survived, together with her unborn baby. This consultant check was actually the first step for her to get involved in the Nenets project. With her knowledge of the language, she did her job very well. So when the time for the recording came, I dared ask her to also record the book. Even though she could not come to the IBT office to do the recording, she did it in the local radio studio, which was actually much better. How great is the Lord that He saved Raisa from death and gave her a new life in Him!”

Tatiana shares how she continues to compose new Christian songs in Nenets, inspired by her Bible translation work and a renewed love for her mother tongue. When young Nenets people hear these songs they come to her and ask her to teach them. She confronts them with a question, “Aren't you afraid of being looked at as though you belong to a cult?” They are not. Attracted by the beauty of these songs in their mother tongue, they are starting their own search for the living God. Some of them are interested in the Bible translation, too. The seeds of a Christian culture among the Nenets have already been sown. As for Raisa, she has recently participated in a seminar for new people beginning their work in Bible translation with IBT!

*Spring 2015*

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NENETS (*population: 45,000*)

*Location: Northwestern Siberia*

*Language family: Samoyed*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: Luke (2004), Mark (2010),  
John (2014), Matthew (2018), Gospel Parables (2020)*

*Audio recordings: Stories about Jesus, Mark, John*

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“The Bible is not just a book.  
It’s a whole library!”

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“To tell you the truth, I’m not a professional ‘man of letters.’ But one day I got an ardent feeling, which turned into a burning question in my mind: why don’t my native people have our own writing system?”

This is how Elisha (we’ll use this Biblical pseudonym for him) started the story of how he joined one of the Bible translation projects in the Caucasus. In our conversation, Elisha struck me as very eager to help, but equally reluctant to talk. His affability conflicted with his firm determination to remain anonymos, and only after my assurance that his name would not be revealed did Elisha start speaking at ease. His words proved to be a heartfelt testimony to the sense of responsibility and generosity so typical of the Caucasian cultures. During our half-hour interview, I was a total stranger who needed Elisha’s help, and he showed himself to be a most hospitable host who introduced me to the very best of his culture. Just an example: in many cultures of the Caucasus, asking a casual guest about the purpose of his visit is considered impolite. For three



days a traveler can enjoy his host's hospitality and protection for free. If he stays longer, he will be regarded as a member of the family and consequently a co-worker in the common household.

The ethnic group to which Elisha belongs lives both in Dagestan (southern Russia) and in Azerbaijan. Elisha himself lives on the Azerbaijan side of the border, where his ancestral home and his roots are. By profession he is an agricultural specialist, but his burning desire to give a writing system and literature to his people is not a mere amateur's emotional impulse. It was confirmed by his literary talent. "I started writing long, long ago," Elisha recounts. "My literary debut was children's poems. It was at that time that I started inventing new letters to represent my language's sounds. Later, in 1994 an alphabet based on the Cyrillic script was created for my people in Dagestan, but in Azerbaijan the school education remains based on the Roman script, and we are not allowed to use the Cyrillic alphabet... So I turned to oral genres. There is a good Azeri custom of playing songs at weddings, and I wondered whether or not it might be possible to compose lyrics for wedding songs in our language. Well, when a wedding is celebrated among my people, it is my songs that now reverberate in the air." His words sounded humble and were pronounced casually. By no means were they a manifestation of the author's pride, but rather a progress report about Elisha's lifetime project. Indeed, Elisha is one of the very few people who is now writing professionally in his dialect. His language has five dialects in total, and his mother tongue is one of the two major ones, the very dialect spoken in Azerbaijan. The literary language of this people is based on another dialect, spoken mainly in Dagestan. People from Elisha's dialect in Azerbaijan understand the literary dialect only up to 50-60%, not more.

In the Bible translation projects that IBT conducts in Muslim regions, the situation usually looks like this: the translator is a Muslim who is deeply concerned with preserving his/her native language and sees the Bible as an excellent tool for language development. This is a conscientious scholarly approach, and though it is a secular one, it may prove quite fruitful and the only possible one to have the Bible translated in the given circumstances. But there was evidently something more behind Elisha's decision to become involved in this project than merely a deep-seated care for his mother tongue. He had thought through an original and profound philosophical concept of human upbringing and education, and he gave the Bible a crucial role in this concept.

"I may teach a first-grade pupil to read and write," he started explaining his point of view, "but what's next? Let's say we even have a novel in our language. But before a child can start reading this novel, we should be able to give him something else. Look at the Bible! Here we have not a single book of a certain genre, but an entire library! It contains so much for all humankind. This is my opinion: first you go to kindergarten, then you enter school, and then — you turn to religion! Indeed, religion should be seen as having an equal footing with other educational stages, because they serve the same purpose: to help a human being become a Human with a capital letter. Kindergarten and school have their own programs, but religion is something higher than these programs. The Koran says that all the books sent by God, not only the Koran, should be trusted. A person must believe all the prophets, not just one of them. If I refuse to believe even

one of the prophets, then I am not a true Muslim. To help a human being become a true Human Being is the fundamental purpose of all true religions. God has hundreds of names, and people address Him differently. Nonetheless He is One. We should start building from the foundation of the Bible, for the Bible is the history of mankind. And can you imagine? My people have no Bible translation at all. What a deficiency! Those who live in Dagestan and know Russian may find at least a Russian translation, but I couldn't find any in Azerbaijan until I started working on the translation myself and got an Azeri Bible from the team. Otherwise I would have never seen a Bible at all! Isn't this proof that the translation is needed? That's why I made a decision to translate. Some of my associates asked me, 'Why did you get involved with this? Those who want to read the Bible – let them search for a Russian one and read that.' But I wanted the Bible texts to become available in my own language. I simply know that this is how it should be.

The Bible is not a fairy-tale, but very serious reading, and translating it is no joke. Indeed it's very difficult to translate. Sometimes there are just 2-3 lines of text, but I have to think them over for days and days. This is how I searched for a rendering of Gen 1:6-7, where it is said that 'God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse.' It has been scientifically demonstrated that 600 million tons of water fall on earth in the form of rain daily, but that's not all: the ocean is also water. If there was no second layer of water, there would be no water cycle and no life on earth at all. We are alive thanks to the second level of water, so it was not in vain that God separated the visible waters from those that we do not see. This sense was very difficult to convey in the text itself, but I finally succeeded. Extended commentary in such situations is no good – the translation itself should be terse and clear, because when you deal with Bible translation, one single incorrect word may guide the reader onto an incorrect path of interpretation."

The Bible translation described in this newsletter is a SIL Int'l project<sup>8</sup> with IBT participation. IBT provides the translation consultant, while our colleagues from SIL coordinate the translation work. On the immediate agenda is a series called "Stories of the Prophets." These include the story of the Creation and the first people, the stories of Noah's Flood and the Tower of Babel, and the story of King Solomon with a selection of verses from Proverbs to illustrate his wisdom. The story of Abraham has also been drafted, and five Parables from the Gospel of Luke have been translated and audio recorded. But in order to publish anything in Azerbaijan, the state committee on printing has to give its approval. Otherwise there will only be online publications in this project. In spite of this difficulty, all the translated materials received positive reviews during field-testing. They are interesting to common people no less than they are interesting to their translator.

*Spring 2018*

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<sup>8</sup> *More recently, project management has been transferred to Wycliffe Russia and Pioneer Bible Translators.*

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## Is it not a holy text for Muslims too?

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The Tatar project is a very special one, for the Tatars are the second largest ethnic group in the Russian Federation after Russians. This is no wonder, for the histories of the two peoples are deeply intertwined and in the course of the centuries the two cultures have influenced each other profoundly. The Mongol-Tatar invasion of Russia in 1237 and their subsequent domination, which lasted till 1480, was a great blow to this young Slavic Christian culture and changed the course of Russian history forever. The Mongol-Tatars of that period were pagan tribes of different origins and thus they assimilated the customs and traditions of conquered peoples rather easily, but in 1262 the Golden Horde announced its adoption of Islam. By the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Islam had grown strong enough to become the state religion. Still, the Golden Horde remained ethnically and religiously pluralistic and Russians were even allowed to have their Orthodox Christian diocese in the Golden Horde capital city of Saray. Later, the Golden Horde was succeeded by several Khanates, all of which were eventually conquered by the Russian Empire. Soon after the Russian conquest of the Kazan Khanate in 1552, a new ethno-confessional group arose among the Tatars, consisting of those who had adopted Christianity as their own religion. They started calling themselves Kryashens, a word that is derived etymologically from the Russian word for “baptism”.

Surprisingly, even Kryashens do not yet have a full Bible in their mother tongue and have only recently received their first New Testament, though the earliest attempts to translate the Bible into Tatar go back to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the Kryashen biblical translations, Muslim terminology is carefully avoided and is replaced by Russian borrowings and ancient pre-Islamic words. However good and suitable for their own isolated ethno-confessional church usage these translations may be, they are not at all intended to be read by the Tatar population at large. What is specific to IBT's Tatar Bible translation project is the use of contemporary Tatar vocabulary, which presupposes that all the names and key terms follow Muslim tradition, which all Tatars understand.

"It was a great challenge for us to find the proper ways of expressing things atypical for our culture," one of the IBT translators said. "As a result, the words that we have finally chosen make it evident for every Tatar reader that 'Christ' means Messiah and is not at all the name of 'the Russian God', that 'baptism' means immersion in water and is not at all the swear word into which the Russian word "christened" has turned in modern Tatar, and that the meaning of sanctification to which Moses and Joshua called the people of Israel was purification and not merely some unknown ancient Jewish rite."

"I have very good friends," she continues, "who were brought up in an atheistic culture, but now when they are already elderly women, they have become devout Muslims. Based on my previous bitter experience of contact with Muslims who were afraid they would become unclean if they even touched a Christian book, I was at first afraid to show my biblical translations to them. But since they are very good friends of mine and my desire to share was really overwhelming, I did this with great caution. Can you imagine my surprise when they accepted the translations as a precious gift? They said, 'Is it not a holy text for Muslims too?' And now they read the translations regularly with great interest and pleasure."

*April-May 2012*

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*TATAR (population: 5.3 million)*

*Location: Republic of Tatarstan, central Russia*

*Language family: Turkic*

*Main IBT Scripture publications: Bible (2016)*

*Audio recordings: Bible, NT with music, Gospel Parables, Bible Stories*

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# What is a true “heart language”?



At the Institute for Bible Translation, we are always reflecting upon the importance of translating the Bible into people’s “heart language.” But what do we usually think of when we speak about one’s heart language? The first idea that comes to mind is that this is the language that a person speaks in his or her daily life, the language that is the easiest and most natural one for communicating with other people. It is interesting that the more we talk with representatives of different ethnic groups and cultures who are working with IBT in Bible translation or Scripture Engagement, the more this seemingly obvious picture becomes blurred and loses its defined contours. Surprisingly so! It seems more likely that the concept of “heart language” goes beyond the language itself and involves the whole cultural worldview and the layer of deepest emotions and childhood memories.

Here is a striking story from a Tatar pastor who recognizes the importance of IBT’s Bible translation and uses it abundantly in his life and ministry.

“When I first got acquainted with the Bible, it was the Bible in Russian of course. I was already used to reading the Bible in Russian by the time the Injil in Tatar was presented to me. As I started reading the Gospels in the language that was my own since early childhood, I felt that Jesus himself was addressing me personally. After this experience I wanted to say to all Bible translators, ‘What you do is extremely significant, you are providing an opportunity for God Himself to address people in their mother tongue!’ But as for me, Tatar is my mother tongue, and my situation could have been expected, but here is an even more striking example: I was sharing the Gospel with my

friend, who does not know the Tatar language well enough to speak it in his daily life, though he is ethnically Tatar. He normally speaks Russian. I read aloud the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel of Luke in Russian. He listened with interest, but did not seem deeply touched by what he heard. Then I took out the Injil and started reading the same passage in Tatar. As soon as I reached the place where the forgiving father addresses his elder son with the word ‘my son’, tears gushed from his eyes and he wept for a long time. This single Tatar word touched some of the innermost strings of his soul and caused the deepest impression upon him.

The Tatar situation is quite specific. On the one hand, Tatars know Russian better than any of the other peoples of the former Soviet Union. The majority of Tatars, who live in cities, know it better than they know Tatar. Therefore many people think that there is no use in translating the Bible into Tatar. Why should it be done, they ask, if people can read it in Russian and understand it even better than in their mother tongue? On the other hand, Tatar people feel on the genetic level that the Bible in Russian is part of an alien culture.”

Here it is important to explain that historically relations between the Russian and Tatar peoples have never been easy, and as anywhere in our world, whenever historical memory becomes the highest priority, then old offenses and stereotypical views inevitably block the living and ever-changing reality. Any Russian person remembers the Mongol-Tatar invasion of Russia in the 13-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Any Tatar person remembers that their capital city, Kazan, was conquered by the Russians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Historical memory compels Tatars to see in Christianity the religion of the conquerors.

That’s why, the Tatar pastor continues, “It’s a widely spread opinion among Tatars that to read the Bible in Russian is like turning yourself into a Russian. This makes sharing the Bible with the Tatar people an amazingly difficult task.”

“Tatars enjoy having something on the walls of their houses,” the Tatar pastor continued, “so we decided to make calendars with Bible quotations in Tatar. We produced our first calendar in 2012, and it immediately became very popular. Paradoxically, we got a lot of requests to translate the Biblical text in the calendar into Russian and publish the calendar as a diglot! Many Tatars do not want to read Biblical texts in Russian, but they do not understand them in Tatar, so what they want is to see the Tatar ‘original’ with the Russian translation! This is the paradox that helped to overcome the psychological barrier. We therefore published Biblical calendars with the Tatar text in big letters and the Russian text in small letters. And in 2015, on the eve of the full Tatar Bible publication, we asked IBT to publish the Gospel of John as a Tatar-Russian bilingual edition. The Tatar text was taken from the new translation of the Bible. The Russian text was taken from the special Central Asian Russian Scripture translation made for Muslim-background readers. We asked for a print-run of 5,000 copies. Both IBT and the organization that held the copyright to the Russian translation were afraid that the book would stay in a warehouse, covered with dust. But to the contrary, the entire print-run was distributed at once and we constantly get good feedback on it from the readers. The book has definitely made its way to readers and more books of this sort are needed!”



This story was told at the IBT office at the end of 2015. Now, in 2016, the first full Bible in Tatar has been published. We immediately got even more evidence of how important it is for people to read the Bible in their mother tongue. No sooner did the information about the Bible appear in the mass media than the phone in the IBT Moscow office started ringing off the hook. Plenty of people wanted to get the book at once. And one person called the office five times! This was an Orthodox believer, an ethnic Tatar, who lived in the suburbs of Moscow. His desire to get the book in his mother tongue as soon as possible was truly overwhelming, and it felt like he couldn't wait a single minute. He made an appointment with the IBT Tatar project coordinator at her church parish and went quite a long distance to another part of the Moscow suburbs in order to meet her. Unfortunately, he happened to write down her mobile phone number incorrectly, and his whole trip could have been in vain. Despite his impatience, the man waited till the end of a very long Lenten service and managed to find the project coordinator in a large crowd of Sunday parishioners. When he got the Bible in his hands, he kissed it with awe and inner joy.

*Summer 2016*

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*TATAR (population: 5.3 million)*  
*Location: Republic of Tatarstan, central Russia*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Bible (2016)*  
*Audio recordings: Bible, NT with music, Gospel Parables, Bible Stories*

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I heard about the Word of God in my own language and I laughed and laughed for joy

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Tuva is a beautiful land in the southern part of Siberia, bordering on Mongolia. It is at the very centre of Asia. Some parts of this mountainous land are called by the inhabitants their “local Switzerland.” Our Bible translation project coordinator says that Tuva is the most beautiful place she has ever been to. “The land itself breathes and these mountains of blue, pink and golden colours are the breath of the land,” she says.

The Tuvan Bible was eagerly awaited. Though the majority of the Tuvans are traditionally Buddhists or practice shamanism, there are Christians too, both Orthodox and Protestant. The local churches have been actively discussing the newly translated biblical texts throughout the years of the project. However, the most encouraging fact is that in Tuva even people who venerate Buddha or seek for their souls’ healing and comfort in shamanist rites are open to hearing the Gospel and are greatly interested in it. The official representative of Tuva in Moscow, who visited our office, said, “I’m glad to recognize that religion is one’s own choice for every Tuvan. Though I am not

baptized and am a Buddhist by family background, my own sister in Tuva has become a Christian. All the time she suggests that I should read the Bible. When I hold the newly translated Bible in my own hands, I will read it eagerly and with great pleasure.”

One elderly Tuvan woman says that in her childhood she lived in a mixed Tuvan-Russian village and earned her living working for a Russian family. Once, a woman from that family asked her to read from some unknown Russian book with a black cover and a golden cross on it. She liked that book very much and heard that it was the Bible. Since then she dreamt to see such a book in her own language. Many years later she became a Christian and now she is truly happy, for her long-time dream has finally come true and her expectation has become sight.

A famous Tuvan poetess says, “I heard about the Word of God in my own language and I laughed and laughed for joy, but there were times when I read the Word of God and I cried and cried for grief [she remembers the era of state atheism]. Due to the circumstances, many of us Tuvans didn’t know our own language well enough. But now it is the Word of God itself that will teach us our own language in its most beautiful, spiritual, pure and profound form. It will bless, instruct, encourage, inspire or rebuke us.”

Tuvan is the first language into which the whole Bible has been translated by IBT Russia/CIS. And in the history of Christianity, it is the 472<sup>nd</sup> language into which the Word of God has been completely translated.

This project lasted 20 years. It gathered together a most wonderful team of competent, enthusiastic and devoted people. They are now eager to continue with translations of other Christian literature, for the Bible never exists in a vacuum. It creates a new world and a new culture around itself. Let us rejoice together with the people of Tuva and pray for them to discover the ways of God for themselves and for their land.

*August-September 2011*

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*TUVAN (population: 264,000)  
Location: Republic of Tuva, Southern Siberia  
Language family: Turkic  
Main IBT Scripture publications: Bible (2011)  
Audio: NT, revised CB, Psalms, Jonah*

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## Like the sun's rays through the clouds...

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As Ulyana Mongush talked about her work, she was wearing a sunny, bright yellow Tuvan-style dress. It was a dismal, grey Moscow day, so I couldn't but cheer up as I looked at such beauty, and it turned out that her choice of clothes was not accidental: "In Kyzyl, the capital of Tuva, we have very hot summers and very cold winters. In winter we heat furnaces with coal day and night, since the central heating doesn't help much. The whole city is filled with terrible black smog. It's unreasonable to wear anything white, since by evening your clothes will be black with soot. But I'm a teacher, and I see my task as inspiring my students. So in winter I go to work wearing something bright on purpose, in spite of the soot. So I've brought a ray of sunshine to you as well."

Ulyana has an advanced degree in music theory and teaches at the Kyzyl College of Arts. She belongs to a people that maintains a very strong connection with their ethnic traditions even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "All Tuvans have some experience of living in yurts," she recalls, "and even those of us who live settled lives in towns and villages have visited our nomadic relatives in their yurts in summer time, even if this was only in our childhood." Nevertheless, Ulyana's European academic background had become a decisive factor in forming her tastes and lifestyle, and for a long time she didn't have any room in her heart for her traditional culture.

“I despised folk music,” she confesses, “and was addicted to European music. When I would hear the sound of the Tuvan jaw harp, I would feel uncomfortable.” Besides this, the Tuvans are traditionally Buddhists, whereas Ulyana decided to follow Christ. In the 1990s, when the work on translating the Bible into Tuvan was still in progress, she started helping in the IBT project during field-testing as one of the first readers who gave their comments on the draft translation. The world of her present life never intersected the world of her childhood and traditional culture, their orbits never touched, and nothing could predict that the time would come when the Bible and Tuvan culture would meet in her own work and in her own heart.

In 2006 Ulyana was working at the Tuvan Humanities Research Center, and was tasked with writing a monograph about the soloist of a Tuvan music group. “This was like asking a person who had never held any construction tools in his hands to build a house. — Here’s a saw, here’s an ax for you — now go and build. But I couldn’t! I consulted many different specialists, I visited writers and editors, but my mind remained arid... Finally I came to the singer’s native village — once, twice, and for a third time. And it was there that all of a sudden I remembered the Tuvan language, I remembered myself in a yurt as a child... I started crying. It was as if a veil fell off my eyes, and my inner self opened up towards traditional Tuvan music. My book about this musician was released in 2008, and in 2010 it was translated into Russian. Now we want to translate it into English, too. This musician became like a brother to me, since at that very time I lost my own brother. He deeply appreciated how I put my whole soul into the book about his music, and when the idea arose to make a musical arrangement for the audio recording of biblical texts in Tuvan, his group, Hun-Huurtu, readily agreed! In Tuvan ‘hun’ means sun, and ‘huurtu’ refers to a propeller. This refers to a visual effect similar to a propeller, when the sun’s rays shine through the gaps in the clouds. This is a purely natural effect, and it is very beautiful. The group has given this name to their musical trend, having in mind that Tuvan throat singing will spread all over the world like the sun’s rays shine through the clouds.”

At Ulyana’s request on behalf of IBT, the musicians recorded thirteen tracks that lasted about 40 minutes. First, Ulyana tried putting this music as ongoing background sound for the biblical text, but she soon received feedback that the music distracted listeners from the text of the Psalms. As a result, it was decided to insert short excerpts of music before and after every psalm. Each psalm thus became framed by traditional melodies chosen in accordance with the biblical themes and images, like with the sun’s rays. Happily, it turned out that the recorded music fragments would also fit into several other audio books of the Old Testament, and the audio recording of the entire Tuvan OT became Ulyana’s next assignment in the IBT project. She was appointed the project’s coordinator, and once again her own plans seemed to be confronted with God’s own plans. This is her further story:

“From the very beginning I saw my task as finding readers among believers. This was also IBT’s idea. But there are not that many Tuvans who are capable of

fluent and correct reading in the Tuvan language, and it turned out impossible to find enough of them among the rather small group of Tuvan Christians. Many people who were eager to serve the Lord tried reading dramatically, but they didn't quite reach the needed level of quality. It was like a personal tragedy for me to refuse all these people with willing hearts, but I was compelled to make the very hard decision to seek further readers among professionals. I started looking for readers among students of my Music College. I needed certain voice timbres with a deep chest tone, which is not as annoying as listening to high-pitched voices. It turned out that the best vocal timbres belonged to Tuvan khoomei masters – throat singers.”

What an amazing coincidence, if we remember the “Solar Propeller” and the daring dream of its creators that the Tuvan art of throat singing should spread all over the world, like the sun's rays through the clouds. Is this not also the way that the biblical message spreads throughout the world? Their professionalism proved to be indirectly helpful for the biblical message to be embodied in audio form.

Ulyana continued: “My former student, who is now graduating from a university in Buryatia, was tested as a reader and was approved of even though he is not a Christian believer. This young man was so interested – he set his heart upon this work. At once he shared in the social media, ‘Look at what I'm doing!’ He was appointed to read Ecclesiastes, and I was scared. Is it possible, I thought, for this young lad, talented though he was, to read Ecclesiastes meaningfully?! For this particular book I had planned to invite a respected teacher of the Tuvan language, but his voice did not fit, while my student enjoyed reading Ecclesiastes wholeheartedly. In the hottest days of the Tuvan summer we worked together, and then he returned to his university and continued audio recording from there. Thanks to his acquaintance with this book through reading it, he started behaving more deliberately in his life and communication. I think the Holy Spirit will open something important to him through this reading. It's now evident to me that he was chosen to read Ecclesiastes quite providentially. And after this book he will continue with the Minor Prophets.”

We see how in the Tuvan OT audio recording project the biblical message started intertwining with the world for which it was meant: in order to be embodied in the traditional culture it required the involvement of non-Christian Tuvans who are experts in expressing their traditional art forms. From its very beginning, the Bible could not be limited to the boundaries of the Tuvan Christian subculture. It became a seed that is bound to test all sorts of soils. In the Tuvan project, where the full Bible had already been around for seven years, the Word of God clearly started finding its own ways of reaching out – like the rays of the sun through the clouds.

*Summer 2018*



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TUVAN (*population: 264,000*)  
*Location: Republic of Tuva, Southern Siberia*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Bible (2011)*  
*Audio: NT, revised CB, Psalms, Jonah*

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## The task of the Bible translator

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When in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Archbishop Innokenty (also known as St. Innocent) celebrated the Divine Liturgy for the Yakut (Sakha) people in the Yakut language for the first time in history, those who were present were so profoundly touched by the opportunity of addressing God without a translator that they fell on their knees in deep veneration and decided to set that day as a Yakut national holiday. Now, after the long Soviet period of forgetting traditions connected to Christianity, prayer in Yakut has resumed. This has come about thanks to the new translation of the liturgy into contemporary Yakut produced with major input from IBT translator Sargylana Leontyeva and paid for by the Orthodox diocese of Yakutia.

IBT's translation work into Yakut started in 1992. In 2004 Yakut Christians received the New Testament in their mother tongue and since 2009 they have had the opportunity to address the Lord with the words of the Psalms. The current translation goal in the Yakut project is the book of Proverbs.

Sargylana shares a story from the life of her family. When one of her male relatives was a student, she translated some aphorisms about alcohol from the book of Proverbs (Prov 23:29-35) in a personal letter to him. Soon after that, he got drunk at a party and was beaten up by some unknown people. His first realization after he recovered was that the Bible had warned him about the treacherous properties of wine. "Everything happened just as written in the Bible," he exclaimed. "The beginning seemed glorious, but the ending was most deplorable." Nowadays, when he goes into the taiga forest for a long hunting trip, he regularly takes biblical texts with him. He says, "The

taiga is just the place to read the Bible. It is a place of complete silence. When a leaf is falling, you hear the sound of its fall.” Last time he went hunting, he took the book of Psalms with him.

Sargylana concluded: “I was really surprised than even people who had no idea about my further translation plans started to ask me when the book of Proverbs was going to appear in Yakut. Our people really like proverbs, because our language is so musical, with such fine rhythm. We like epigrammatic phrases. And we want to have all the vital advice of the Bible in the pithy sayings of the biblical Proverbs.”

Sargylana loves her mother tongue to such an extent that for one period of her life she stopped speaking Russian entirely in order to enrich her perception of the poetic beauty of Yakut. “Yakut is sometimes called a language with a mane and tail,” she shared. “It is wild and unrestrained like the primeval elements of nature. In my work on the Bible translation, I sometimes felt that the whole weight of the language fell on me and I was buried under it. I heard the roar as if I were under water. When I could not find a proper Yakut word for this or that Biblical term, I never doubted that I should keep on digging and that the time would come when the Lord would give the needed word. It never seemed a real problem, but just a matter of time, and it was even exciting. What did seem to be a problem was that when you read the Word of God, you start feeling that in order to translate it adequately you should be completely of the same spirit as the one speaking, be it the apostle Paul or the Lord Himself. That is such a challenge, and the greatest responsibility! How can I convey this love if I feel incapable of such love myself? I would start working and then I would read my own translation only to realize that all that was alive had been killed. Everything was technically correct, yet insipid, dull and tasteless. The words may seem right, but I felt inside my heart that the Lord would never have spoken those particular words. This is where the real work began. My task as a translator is to become a little closer, even a tiny bit closer to the Lord in order to catch His meaning. This is really hard, but there is no other way around.”

*February-March 2013*

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*Proverbs (2016), illustrated Jonah diglot (2019)*

*Audio: NT, Psalms*

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“I saw the eyes of a person who had truly  
met her Lord”

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When the members of the Yakut team came to the IBT Moscow office for the audio recording of Psalms, it was not at all an easy task for them. Our translator Sargylana suffered from problems with her voice, while the well-known Yakut poet Mikhail Dyachkovsky, who lives in Moscow, came to the IBT office to do the audio recording with a broken arm. Still, together they managed to do excellent work, and the Psalms were recorded in two versions, one of them accompanied by a Yakut folk instrument, the khomus (jaw harp), played by a Yakut woman named Irina. In addition to their main task, the Yakut recording team prepared an audio version of the Hexapsalmos (Liturgical Six Psalms) in a cantillated Orthodox manner of reading that could be used during church services.

During small breaks in their difficult but rewarding work, Sargylana and Mikhail shared a few interesting facts and eyewitness observations about the Yakuts and their neighboring ethnic groups in northern Russia. It was surprising to hear them voice an opinion commonly held in the north: that one of the characteristic features of indigenous northern peoples such as the Evens or Evenkis is their extremely hot temper, while the Yakuts, or Sakha people, as they call themselves, are considered to be balanced, calm

and rather unemotional in comparison. This is rather unexpected given that the ancestors of the Sakha came from further south many centuries ago, the indirect evidence of which is that the Yakut language itself belongs to the Turkic group. For me as an outside observer, everything should have been vice versa, since hot temper is usually associated with the geographical south and southern roots. Sargylana complained of herself as being a rather emotional, “un-Yakut” lady, and in her eyes it meant that there is much “hot northern blood” in her veins. Once again I realized how God’s beautifully diverse reality refutes human assumptions in all respects.

The territory where the nomadic ancestors of the Yakuts settled was not always as big as their territory today. When the Russian Cossacks came to north Siberia in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Yakuts followed them step by step and spread over the vast territory. Their language became the language of interethnic communication in the north and even gained an unofficial status as the aristocratic language among the Evens, Evenkis, Yukaghirs, and even local Russians. Half of Siberia communicated in the Sakha language, similarly to how the Russian aristocracy in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 19<sup>th</sup> century preferred to communicate in French. People even started finding supposed similarities between the Sakha language and French!

Though the ancestors of the Yakuts came from further south, the climate of their present homeland, the Sakha Republic, is far from the climate of the Holy Land where the Holy Scriptures originated. Thus, when translating Proverbs 31:21 “When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet,” there was no question for Sargylana whether to mention the word “snow”. For the Biblical authors snow implied cold weather, but for Yakuts, mention of snow would mean weather which they count as warm, since cold weather in Yakutia is too cold for any snow to fall! Thus, the Yakut translation of this passage simply says “when it is very cold”. Despite the geographic and climatic differences between the two lands, the Sakha language is no less rich in its poetic capacity than the languages of the Bible. Of course, much depends on the personality of the speaker, and Sargylana in particular has a keen sense of her mother tongue’s poetic beauty. According to the Yakut project’s translation consultant, Dr. David Clark, in Sargylana’s translation of Proverbs she frequently achieves such features of Yakut poetic style as rhythm, alliteration, vowel harmony, and even end-line rhyme. All these features make her translations highly suitable for audio recording, so Yakut Biblical audio recordings are highly attractive for listeners.

Yakut Bible translations have a long tradition of opening human hearts. This must be thanks to the historical fact that the first Russian Orthodox missionaries in Yakutia cared greatly for the local population. They did not baptize them forcibly, but studied the language, developed the Sakha alphabet, and opened schools and libraries. This is why, even at present, translations of Scripture into Yakut are “seeds that fall on a fertile ground.” One such heart-opening story was shared by Sargylana during the recent IBT Fellowship Days in Moscow. “The most joyful thing in my Bible translation work is to see a specific person whose life has been changed because of what IBT is doing,” Sargylana began her story. “Once I went to visit my mother in a small village in the taiga forest. It is a 10-hour ride by shuttle bus from Yakutsk. I took the bus late in the

evening. Suddenly, a young lady from among the other passengers called me by name. I did not recognize her at first, but she seemed to know me very well and was excited to see me. She said that she was regularly reading the NT in Sakha and always carried it with her. To my utter surprise she took a shabby, well-read first edition of the NT out of her bag and showed it to me triumphantly. We spoke for some time without it becoming any clearer to me who she actually was. She stepped off the bus at one of the small villages along the way, and it was only then that I remembered that I had last seen this young woman when she was just three years old. Alas, I knew the drama of her life, which unfolded right before my eyes long long ago, since her village was nearby. Her beautiful mother had become an alcoholic and her stepfather once murdered a guest who arrived at their house. After that he committed suicide. Later, her mother froze to death and her birth father drowned. Together with her sister, this girl was raised by their elderly grandmother. Her life-story was an awful one, but when she spoke to me during the bus ride that night, her eyes were full of warmth and joy. I saw the eyes of a person who had truly met her Lord.”

*Winter 2014–2015*

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## The language of the Bible should be sumptuous!

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Russia is big, and the difference in time between Moscow and Yakutia (Sakha Republic) is six hours. I asked our Yakut translator Sargylana about her most recent translation news after she had completed a week of working with the translation consultant at the IBT Moscow office, and during our talk I was surprised to hear that she was getting up at 4 a.m. every day. In Yakutia it was already 10 a.m., and Sargylana didn't want to get used to Moscow time. However, after a long work day and inevitable household chores in the evening, she was going to bed according to Moscow time, which left her just 5 hours for sleep. But such is her amazing dedication that trying to persuade her to take better care of herself seemed useless.

The time zone is not the only thing that is different in Moscow and Yakutia. Another major difference is the climate, and though everyone knows that Yakutia is a very cold place, fewer people know that almost every year Yakutia has a very short but hot period in the middle of summer. During this time the temperature may rise to 38 degrees Centigrade (100 degrees Fahrenheit) and the taiga forest frequently catches on fire. In wintertime, on the other hand, the main trouble for the population is frostbite. Several years ago Sargylana's own nephew, who was a little boy at the time, was on the verge

of losing a finger to frostbite. The doctors thought that amputation was inevitable, but many people prayed for the boy. The doctors were therefore surprised and relieved to announce that the boy's hand could be spared and treated medically. Praise God, this was a real miracle! "If it had been amputated," Sargylana says, "his whole life would have been ruined — everybody would think of him as an alcoholic, since it is usually drunk people who stay out in the cold too long, get their fingers frostbitten, and need to have them amputated."

Sargylana shared one of the secrets of her highly professional approach to Bible translation: "When I start my translation work, I go away from the city," she shared. "The problem is that in the city, people speak mostly Russian, and even when they speak Yakut, their speech is very correct, but dry and drained of its natural beauty. Even my own speech becomes clumsy, while returning to the village is like taking a dip in living water. My tongue becomes liberated. I start speaking like ordinary Yakut people do. The best place for me to go when I start my translation work is Vilyuisky-ulus, the region of Yakutia where my mother lives. The Yakut language of our native village preserves its primeval richness and flexibility."

"I never start my translation by writing my draft on paper immediately," Sargylana continues. "I always read my version aloud first, because Yakuts are a very musical people, and it is important to make the translation sound pleasant. If I stumble when reading my own translation to myself, I understand that it is not smooth enough. Fortunately, we all know each other in the village, and whoever comes into the house, I ask them to listen. These can be people of different ages, but it's the older people who immediately hear what can be improved and whose comments are most precious. Once, my former classmate Sergei came to our house. His life has not been successful by outward standards. His house burned down when he was drunk, and since then he has been living with his friends. However, he is the best mechanic in the village and he is such a person that even when wronged, he harbors no grudge against people. He is also the most avid reader in our village, and if you could only hear him talk! The time he came to our house he spoke Yakut worthy of being written down by the best linguistic scholars. His speech was sumptuous. This is what the language of the Bible translation should be — vivid, flexible, delicious. I see the primary reading audience of our Bible translations not necessarily in those who are already Christian believers, but in common Yakut villagers, like Sergei, who know and treasure their mother tongue."

I asked Sargylana if these villagers ever read books, and was pleasantly surprised to hear her unhesitating affirmative reply. "Indeed they do!" she said enthusiastically. "It's typical for our villagers to read a lot. The older generation are all great readers and book lovers. Alas, I can't say the same about children or teenagers. They turn away from reading and stick to computers. Even my own nephews who live in the village are like that. They study well at school, but I never see any of them with a book." I asked Sargylana if she felt it was useless to give her Scripture translations to her nephews, since it could be expected that children would find it boring to read the Bible, which requires patience and thoughtfulness so untypical of children. But Sargylana's face lit up.

“Oh, yes, that’s true!” she smiled. “However, that nephew of mine, whose finger was saved from amputation... He is 14 now. My brother says that he always takes the Yakut Children’s Bible with him wherever he goes. Once somebody died at my brother’s workplace, and there is a Yakut tradition that after a person is buried, his friends should spend a night at the place where he died. My brother went there with his son, and the boy took the Children’s Bible with him even on this occasion. They needed to stay awake for the whole night, but my brother has poor health and needed to sleep, so he took his son with him to keep vigil, and the boy was reading the Children’s Bible all night long. I have never seen him with any other book in his hands. How joyous it is for me that my nephew enjoys reading it so much!”

*Autumn 2018*

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## “Faith comes by hearing”

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When the Apostle Paul came to preach about Jesus and the resurrection in Athens, he was brought to the Areopagus, since “all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). By preaching in the Areopagus, Paul humbly implemented the idea of approaching people where they actually are, not where we as Christians would like them to be. People who are just seeking to hear something new are not necessarily seeking God, and there may in fact be only a few in a crowd who are truly ready to hear God. Nonetheless, Paul was not afraid of speaking in vain. He was simply doing the Lord’s work, and it was up to the Lord to do all the rest. There is no doubt that Paul was the most successful missionary among the Apostles.

This principle of reaching people where they are was the foundation of the IBT seminar on Scripture Engagement in the summer of 2015. Be it for better or for worse, the times when common people argued about theological concepts in the streets or marketplaces of Byzantium are gone. In our era of high speeds and high technology people have plenty of choices and plenty of entertainments. Very often, even if they are seeking for truth in the depth of their hearts, they may not realize this with their minds. To let people know about new Bible translations and to help them feel interested

is a big task that requires time, effort, imagination, knowledge, humility and a truly self-sacrificial aspiration to do the Lord's work in today's world.

Representatives of 11 ethnic groups of Russia and the CIS took part in the Scripture Engagement seminar. The aim of this workshop was to provide participants with the tools necessary to arouse their society's interest in the Bible in the language that is most convenient for that society. Participants discussed the question of how to distribute Bible translations in the most acceptable form for their audience (printed, digital, video, audio, animation, storytelling, and so forth). This time the IBT seminar was not so much for the translation team workers, but more for the users of already translated Bible texts. These are people who see their life calling in helping others to hear the message of the Bible. What is their "Areopagus" in each specific case? How will they be able to implement the ideas encountered at the seminar and what are they already doing on their own initiative? Let us listen to the unique stories of three seminar participants who represent three Turkic languages – Altai, Crimean Tatar, and Tatar.

**Altai:** "I am a pastor in one of the Altai Pentecostal churches. The main problem with Scripture use that I see among the Altai is that people are not yet ready for receiving the Scripture in the form of a printed book. First of all, they believe that a crucial feature of Altai culture is that it is not literary, but oral. When you offer people any book about God, they may simply refuse to read. Second, if you have become a Christian, your own clan and family will turn away from you. In their eyes you have become an enemy of your own people, you have betrayed your land and your home and even lost the right to put on Altai clothing. By turning to Christ, you have received the 'Russian God'! Our people prefer listening to reading, and this is a clue to what I am currently doing – making a contemporary audio version of the Psalms, adapted for contemporary situations and using a contemporary vocabulary. It is a more digestible form of Biblical wisdom, presented in the cadences of Altai poetry. I do not read my version of Psalms in the church – I sing them! I am a throat singer, which is our traditional music form. And whenever I take part in throat singing competitions, I use the Psalms. This is how I am preparing the Altai audience for receiving Biblical wisdom. Once a sister in Christ from my church who works as a nurse at a hospital asked me whether there are any prayers in Altai. I wrote down several of these Psalms, and patients in the hospital started using them as their personal prayers. Their responses were very positive."

**Crimean Tatar:** "All Crimean Tatars know that their distant ancestors were Christians, yet you will not find any Christians among the older generations. Nowadays all are Muslims. What was very important for me at this seminar was the practice of storytelling. Our people simply love stories! Once I even met a person who told me that all of Pushkin's stories are based on Crimean Tatar folk tales. We have a great tradition of stories and tales of all sorts. In my storytelling, I use stories about Jesus and the prophets from both the Bible and the Koran. When you tell stories in Crimean Tatar, although people often lack vocabulary to understand you well, they immediately feel that 'this is our own stuff!' and become interested. When they attend the mosque, they do not think deeply about their religion. They simply accept certain rules which they consider obligatory for their life, but when you approach the same people with

storytelling, they start thinking independently, they start asking questions. Their interest awakens. When people say that they are Muslim, I approach them with Koranic stories and I praise God that they are Muslims, because ‘Muslim’ means faithful and obedient to God. The main thing is to help people to start thinking and posing questions from their own heart. I organize Christian summer camps for children, and quite a few Muslim Crimean Tatars allow their children to participate in our camp programs. Before the very first camp, I spoke to their parents and suggested that if their children would not become better after the camp, next year they should not allow them to come. During our program we sing songs in Crimean Tatar, and I stimulate children to speak their mother tongue through Bible classes in Crimean Tatar. The first year we had 27 participants, next year there were 46 participants, then 55, and last year we had more than 60 children in our summer camps.”

**Tatar:** “I am a Pentecostal pastor. Once several brothers in Christ from our church were invited to visit an elderly lady who had fallen down and hurt herself badly. She needed somebody to comfort her because she had terrible pain and could not even sleep at night. Our brethren brought an IBT Gospel in Tatar with them and suggested that she should read this book, but the woman said that as Muslims neither she nor her relatives were allowed to read Christian Scriptures. Right on the spot one of the brethren was inspired to ask whether it was allowable for him to read this book aloud to her. ‘Why not?’ she responded. ‘You may certainly read it.’ So he started reading all the passages where Jesus healed people. Afterwards, he asked the elderly lady whether they could pray for her, and she gladly agreed. After that prayer she slept peacefully the whole night, and soon after, she eagerly started to pray on her own. Christians continued visiting her, and each time they came, she immediately asked her relatives to bring a scarf to cover her hair and then initiated fervent prayer. Some time passed and she became interested in hearing about the whole life of Christ, and on this request the Gospel was read to her. She felt that she was a sinner and confessed her sins. She lived a year and a half after her first contact with Christians, and died peacefully one morning after inviting some sisters in Christ from the same church to participate in her heartfelt prayer in Tatar. The relatives of that elderly woman asked Christians to continue visiting them whenever they are somewhere near their village. This is how intercultural bridges are built through Biblical texts.”

All these three short interviews are based on oral Scripture use. They all show how God inspires His servants with the most unexpected ideas, when they are not afraid to offer Him their voices. In the time of the Apostles the Scripture was always read aloud, since people had not yet initiated the custom of silent reading. Maybe in this era of new technology we are once again entering a time when “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17).

*Autumn 2015*



## “A university for Bible translators”

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“We were fortunate to visit the very spot where several thousand years ago Abraham may have stood looking at the place that God chose for him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac,” one of the participants of the study tour to Israel exclaimed emotionally. The trip was organized by the Jerusalem Center for Bible Translators specifically for IBT’s Bible translators from the Caucasus.

Each of these translators already had serious experience in Bible translation work. Some of them had translated quite a few books of the Bible, to say nothing of the annual training seminars, workshops, and tons of literature they read. All of that was an important school indeed. But only a school, whereas the study trip to Israel was described by one of the participants as “a university for Bible translators!” In less than two weeks, this “university course” was mastered, and more than that, it was experienced with the mind, the heart, and all five senses. On the very first day, one of their instructors promised, “You will see, smell, and feel this land.” “How true this was!” the Kumyk translator exclaimed on the evening of the very same day, surprised that the instructor’s prediction was fulfilled literally. “We were convinced of the truthfulness of these words right from the start.”

This was not the first time that the Jerusalem Center for Bible Translators (formerly known as the Home for Bible Translators) has welcomed a group from IBT. Each

time, the JCBT staff prepare a slightly different study program, depending on their guests' background knowledge and precise specialization in their translation projects. Nonetheless, their guests experience an unforgettably warm and welcoming atmosphere every time. This time the study tour group consisted of ten Bible translators from the Caucasus, representing seven translation projects: Abkhaz, Dargi, Ingush, Kabardian (Cherkess), Kumyk, Lak, and Tabasaran. One of the peculiarities of the situation was that the group was not completely made up of Christians. In fact, only four members were Christians and the rest were Muslims, which is not surprising given that Islam is the religion practiced by most of the Caucasus cultures. It was both an exciting and uneasy task for the JCBT staff to plan for this interconfessional group. Many questions arose as to whether the members of the group would be able to find a common language with one another and with their instructors. Would they be able to avoid disagreements and conflicts? "We gradually get acquainted with one another. Good communication is just as useful as good education," the Dargi participant reported cheerfully on the second day of the trip, while his Tabasaran fellow traveler was provoked into philosophical meditation by what he experienced that day: "All that we've seen today is incredibly impressive, and I am more and more troubled by the question, why after such a long historical path do people still lack the understanding that there is but one God and that we should learn to live in peace and harmony rather than mortal enmity?"

Though it was an educational trip, our translators managed to be not only scholars but also pilgrims: "I never dreamt that I would have the opportunity to touch the sarcophagus of the prophet Samuel with my own hand – my impressions are inexpressible!" "To tread the stones stepped on by the prophets thousands of years ago is beyond comprehension!" "We saw firsthand the places where Abraham wandered with his flocks. I was awe-stricken." And it was a Muslim who wrote the following lines in his travel diary: "Isn't it the ultimate dream of anyone who has any contact with the Bible to visit the very place where Jesus was baptized? For me this dream came true today."

The IBT group consisted of scholars, university professors and men of letters (and they were, in fact, all men). But even for them, people who already had a broad vision and extensive life experience, the trip to Israel came as a real cultural shock that turned a number of firmly held beliefs upside down. Let's listen to their personal discoveries: "Today I learned that the well into which Joseph was thrown by his brothers was not really a well, but a cistern for collecting rainwater"; "I was absolutely sure that a desert is a bare, sandy steppe, but the Judean Desert is something else entirely. I'll have to think about this when translating certain episodes in the Bible"; "I stood looking at the manger and wondering if I had previously properly understood what a manger was. The answer was no. When translating this word I'll have to decide whether it needs a footnote. The Bethlehem manger is quite different from the Dargi manger."

"Many previously translated texts will require revision, many terms will need to be changed," one of the group members summarizes. "And if we have difficulty in finding the right word, it's OK, we'll try our best and eventually find a solution. What is more important is that now we know exactly what stands behind so many Biblical terms," echoes another group member.

The translators also immersed themselves in the symbolic depths of many Biblical texts. Several of them noted that in Jdg 14:3, where we find the story of Samson and his Philistine bride, there is a phrase commonly translated into various languages as “she pleases me well,” while the original literally reads “she has found favor in my eyes.” Taking into account the fact that Samson’s eyes were later gouged out, that he loved with his eyes alone and tragically lost them, our translators mentioned that in such places a more literal translation may be necessary for conveying the depth of the Biblical text. When visiting the Garden of Gethsemane one of our translators recalls that “the instructor called our attention to the symbolism of the word Gethsemane (olive oil press). Indeed the earthly path of Jesus was as heavy as being crushed in a press.”

By the end of the trip several translators were already forming daring creative plans. “An idea crept into my head to write a cycle of poems on Biblical themes in my native Tabasaran language. This should definitely attract Tabasaran readers’ interest to the Bible”; “I decided that when I return home I’ll try to produce a translation of the Lord’s Prayer in both varieties of the Cherkess language. We will then send it to Israel decorated with the Cherkess national ornament so that our tongue would also adorn the walls of the Church of the Pater Noster on the Mount of Olives.”

One of the travelers to Israel also expressed his hearty wish to IBT staff members: “May God grant you patience and strength to complete what you have started. It’s a very hard and complicated process, but the Almighty is always close to those who do His work. And the Bible is the Word of God, so translating the Word of God is His work.”

*Winter 2016–2017*

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## The multifaceted task of the Bible translator

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At translation workshops, many translation teams gather together to work on a practical task and exchange their experience with their instructors and with one another. The entire process resembles a massive brainstorming session. The intensity of the work gives birth to new translation decisions and sometimes even to completely new approaches to translation. Talking to translators at such workshops gives us a glimpse into the complexity of Bible translation. In this newsletter, we would like to share with our readers several such glimpses, gleaned from IBT's recent workshop on the Minor Prophets, with Haggai, Zephaniah and Joel in focus.

The very first task of a translator is to understand the Scripture text correctly. This implies understanding not only the words, but also the reality behind them, which often contains a meaning that is not immediately clear on the surface. The **Kumyk** translator shared that he was much impressed by the description of the locust invasion in Joel 1: "When we open the Bible in different languages, we see that there are different ways of translating these verses. In some texts, there are different stages of locust development, while in others, different types of insects are given. The Kumyk reader knows

what locusts are and there is no difficulty in translating the passage literally, but what I couldn't understand was verse 7, which says that the branches of the fig tree become white. It was only after the instructor's explanation that I understood that the gnawing locust may eat even the bark off the trees, so that the tree branches become white. As a professional literary critic, I clearly see that the device of gradation is used here: through the image of locust invasion, the prophet shows that the disaster is intensifying, so this is what should become clear from my translation."

Another example comes from Joel 1:13, where we read, "lie all night in sackcloth." When the workshop participants were asked by the instructor how they understood these words, the majority suggested the most obvious interpretation: "The prophet tells his hearers to wear sackcloth all the time, so that you even sleep in sackcloth." It was the **Avar** translator who offered a completely different version: "This is a call to vigil, not to sleep, because it is the process of penitence that is symbolized by sackcloth in the Old Testament tradition. The sackcloth is merely an external sign, and the translation should reveal the idea, 'Cry out to God all night long, don't fall asleep!' When the process of penitence is real, there is no time to sleep, and to translate this as 'sleep in sackcloth' would convey an awful misunderstanding. When we come across idioms or images in the Bible text, we should identify them in order to not translate too literally. Otherwise, our translations may turn into nonsense."

After the meaning of the Bible passage becomes clear, the second hard task is to render this meaning adequately in the recipient language. Sometimes the problem is that various genres are rendered very differently in different languages from the point of view of style. This is how the **Yakut** translator explained the problem she faced: "I need to grow into the texts of the Prophets in order to transmit them into my language. The Yakut language is very flowery. For us poetry is plentitude, but in ancient Hebrew, poetry is highly compressed. The style of the Prophets is understatement, and I can't get a hold of it. I am very afraid of giving my own emendations, because the Yakut language requires singing, it requires verbal eloquence and plenty of colors. If I render the Bible text as it is in the Hebrew, for the Yakut ear it may seem very dry. On the other hand, the very fact that the Prophets wrote primarily in poetry may save the situation. I just need to find the right style of translating, and this is my task for the near future."

And sometimes the problem is just in word usage. The **Kyrgyz** translator, who is now engaged in the Kyrgyz Liturgy project and has translated several Psalms for use in the Orthodox church service, shared a funny example. The team was translating Psalm 103, which is sung at the very beginning of a celebration of the Liturgy, and in the very first verse they had to change a direct address of the soul – "Bless the Lord, o my soul" – into a simple description: "I bless the Lord with my soul." The reason for such a change turned out to be unexpected. When Kyrgyz speakers heard "Bless the Lord, o my soul", they understood this line as speaking to a woman, because "my soul" is a typical Kyrgyz term of endearment for a beloved woman.

One more task of a Bible translator touches upon something very significant, but almost imperceptible. This is how the **Avar** translator puts it: "We seek knowledge



all the time, and certainly this is very important. For example, there are fewer than 10,000 distinct words (lexemes) in the Hebrew text of the Bible, while there are tens of thousands words in our contemporary languages. Thus, one and the same word in the Bible may mean different things in different contexts, and some rare words are used just once in the Bible, and there are plenty of opinions concerning their meaning, so we can never stop learning. But besides ongoing study, there is one more thing: it is very important to walk with the Lord in the process of Bible translation, and to translate out of one's close relations with God."

And there is one more side to the process of Bible translation: helping the translated message to make its way to readers, a process known as Scripture Use or Scripture Engagement. Sometimes Scripture Engagement is achieved due to the heartfelt striving of the translator himself, even if he is a Muslim scholar and not a Christian believer. Here is a brief testimony from the **Kumyk** translator: "There are quite a few Kumyks who don't accept anything connected with the Bible. And with certain potential readers one has to prepare them, direct them, and explain some important points to them. Consider this point: one of the pillars of Islam is trust in the Books. Not just in one Book, but in the Books in the plural. Although it was clear for me that this means the Torah, Injil (Gospels) and Zabur (Psalms), I still approached a Muslim theologian with this question, and he gave me the same explanation. And when I meet someone who totally rejects the Bible, I ask him, 'How do you understand this pillar, "Trust in the Books"?' Usually this is understood properly. Then I ask the following question, 'Then what is your problem with the Bible?' Usually I get the answer, 'Well, yes, there is trust in the Books, but these Books have been distorted by Christians, their contents and everything.' – 'Distorted or not distorted – how will you know this if you don't take them and look with your own eyes, and find the answer for yourself, and not just take for granted what you are told by somebody else? Shouldn't you make your own decision instead of appealing to abstract categories?' I have to engage in such discussions."

Thus the multifaceted task of any Bible translator involves bridging gaps: between the Bible and one's mother tongue, between the Bible and a different worldview, between the Bible and one's own life, between the Bible and one's fellow citizens.

*Spring 2020*



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*AVAR (population: 912,090)*  
*Location: Central Dagestan*  
*Language family: Northeast Caucasian*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: Proverbs (2005, 2007), NT (2008),*  
*Genesis (2011), Jonah-Ruth-Esther (2017)*  
*Audio: NT*

*KUMYK (population: 503,000)*  
*Location: Central Dagestan*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2007), Genesis & Proverbs (2009),*  
*Psalms (2016), Job (2018), 1–2 Samuel + 1–2 Kings (2019)*  
*Audio: NT*

*KYRGYZ (population: 4.5 mln)*  
*Location: Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Non IBT Scripture publications: NT (1991, 2005), Pentateuch (1997),*  
*Jonah-Esther-Ruth (2016), Joshua (2017), Judges (2017), Genesis (2018)*  
*Audio: NT (with National Drama Theatre actors, 2007), NT (2009, FCBH)*

*YAKUT (population: 478,000)*  
*Location: Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Siberia*  
*Language family: Turkic*  
*Main IBT Scripture publications: NT (2004, 2008, 2016), Psalms (2009),*  
*Proverbs (2016), illustrated Jonah diglot (2019)*  
*Audio: NT, Psalms*

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