

BIBLIA SACRA HUNGARICA: THE BOOK THAT “GIVES ETERNAL LIFE”



The *Biblia Sacra Hungarica* exhibition was held in our library's three display halls from 21st November 2008 to 29th March 2009. The exhibition about the book “that gives eternal life”, which in retrospect we may confidently label as a great success, was held in the cooperation of the National Széchényi Library, the Hungarian Bible Society and the Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries to celebrate the Year of the Bible.

The exhibition followed the process of the Holy Script gradually entering the life of Hungarians, becoming known in wider and wider circles, initially in its excerpts and later in ever more complete versions. The process started from two directions. On the one hand, in the mandatory daily prayers and also in the oral and dramatic liturgies several excerpts from the Holy Script were heard in Latin, taken mostly from psalms, gospels and apostolic letters. The solemn quality of the liturgy already suggested that the sacred text was special and commanded deep respect. Many parts of the Bible are likely to have received their permanent form at this oral stage. Later, for the sake of non-Latin speaking nuns and monks of the second or third order, more and more of this oral tradition was committed to writing.

The first stage of the reception history was documented in the first exhibition hall by the *Esztergom Capitulare* dating from around 1370, the most important sections of which are the one-sentence Biblical sections (*capitulum*) and the supplication (*collecta*) intoned in the chant. The *Capitulare* was used for centuries at the Esztergom chapter. Among the most remarkable Hungarian pieces of the age, special attention is due to the mid-15th century *Vienna Codex*, one part of the so-called Hussite Bible, which has survived in three codices. It had mostly the texts of prophetic books recorded in it. The some seventy years younger *Jordánszky Codex* contains a large amount of text both from the Old and the New Testaments. In the introduction to the *Érdy Codex* (1526-1527), we read the first clearly formulated Hungarian literary program from the pen of the Anonymous Carthusian. The volume incorporates evangelical and apostolic letter excerpts to be read on Sundays and other holidays, as well as sermons to explain them.

The same hall featured richly decorated Latin Bibles originating from abroad but used in Hungary,



The cover page of the *Psalterium*
by Orbán Nagylucei, King Matthias's treasurer

as well as small codices with tiny letters intended for university education in Paris, the main medieval Bible commentaries, the works of Petrus Lombardus and Nicolaus de Lyra, the fragments of the *Guttenberg Bible*, and finally the very beautiful Gyöngyös copy of Petrus Schöffer's 1462 Mainz Bible, which had not been analyzed in the literature before. All this demonstrates that at the end of the Middle Ages both the clergy and laymen had a growing need for getting a deeper and more truthful understanding of the Bible. It also demonstrates that the emergence of university education, the development of the science of theology, the appearance of textual analysis and the discovery of book printing led to an articulated intellectual space and infrastructure that in the 16th century made it possible to meet these demands and to print the Bible in large numbers.



The Esztergom *Capitulare*. The section in the Gospel introducing the family tree of Jesus (Luke 3, 21-38)

The second hall thus featured the Bible editions and translations of Erasmus and Martin Luther. The main European polyglot Bibles, as for example the works of Sebastianus Münster (1489-1552), the well-known Hebrew scholar and Franciscan friar turned into reformer, and the Hebrew professor of Paris University, Franciscus Vatablus (+1547), which presented the texts of the Holy Script in the original language and whose commentaries amalgamated the achievements of European theological thinking and the rabbinic tradition. They provided inspiration as well as sources to 16th century Hungarian translators.

This is the room where Hungarian Erasmus followers' publications were also on display: Benedek Komjáti's translation of *Apostle Paul's Letters* (1532), four gospels by Gábor Pesti, and János Sylvester's complete *New Testament* (1541). The main objectives for the followers of Erasmus were to convey ethical teachings, to strive for grammatical accuracy and clarity in their translation, as well as to cultivate and raise the prestige of the national language. They also had a fundamental impact on the birth of Hungarian linguistic science.

In addition to grammatical precision, the translations reflecting the spirit of the Reformation, namely the partial translations of Gáspár Heltai (1551-1565), Péter Melius Juhász (1561-1567) and Tamás Félegyházi (1586) and the first full Hungarian printed

Bible, the *Vizsoly Bible* (1590) make every effort at producing texts that convey the 'sensus litteralist' the 'word for word sense' that you read out from the Bible as a whole and from its harmony. Edited by Gáspár Károli and his group, the *Vizsoly Bible* made an especially lasting impact, acting as the starting point for the reception processes in later ages. With certain revisions, but with no fundamental changes, the text was used by the Hungarian Reformed and Evangelical Churches until 1909. Due to its life of hundreds of years it was a major factor in the unification of the Hungarian language, working as the source and canon of the literary as well as the spoken language.

This was the text that Albert Szenci Molnár published again in 1608 and 1612, attaching to it the complete translation of the Book of Psalms in verse, as well as appendices, modelling its structure on the most up-to-date German and French editions. This in turn was improved by Miklós Tótfalusi Kis in Amsterdam in 1685, who had it printed at his own expense because of the devotion and piety so characteristic of Puritanism. The first Catholic translation (1626) emerged as a reaction contesting the *Vizsoly Bible*. The Jesuit monk, György Káldi produced it in a very short period of time. In all probability, he relied on the medieval origins he had learnt by heart. His text seems to be related to the textual tradition recorded in the *Jordánszky Codex*.

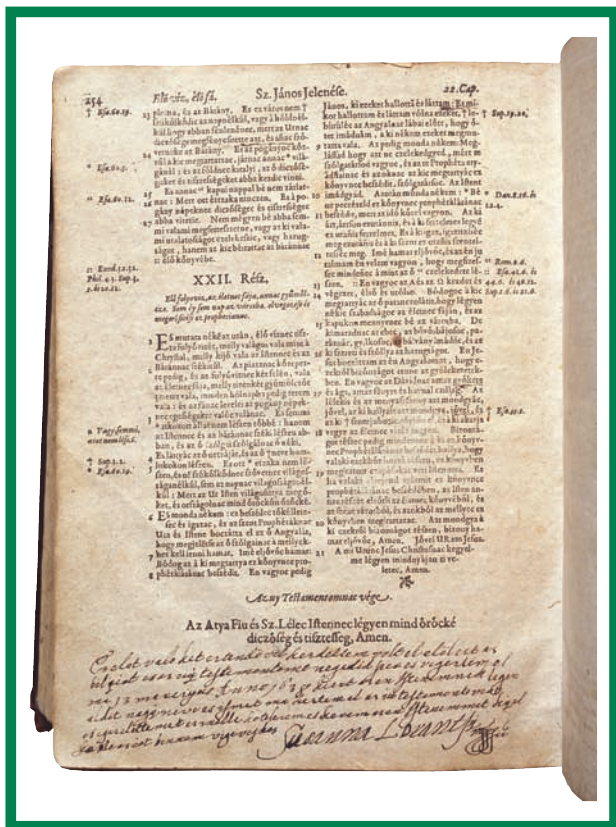
The installation in the exhibition hall evoked a sacred space, with the painted pulpit of the Nemescsó Evangelical church in the middle suggesting that in the centuries of the Reformation the spoken word was placed in the centre of religious life.

Besides the church, the school was the second most sacred place for the Reformation, as not only did it strengthen students' scholarship, but it was also the scene of teaching Christian morality.

For this reason, the setting in the third exhibition hall was a classroom in an elementary school. This is where independent editions of psalms were lined up from the magnificent *Psalterium, a genuine match of the Corvinas*, by Orbán Nagylucsei, King Matthias's treasurer to Albert Szenci Molnár's Herborn book of psalms in verse and the late manuscript copy of our 16th century Unitarian poet Miklós Fazakas Bogáti's *Hungarian Psalms*. From the Middle Ages onwards, psalms had an enormous significance in church life as well as in strengthening individual piety. The deepening of individual piety and the development of habits of reading the Holy Script are also witnessed by the personal Bibles that outstanding historical and literary personalities such as Janus Pannonius, István Ecsedi Báthory, György Rákóczi I, Zsuzsanna Lorántffy, Mór Jókai, Endre Ady and others once possessed. Beside these volumes, some of which bear silver embossed

covers, while others are of a rather modest appearance, we placed 20th century manuscripts the themes of which originated from the Bible. The authors, Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Attila József, Géza Otlík and János Pilinszky interpret the Biblical experience sifted through their own personalities.

The exhibition drew remarkable attention to the awe-inspiring spiritual and cultural heritage embodied in the Hungarian Bible editions and the intellectual processes they induced. No matter how colourful the display was, the three halls could not hold everything related to the Bible's Hungarian reception history. Therefore, urged by the intensified interest in the topic, the Széchényi Library's management and the



Zsuzsanna Lorántffy's own note at the end of the Hannau Bible, saying: "I have read this Bible and the New Testament for the fourth time today..."

exhibition organizers decided to document and reinforce the impact of the exhibition by a scientific conference. This conference was held on 30th January 2009, with some 150 participants.

There were two major considerations for compiling the themes of presentations. Firstly, it was decided that the conference should provide information about recent philological research into the Bible's cultural and historical impact. Secondly, it was decided to cover aspects of the reception history the artifacts of which had not been presented in the three halls.

For instance, while the literature about our codices with excerpts of the Bible is relatively rich, so far scholars have no more than fragmented data and notes about the relationship between the Bible and liturgy, an equally important area in reception history. This is why László Doboszay's introductory study giving a systematic and wide-ranging overview of the field carries so much weight. The liturgy had several devices to show respect for the Biblical text. In their objective appearance, printed Bibles and other religious publications frequently reflect the same reverence. Almost completely ignored in Hungarian scholarship, this phenomenon is highlighted in Marianne Rozsondai's analysis of Biblical scenes depicted in book bindings.

We have several early printed editions of the Bible as, for example, the partial translations by Gáspár Heltai, Péter Melius Juhász and Tamás Félegyházi, the thorough examination of which still needs to be done. This gap is indicated and, to some extent, filled by Mihály Balázs's paper on Gáspár Heltai's edition of psalms, Éva Petroczi and Tibor Pénzes's co-authored study of the *Várad Bible* and Zoltán Csepregi's summary that takes stock of 18th century Evangelical Bibles. Even highly specialised researchers had not known about the late 18th century preparations for issuing a small-format portable Christian translation of the Bible with explanations, of which Judit V. Ecsedy gave a detailed report. Naturally, the conference papers given by István Bartók, Mihály Imre and Judit P. Vásárhelyi addressed more intensively researched and highly important topics as well, namely recent findings related to János Sylvester's *New Testament*, the *Vizsoly Bible* and Albert Szenci Molnár's two editions.

The picture of the Hungarian reception of the Bible cannot be complete without exploring the genesis and editorial history of Bibles not written in Hungarian but printed in Hungary. In order to meet this need, Levente Nagy and István Käfer have undertaken to investigate Romanian and Slovak Bibles in Hungary. It was not merely through direct listening or reading that the text of the Bible reached believers. There were numerous other genres, sermons, Biblical stories, collections of quotations, books of prayers, contemplation and songs, as well as catechisms, confessions and polemics to assist and strengthen the understanding of the words of the Bible. The papers given by Bernadett Varga and János Heltai take a look at the relationship between prayers and religious polemics on the one hand and the Bible on the other.

It is hoped that the Bible exhibition, with the accompanying catalogue and volume of conference presentations, offers a solid image of Hungarian research into the Bible's role and impact in education-



A section of the Bible exhibition

al history, and that it will help in outlining new directions and valuable themes for future scholarship.

The concept of the exhibition to commemorate the Year of the Bible was developed by its curator, Botond

Gáborjáni Szabó, the director of the College Library of the Transbiscan Reformed Church District. He also compiled the first draft of the exhibition script, while János Heltai from the National Széchényi Library, who was responsible for the exhibition's professional content, assisted in elaborating the final plans. The

museum installation was designed by György Fekete and Pál Héjjas, while the exhibition was mounted by the *Kiáll* Exhibition Design and Construction Company. The exhibits were offered by seventeen ecclesiastical and public collections. The technical aspects of the exhibitions were handled by Edina Szilárdi, Tímea Király and Eszter Kiss from the National Széchényi Library's Public Relations Department. The national library's activities were coordinated and managed by the institution's director for research and academic affairs, László Boka.



Miklós Tótfalusi Kis's *Aranyos (Gilded) Bible* and its appendix and Albert Szenci Molnár's *Book of Psalms* with notes

János Heltai
heltai@oszk.hu