

Book Reviews

A new translation of the *New Testament and Psalms* in Armenian

The recent publication in Armenia of the New Testament and Psalms in modern Eastern Armenian represents a significant milestone in the history of the Bible in the Armenian language (*New Testament and Psalms* [Erevan, Armenia: Faith and Life, 2021]). It is generally accepted that Armenia was the first nation to have officially adopted Christianity as its state religion (301 CE, i.e., under the reign of emperor Diocletian, thus thirteen years before the Edict of Milan). A century later, a translation (technically speaking, a *version*) of the Bible from the Septuagint and Syriac manuscripts of the New Testament was undertaken under the leadership of Meshrop Mashtots, a learned cleric surrounded by a team of disciples. For this purpose, an alphabet consisting of thirty-six letters matching the sounds of the Armenian language was designed. It was organized in such a manner that each letter corresponded to a section of the Lord's Prayer. As remarkable as this version (called the *Grabar*) may have been in its time, to the point of appearing regularly in the critical apparatus of modern eclectic texts of the New Testament, it remained precisely a *version*, not a direct translation.

Many revisions of the *Grabar* were undertaken through the centuries. Toward the end of the nineteenth century (1896), another version of the Bible, called the Ararat Bible, entered use among evangelical Armenians, and it is still being used, despite its many flaws and obsolete idioms. Until now, no translation of the Bible made directly from the original Hebrew and Greek has ever been undertaken, though the source languages were consulted in the various updates. At one stage, a translation made from the King James Version was even circulated. In some cases, new editions of the very same text, offering mere cosmetic changes of cover or format, were presented as “new translations.”

In 2005, Rev. Aaron Kayayan (1928–2008), aware of the many flaws of the Ararat Bible, undertook and before his passing completed a translation of the New Testament in the Western Armenian idiom, which was his mother tongue. Western Armenian was the idiom spoken in Anatolia (Eastern Turkey) by the two million Armenians who lived under the Ottoman Empire before the 1915–1920 genocide. Today, it is mostly in use among the Armenian diaspora living in Lebanon, Western Europe, and America. It differs to some extent from Eastern Armenian, which is spoken in the Republic of Armenia and among the large Armenian diaspora living in Russia and neighboring countries (such as Georgia and Uzbekistan).

After 2008, the steering committee of Christians for Armenia, founded by Rev. Aaron Kayayan, resolved to take up the matter again, adding the Psalms to this project (see <http://www.christiansforarmenia.org/Home/tabid/38/Default.aspx>). The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (4th edition) and the 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland New Testament were used as source texts, while Rev. Kayayan's own translation of the New Testament was regularly consulted. One of the main challenges faced by the committee of Christians for Armenia was to recruit and consolidate a reliable ground team of translators and editors despite the limited human resources available in Armenia for such a complex task. Exegetical resources and external advice were regularly provided to them whenever requested. The goal pursued was to remain faithful to the source text while putting it in an impeccable idiom understandable by the contemporary Armenian reader, though without resorting to dynamic equivalencies. Many screenings of the translation were effected by the editing team before this New Testament and Psalms was eventually published in March 2022. Six thousand copies were printed by two printers in the capital of Armenia, Erevan. Many of them have already been distributed. The readability of the characters and the clear layout of the text mark a significant change in comparison with the existing publications of the Bible. Introductory texts explain to the readers the purpose, the relevance (*necessitas*), and the principles followed. A theologically informed introduction to the New Testament already written in 2005 for the purpose of this project by the late Prof. L. W Schulze from Potchefstroom, as well as a short introduction to the Psalms, complete these preliminary texts.

Officially presented to the public during two events organized in Erevan and Gyumri in May 2022, this *translation* is already making headway in the Armenian public, as several letters and messages received by the committee of Christians for Armenia testify. They stress the impact that the text of Holy Scripture has on hearts and minds once it reaches the people in an

understandable idiom. In a time of great turmoil and uncertainty about the survival of their country's independence, these first readers eagerly want to return to Christianity as the source of the life of their nation.

Exactly five hundred years after the publication of Luther's New Testament in vernacular German (1522), this translation also exemplifies the need of every tongue and nation to hear God's word in their own language (Acts 2:7–11) despite conservative resistance and a false appeal to "tradition" (in fact, "traditionalism"). Of course, no translation of the Bible as such is perfect. Necessary revisions or adjustments here and there will certainly take place in time when new editions are published. The public addressed during the abovementioned presentations was invited to make remarks or deliver informed criticisms (based on solid arguments, not mere reading habits).

The next step is, of course, to complete the translation of the Old Testament and eventually publish the whole Bible. The committee of Christians for Armenia is committed to achieving this goal, which will take a few more years. Completing the translation of the Pentateuch is already well on its way. It might be published in a proof edition before the end of 2024. Needless to say, ensuring that adequate financial backing will enable the costs of this long-term enterprise to be covered remains a priority for this committee. While significant pledges have already been received, a fund destined to cover the eventual printing costs needs to be established without delay.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105).

ERIC KAYAYAN

Reformed Faith and Life¹

Gerald Bray. *How the Church Fathers Read the Bible: A Short Introduction*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022.

Interest in the church fathers and studies focusing on how they interpreted the Bible have undergone a renaissance in recent years. It is not uncommon to find an increasing number of studies on biblical hermeneutics today that invoke the precedent of church tradition, not least the ancient church. However, the past is a foreign land, and finding one's way in the labyrinthine field of patristics studies can be daunting. While nothing can replace a deep dive into the primary sources, Gerald Bray has offered a wide-angle lens on

¹ Rev. Kayayan is involved with Reformed Faith and Life, both its French ministry and its Armenian branch, known as "Christians for Armenia," of which he is the chairman.