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Protestants among Kurds and some problems of translations of the Bible into Kurdish in the 19th century

„I am studying Kurdish. Every day I am brought into contact with Kurds; and for our protection and security here it is important that I know their language.”¹ This was a quoted sentence, written by an American missionary Samuel Rhea, who worked amongst the people living in Kurdistan in the middle of the 19th century. At least three different problems may be found in his writings: the first one concerning missionary activity in Kurdistan provoked discussion on the Christian mission with the Kurds and raised doubts to whether it really was a mission for the Kurds. The second one raised the question of the missionaries’ knowledge of the Kurdish language – if it was really sufficient to start a translation of the Bible; and the third one, referring to the connections between the mission and translation, and, on the other hand – connections between translation and communication, mainly in Kurdish communities.

The socio-cultural context of the Kurdish Bible’s translation in the 19th century

It should be remarked that Rhea’s main activity was preaching the gospel to Christians living in Kurdistan (Assyrians) rather than to Muslim Kurds. Although he translated some fragments of the New Testament into Kurdish (Kurmanji dialect) as “The Lord’s Prayer” and “The Parable of Prodigal Son,”² he did not generally

¹ D. W. Marsh, *The Tennessees in Persia and Koordistan. Being scenes and incidents in the life of Samuel Audley Rhea*, Philadelphia 1869, p. 200 (Michigan Historical Reprint Series, 2005).

² Cf. S. A. Rhea, *Brief grammar and vocabulary of the Kurdish language of the Hakari district*, „Journal of American Oriental Society” 10 (1872–1880), p. 118–155.

use Kurdish for religious purposes but for “security”, as he admitted. Rhea’s deeds show some of the main problems faced by missionaries – translators in the 19th century, which were of a social and cultural nature rather than linguistic.

When answering the first question on missionary activity among the Kurds, it is quite apparent that the great protestant missionary movement spreading among the nations of the Middle East in the 19th century had a strong impact for translations of the Bible into a great number of ethnic languages as well as Kurdish. In fact, the Bible translation itself became the goal of work, as such, determining success on the mission field. It should be clarified that some social and political changes which had occurred in Turkey and Persia in the 19th century (including progress in construction of the self-identity of the people inhabiting those countries) made missionary activity easier. The great step in popularizing the Bible and Christian literature among Muslims was made in Istanbul, where a Christian bookstore was started.³

The possibilities of translation and, in fact, communication gave an opportunity for an estimation of the values of proper language based on its universal role as a medium in inter-ethnic contacts. On this scene Kurdish was not treated as a useful or practical tool by missionaries.

Christian missionary work in Kurdish communities was addressed to the Kurds – Muslims started and performed through a member of the Basel Missionary Organization⁴ – Christian Gottlieb Hoernle (1801–1882) proved to be fruitless and a few years later, in 1837, was completely abandoned.

The mission called *Kurdenmission* was inspired by Scottish missionary and worker of the British and Foreign Bible Society – Robert Pinkerton (1780–1859) and performed for years by Hoernle with some help of the members of the Basel mission – F. E. Schneider and Ch. F. Hass, as well as an American missionary – Asahel Grant.

Hoernel, who made a few scientific expeditions to the Persian and Turkish parts of Kurdistan and tried to translate the Bible in his reports, gave his reasons closing down this particular missionary undertaking. He saw too many difficul-

³ This interesting activity was portrayed in the 19th century missionary literature, cf. S. I. Prime, *The Bible in Levant, or: the life and letters of C. N. Righter*, London 1859, where on p. 66 we can find such a description: „The principal feature of interest in connection with the Bible cause at Constantinople, during the present month, is the opening of our new depository to the public, for the sale of Bibles in various languages, in Pera, the Frank quarter of the city. We have obtained a large magazine in the main street, and erected a sign over the door with ‘Bible and Religious Book Depository’ in large capitals upon it, and suspended another in front with five different languages, English, French, German, Turkish and Greek, upon the two sides; and placed the open Bible in various tongues in the windows, announcing to the multitude of every nation, who throng this crowded street, that ‘here each in his own language can buy the Bible’”.

⁴ A. Waldburger, *Missionare und Moslems – Die Basler Mission in Persien 1833–1837*, Basel 1983.

ties, such as the nomadic life of Kurds or the complete indifference to education among the Kurds, he thought about a medical mission but was afraid of what would happen to a foreign doctor after a medical failure.⁵ The main reason being, however, the dialectical diversity making the Bible's translation impossible. It is easy to notice the identification of missions with translation in missionary narratives. When the translation is difficult the mission loses its values.⁶

As a result of Hoernel's statements, the idea of untranslatability of the Bible into Kurdish found a lot of followers in the 19th century. Such an idea has a lot in common with a popular stereotype on the so-called "primitive languages", into which translation of the Bible is simply impossible. The untranslatability of the Bible into Kurdish is, in fact, the translator's problem based on wrong presuppositions, which are part of a stereotypical view on the Kurdish language and its speakers. Which involves us in searching for the answer to the second question on the missionaries' knowledge of the Kurds and the Kurdish language. Stereotypical opinions play an important role as a slacken matter in the history of the Bible translation into Kurdish.

The aforementioned Samuel Rhea confessed his knowledge of Kurdish but only as a communicative tool helping to avoid problems from the Kurds, cruel people and robbers as they were portrayed in missionary narratives of the 19th century. Horatio Southgate, an American missionary, pointed out the uselessness of learning Kurdish: "In Mesopotamia the Arabic would have done me better service, as would the Kurdish in Kurdistan."⁷

The first common opinion on the Kurdish language is its lack of an alphabet used for writing. Missionaries shared an opinion that the alphabet guarantees a stable development of a language and constitutes evidence for the people's literacy. In consequence, the Kurds are seen as a nation without literature, without writers and without instruments in which the Biblical message could be conveyed. Following this presumption, missionaries criticized the vocabulary of the language, saying: "Their language is a most horrid corruption and mixture of Turkish and Persian."⁸ In his letters, Joseph Wolff, the author of this opinion, also included a short poem in Persian deprecating Kurdish: *Farsee shereen ast, Turkee hunur ast, Kurdee khar ast* – Persian is beautiful, Turkish

⁵ R. Blincoe, *Ethnic realities and the church. Lessons from Kurdistan*, Pasadena 1998, p. 37.

⁶ The end of this missionary effort was commented by Justin Perkins in his *A residence of eight years in Persia among the Nestorian Christian*, Andover 1843, who concluded: „The Basel Missionary Society, under whose patronage they labored, decided not to continue operations in Persia, unless the gospel could be openly proclaimed to the Muhammedans. This is impracticable” (p. 314).

⁷ H. Southgate, *Narrative of a Tour through Armenia, Kurdistan, Persia, and Mesopotamia*, vol. 1, New York 1840, p. 72.

⁸ J. Wolff, *Narrative or mission to Bokhara in the years 1843–1845*, vol. 2, London 1845, p. 264.

is the language of art, but Kurdish is the language of asses. It is, in fact, the third language myth on Kurdish based on its sounds.

Summing up all the opinions about the Kurdish language it is easy to understand why the missionaries made no efforts to translate Christian texts.

While analyzing the connections between translation and communication (the third question) one should ask about the receiver of a translated text. Missionaries soon realized that the Kurds, Muslim believers, in spite of the corrupted form of Islam which they profess according to the popular opinion on them are not receivers of the Bible translation texts. “The Kurds in general profess a very corrupted form of Mohammedanism: they reject many of the precepts of the Koran, and of the religious practices it prescribes. They have no mosques: for God, they say, is more appropriately worshipped in his own great temple beneath the sun (...) Many of them admit the sacred books of other religions, and profess an indiscriminate reverence for Moses, Christ, Mohammed, and the prophets of almost all the races that surround them.”⁹ All that excluded Kurds in the 19th century from the family of nations which received the Biblical message. However, the ethno-linguistic situation in Kurdistan in 19th century was complicated. There were Kurdish-speaking Armenians living around the city of Charput, where an American missionary station was established in the middle of the century. Kurdish-speaking Armenians became the missionary target and the first well-know Kurdish Bible translations were addressed to them not to ethnic Kurds.

Some attempts of the Bible’s translation into Kurdish in the 19th century

The first attempt to translate Biblical books into Kurdish was undertaken by the British and Foreign Bible Society at the beginning of the 19th century. The society employed a Chaldean bishop named Shevris, who, with some help by Kurdish noblemen from the city of Urmia, finished the NT translation in 1826. However, the translation has never been published and its role in the history of the Bible translations into Kurdish is rather insignificant. We are able to reconstruct the process of translation using the opinions expressed by two American missionaries – E. Smith and H. Dwight in their *Research in Armenia Including a Journey through Asia Minor and into Georgia and Persia*, published in Boston in 1833. Some information from this interesting book is worth being quoted:

“The British and Foreign Bible Society employed him to translate the New Testament into the Kurdish language, and the work is now in the hands of the missionaries in Shoosha for revision. An English gentleman at Tebriz, who knew

⁹ J. Kelly, *Holy Land. Their scenery and their people*, London 1844, p. 43.

Shevris well, had already expressed to us an apprehension that he had done his work like a hireling. The priest here affirmed that it could be of no use, as he had written it in a Nestorian character, which, besides being entirely unknown to the Kurds, is ill adapted to express the sound of their language. Undoubtedly, as the Kurds have no alphabet of their own, and are as Moslem more or less familiar with the Koran, to say nothing of the languages of the Turks and Persians who surround them, the Arabic alphabet ought to have been used. The translation, however, will doubtless be worth something as a first attempt, and will be an important help to missionaries who may wish to learn Kurdish language.”¹⁰

The first important question raised while reading the text being: why did Shevris decide to use a Nestorian script for a Kurdish text? Neither do we know how and nor by whom the text was used. The only positive opinion from Dwight and Smith’s information is that it would be used by missionaries to learn some Kurdish, which means that it was not used by Kurds.

This first Kurdish NT translation shows a bulk of difficulties confirming the aforementioned suggestions that such problems were of socio-cultural nature. In addition to that the very limited knowledge of Kurdish created absurdist decisions on the possibility of Kurdish translation.

In 1857 a new translation of the Gospels was prepared and published. It was made by Armenians and written in an Armenian script and clearly not addressed to the Kurds but to the Kurdish-speaking Armenians. It should be mentioned that protestant missionaries arriving in the Middle East region treated Armenians – Christians as a natural tool for the evangelization of the Muslim communities. Protestant millet in Turkey was created in 1850 joining all Protestant believers in such efforts, mainly Armenians, who quickly started to translate the Bible into the languages used by Armenians in Ottoman Empire such as Turkish and Kurdish. It seems certain that due to the fact of the Kurdish language being used by Armenians made it a little more prestigious. It is well-seen in narratives by Ernst Riggs, the son of the great missionary Elias Riggs, who admitted: “For many years the Armenian Protestant churches have felt in their special home missionary work to evangelize the Kurdish-speaking Armenians, of whom there are many. Some of these Armenians have so completely lost touch with their race that they have even ceased to be known as Christians. This has given rise to the theory held by some that all the Kurds were originally Armenian.”¹¹ The theory presented is completely incredible but shows how stereotypes may influence decisions with reference to translation.

¹⁰ E. Smith, H. Dwight, *Researches in Armenia including a journey through Asia Minor and into Georgia and Persia*, vol. 2, Boston 1833, p. 189–190.

¹¹ E. Riggs, *Spiritual reconstruction in the Near East*, „The Muslim World” 10 (1920) nr 2, p. 131–132

In 1872 the complete New Testament translation into Kurdish in an Armenian script was published in Constantinople under the title *P'ēymanē nō*, in which the Gospels of 1857 were included.¹²

The complete 1872 translation of the New Testament into Kurdish

The translation was criticized for its publishing. Firstly, because of the Armenian script it was written in, secondly, due to its language being a mix of different words on dialectic provenience, which made it completely useless for a wider audience. In spite of all the objections, it still constituted great linguistic material for studying the development of the Kurdish language in the 19th century in general and the language choices for translating the Christian message, in particular.

In the vocabulary of this translation one may underline two groups of borrowed words – from Arabic and Turkish.

The words of Arabic origin played a significant role in creating the sacral sphere in the Kurdish translation. There are words such as Allah, Isa, shariyat strictly connected with Islam. Apart from those we can find Arabic loanwords with some semantic changes, which is rather typical of Kurdish. The word: *t' a h v i l* of its primary meaning 'transformation' is used for baptism, this being an innovation in comparison with Persian translations using *t a m i d* and Turkish with *v a f t i z*.

On the other hand, there are a lot of Turkish words connected with daily life as: *ç a r ş i*, *a l ı ş v e r i ş*, *b a y r a m*.

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This short presentation allows to draw some conclusions:

The translation of sacral text does not only depend on the linguistic matters but also on the socio-cultural context in which it is undertaken.

A successful translation is the responsibility of the translator, their skills, presuppositions and their cooperation with the receiver. The lack of such cooperation makes translation useless.

The first Kurdish translations were not addressed to native Kurds, if it had been so, the translators-missionaries should have considered the oral literary tradition among Kurds and done thorough research on Kurdish dialectical differentiation as well as on the crucial culture-rooted words.

Unfortunately, the 19th century translations into Kurdish had no impact on the Kurdish language or culture, nevertheless, they still constitute interesting material for studies on the stereotype-oriented translation strategies of the time.

¹² *P'ēymanē nō*, Stambol 1872.

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و ۷۸۱ نومروی رخصتنامه سیله نعر اولمشدر

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Kurdish New Testament Translation from 1872 (in Armenian script)

Streszczenie

Misje protestanckie wśród Kurdów i problem przekładu Biblii na język kurdyjski w XIX wieku

Za pierwsze tłumaczenie fragmentów Biblii na język kurdyjski uważany jest przekład Nowego Testamentu, którego autorem miał być biskup chaldejski – Szewris. Podstawą tłumaczenia był tekst w języku arabskim, a całość przedsięwzięcia ukończono w 1826 roku. Nie odegrał on jednak większej roli w historii kurdyjskich tłumaczeń Biblii. Ukazał natomiast złożoną problematykę związaną z przekładem na język kurdyjski, nie tylko natury językowej, ale również społeczno-kulturowej.

W wieku XIX na tereny zamieszkałe przez Kurdów przybywają misjonarze protestantcy. Są wśród nich Amerykanie – H. G. Dwight i E. Smith, którzy sami jednak nie prowadzą misji, podróżując, zbierając wszelkie informacje dotyczące mieszkańców, języków i religii rejonu od Armenii po Anatolię. Podjęta przez nich wyprawa to rekonesans badawczy, który ma wykazać możliwość prowadzenia misji na tym terenie, a jednocześnie stanowi raport z misji już istniejących.

W 1829 roku Robert Pinkerton (1780–1859), pracownik Brytyjskiego i Zagranicznego Towarzystwa Biblijnego, odwiedził siedzibę misji zwanej od miasta, w którym powstała – misją bazylejską. Wiedząc, że misja prowadzi ośrodki na Kaukazie, zaproponował misjonarzom podjęcie pracy wśród Kurdów, jak również tłumaczenie Biblii na ich język. Propozycje te spotkały się z zainteresowaniem przedstawicieli misji, dając początek krótkotrwałemu, jak się okazało przedsięwzięciu, określanemu mianem Kurdenmission.

Przygotowania do misji rozpoczął Christian Gottlieb Hoernle (1804–1882). W tym celu udał się do Tebryzu (z Szuszy, gdzie znajdowała się główna placówka misyjna), skąd następnie odbył szereg wypraw na tereny zamieszkałe przez Kurdów. Towarzyszyli mu, między innymi F. E. Schneider i Ch. F. Hass, pracownicy misji z Bazylei, a także misjonarz amerykański Asahel Grant.

Pragnąc rozpocząć pracę nad tłumaczeniem Biblii na język kurdyjski, w 1835 roku zatrudnił Kurda jako konsultanta językowego, który miał służyć pomocą podczas pracy nad przekładem. Pomimo tych starań, chęci, dobrej woli Hoernle widział jednak zbyt wiele problemów, które uniemożliwiały, jego zdaniem, prowadzenie misji wśród społeczności kurdyjskiej. Podstawowym problemem była złożona sytuacja komunikacyjna w Kurdystanie, na którą składało się ogromne różnicowanie dialektalne obszaru kurdyjskiego, czyniąc tym samym przekład Biblii bezużytecznym.

Pierwszy kompletny przekład Nowego Testamentu na język kurdyjski ukazał się w 1872 roku był on jednak przeznaczony dla mówiących po kurdyjsku Ormian.