



Bibles in Slovakia and at the Library of the Museum of Jewish Culture (SNM) in Bratislava

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Abstract

The Bible is a set of Holy Scriptures from Judaism and Christianity that have laid the foundations for these religions. It has likewise been a major cornerstone in the development of European culture based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. The older, Hebrew Bible was also incorporated into Christianity and, as the Old Testament, became a part of the Christian Bible. The history of the distribution and publication of Bibles is outlined in this paper. Slovakia's oldest edition of the Christian Bible (and perhaps the oldest from the Bible anywhere) is thought to be an Old Slavonic translation from the 9th century. National bibliography programmes at the Slovak National Library have documented the existence of printings from the 15th century to the present day and also of Biblical literature. Apart from Slovakia itself, these editions come from several countries in Europe and even farther away. The history of the Hebrew Bible in Slovakia is somewhat less known and has so far been hardly explored. Two specialised collections of books that provide a rich source of printed editions of the Bible are the Judaica Collection at the University Library and the even more comprehensive library of the Museum of Jewish Culture, a branch of the Slovak National Museum. Both of these collections are located in Bratislava. Accordingly, it points to the need to develop research into the Hebrew Bible in Slovakia and also to research on Hebraica in general.

Keywords

Hebrew Bible, Christian Bible, Slovakia, University Library Bratislava, Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava

Because a comprehensive presentation of the Bible and its functions would be challenging and preferably a topic for discussion by theologians and historians, discussion will be confined more to it as a body of canonical text and Holy Scriptures from Judaism and Christianity that together form the foundation for these religions. It has likewise been a major cornerstone in the development of European culture based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Bible has been translated into some 1,800 languages and dialects to become the most widely distributed book in the world. It was the invention of the printing press that contributed significantly to its spread, with printed editions of the Bible becoming a point of interest both as a typographic product and an element of literary culture in general. Finally, the books and stories of the Bible have been an inspiration for artists, writers, musicians and graphic designers throughout the ages.

A distinction should be drawn between its use in the Jewish and Christian faiths. The *Hebrew Bible* is divided into three parts covering 39 separate books. These divisions are the *Torah*, comprising the *Pentateuch* or the *Five Books of Moses*; the *Nevi'im* or *Prophets* (Books 6-26); and the *Ketuvim*, also called the *Hagiography* or *Writings* (Books 27-39). In Judaism and among Jewish communities, the Hebrew Bible is called the *Tanakh*, while in Christianity these books are referred to as *The Old Testament*. Under the latter name, they form the first and larger part

of the *Christian Bible*, to which the 27 books of *The New Testament* were subsequently added. They are comprised of the four canonical gospels (*Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*), *The Acts of the Apostles* (Book 5), the epistles (*Pauline and Catholic Epistles: Books 6-26*) and *The Book of Revelation* (27th and final book).

What eventually became the complete Bible was written over a considerable span of time, roughly from the period between 1000 and 500 BCE to the 2nd century CE. The earliest parts of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) were compiled in Jerusalem before the Jews were forced into Babylonian captivity in 587 BCE. Other parts were written and edited during the Babylonian exile and after the return to Judah. Both the final editing of the Pentateuch and the canonisation of the prophetic books in the *Nevi'im* have been attributed to Ezra, a priestly scribe that lived in the 5th century BCE. It was in the centuries after the Babylonian captivity that the third division of the Hebrew Bible, the *Ketuvim*, took shape. Although the earliest parts of the Hebrew Bible were originally written in Aramaic, the language of the wording is nevertheless Hebrew.

On the other hand, the *New Testament* was written in the first two centuries of the Common Era. The first of the books, the *Gospel according to Matthew*, first appeared in Aramaic and was later translated into Greek while the later books were being written in that language. All of the books were subsequently translated from Greek to Latin and then over the following centuries into the national languages that were or became spoken. Greek translations of the Old Testament were also disseminated through Christendom. The first translation of the entire Christian Bible into Old Slavonic took place in the 9th century and it is associated with the names of Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius, missionaries that spread the Christian faith between 863 and 867 CE. Their mission took them to Great Moravia, a major state then emerging in Central Europe and which extended into present-day Slovakia.

Both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles were distributed only in manuscript form until the middle of the 15th century. These manuscripts were copied at centres of Jewish and Christian learning such as synagogues, monasteries and schools. Knowledge about manuscript editions that were produced or preserved in what would become Slovakia remains scarce and has only resulted from scattered research.

In contrast, the printed editions of the Bible have been a far richer source of information. The overall number of printings includes editions that have been researched and processed within Slovakia's national bibliography as part of broader research into the country's book and library culture. Incunabula were first recorded in the 15th century and information about them has been presented in a comprehensive book resulting from many years of research by incunabulist Imrich Kotvan (Kotvan, 1979). It outlines and describes 46 editions of the entire Christian Bible, two editions of the *Biblia pauperum* (Latin for Pauper's Bible), the third edition of the Psalms and the first edition of *The New Testament*. The oldest printed book in this collection is an edition of the *Vulgate* printed in Strasbourg between 1468 and 1470 (*Biblia latina*, circa 1468/1470) and currently in the collection of the University Library in Bratislava. Besides the Strasbourg Bible, the library currently possesses incunabula from 11 different locations such as Italy, Germany, Switzerland, France and the Czech Republic. All of these Bibles are in Latin. The majority of the editions have two or more copies and most used to be kept at religious institutions such as monasteries, chapels, dioceses, rectories and church schools, with some owned by church dignitaries. But today, many of these Bibles are concentrated in libraries and archives, which received them after the religious orders were dissolved and church property confiscated in 1950. Any opportunity for returning them to their rightful owners would come only after Slovakia passed a restitution law in 1993.

Bibles printed in the 16th century were researched at libraries in Slovakia and catalogued by them in an effort to produce a general listing of the books that had been printed and distributed during the century and were still preserved in Slovakia (*Generálny katalóg tlačí 16. storočia*, 1993 -). Printed matter collected in libraries, museums, galleries, archives and other cultural institutions were reviewed and a total of 15 sub-catalogues produced, most of which have been since published.

The **oldest printed Bible produced in the territory of present-day Slovakia** dates from the 16th century. To be more precise, it is actually a postil composed of parts from the Holy Scriptures and intended for liturgical reading on Sundays and feast days. The five-volume postil was printed in Hungarian between 1573 and 1579 as *First /Fifth Part from the Gospels and Epistles (Első / Ötödik része az Evangeliumokból, 1573-1579)*. Each volume was published by Peter Bornemisza, a Lutheran minister and printer, at three different towns, now Komjatice, Šintava, and Plavecké Podhradie in south-western Slovakia, because he was forced to move his printing house several times to escape persecution during the Counter-Reformation

The first known translations of the gospels and epistles into Slovak came in the 17th century. *Ewangelia a Epistoly* was printed in Žilina by Alžbeta Dadanová in 1676 and again later in the century, in 1689, by the Aca-

demical Press in Trnava, at the time operated by the Jesuit Order (*Ewangelia a Epistoly*, 1676, 1689). Several editions of the Bible were published in the following 18th century in Slovak-influenced Czech for use by the Lutheran community for Bible readings. **The first translation of the entire Bible into Slovak** was the two-volume *Svaté Písmo starého i nového Zákona* (*Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*), which came out in print in 1829-32 (Palkovič, 1829-1832). It was translated by Juraj Palkovič, a canon priest in the service of the Archbishop of Esztergom, where it was published, and also a member of the Slovak Learned Society (*Slovenské učené tovarišstvo*).

As the previous paragraphs make clear, the books of the Bible were published and distributed in Slovakia to both Catholic and Protestant denominations and, in addition to Slovak, they were also printed in the traditional Latin vernacular as well as in German and Hungarian, as is still the case today. Ever since the first editions were published, they have captured the works of Slovakia's national retrospective bibliography and later the parallel bibliography (Čaplovič, 1972-1984; Klimeková, Ondroušková & Augustinová, 2008; Klimeková & Ondroušková, 2016-2017; Fedor, 1964; Koppal, Holanová & Režná, 1979-1980; Klimeková, Midriaková & Příbelská, 1993; Dubay, 1948; Dubay, 1952; Ferienčíková & Spišková, 1967-1969; *Bibliografický katalóg ČSR/ČSSR*, 1956-1969; *Slovenská národná bibliografia*, 1970-1998). Most of the bibliographies has been digitised and is available on the internet. Since 1999, information about the published Bibles has been published in the libraries electronic catalogues.

A similar denominational and linguistic diversity characterised the books of the Christian Bible that were arriving in Slovakia from other countries. The books were likewise captured by catalogues in different libraries and in some complete catalogues, too.

Unlike the Christian Bible, the **history of the Hebrew Bible in Slovakia** has been hardly researched and is generally less known. The Jewish community came to Slovakia during the medieval period and brought their own Bibles and religious texts, first handwritten and later also printed. Manuscripts would subsequently be copied there, too. The printed Bibles were acquired from both neighbouring and distant countries, and continued to be the case even after the first Jewish-owned printing shops were established in Slovakia towards the end of the 18th century. Besides monolingual Bibles, printed solely in Hebrew, there were Hebrew Bibles that were printed in other languages alongside Hebrew and these Bibles were often adapted for schools or in illustrated editions to be read by families.

The monolingual Hebrew Bibles (and other books) produced by the Jewish printing houses usually formed only a small portion of the national bibliography and often were not even registered among the books and written works therein. Many of them were undoubtedly lost during the Holocaust. Such circumstances have made reconstructing the production of these Hebraica retrospectively an extremely challenging task, and yet it would be seen as a very meritorious achievement. Such reconstruction could be possible through the researching and processing of books that over the years have been acquired by Jewish religious, cultural and educational institutions, collected by museums and from what scientific, academic and public libraries likewise hold.

A major source of Hebrew prints is the *Judaica Collection*, located at the *University Library Bratislava*. Samuel Bettelheim, a journalist, publicist and Jewish activist in Bratislava, was instrumental in the establishment of this specialised collection in 1933. Between that year and 1976, he managed to acquire around 1,300 printed works, which the collection currently has in its possession today. These include books from Jewish authors, publishers and printers; publications about the Jewish community and works intended for Jews. Most of them were printed in Hebrew or a combination of Hebrew and German in the 19th and 20th centuries and are largely of Bratislava provenance. The entire collection has been professionally catalogued and the Hebrew text transliterated into the Latin alphabet. The catalogue includes information on the graphic design and ornamentation of the printing, the binding of the books and any bookplate or other method for recording inside their previous owners. The Judaica collection is currently not exhibited to the public, but has been stored and made accessible to researchers, historians and other interested people in a department of the University Library that encompasses manuscripts and old, rare prints. In 2017, the collection was presented at a scientific conference in Bratislava organised by the University Library in cooperation with the Jewish Community Museum. (Information about the conference can be found in the printed proceedings.) The collection has over thirty editions of the Hebrew Bible, dating between 1818 and 1928, which were originally published in Austria, Germany, Bohemia, Poland and Carpathian Ruthenia in Ukraine, as well as from France and England.

The *Museum of Jewish Culture (Slovak National Museum) in Bratislava* has accumulated over the years a

relatively abundant collection of Bibles. The collection was established in the city as a specialised museum within the Slovak National Museum network in 1993. The museum's library currently contains more than nine thousand books and related documents. About half of them are historical, meaning they were published and printed before 1918. A point of interest worth mentioning is that its oldest printed edition is a collection of works from Jewish historian Josephus Flavius. It was produced in Paris in 1514 and includes *The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*. The more recently produced works in the library's collection covers diverse content in traditional books, periodicals and a number of manuscripts alongside audiovisual and digital documents.

The library has been collecting editions of the Bible and related literature ever since it was established. Books first purchased by the library include *Dictionary of Biblical Culture* (*Slovník biblické kultury*, 1992), listed as having been received on 7 July 1993. There is also a purchase recorded on the first of September in the same year of the *Book of Psalms* (the 27th book in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament), which was published in 1827 in Halle an der Saale, Germany (*Psalterium*, 1827). Besides purchases made at bookstores and antiquarian shops, the library has acquired Bibles and other biblical literature through exchanges with other institutions and, not in the least, through donations.

The most current inventory of the library's collection indicates more than 140 editions in its possession, yet in all fairness it should be noted that only editions in Hebrew and European languages have so far been counted. Any prospective research in the editions written solely in Hebrew will require collaboration with Hebraists. Almost 95% of the collection is composed of editions from the Hebrew Bible, while the remaining 5% are editions of the Christian Bible.

The oldest of the library's printed **Hebrew Bibles** is the *Biblia Hebraica*, produced in Frankfurt am Main in 1716 (*Biblia Hebraica*, 1716). It is noteworthy that it was prepared for publication by professors teaching at a Protestant Christian university in Essen, Germany. One of the two copies of this Bible kept in the museum's library contains a manuscript and a printed engraving from a previous owner, Lutheran clergyman Ján Miloslav Hodža, mentioning that he had received it from Karol Kuzmány, a professor of theology and another Lutheran pastor. Both men were well-known figures in Slovak national and cultural life. It indicates that Christian theologians did study Hebrew and were reading the Bible in how it had been earlier worded. The library's second oldest print is a *Torah* in Hebrew and German from the late 18th century. This compilation of the *Five Books of Moses* was printed in Vienna in 1794 (*Chomisch*, 1794). About two-fifths of the prints in the library are from the 19th century, while around half of them date from the 20th century. Among the approximately 10% remaining, about an equal number are recent 21st century prints and printings whose year of publication is unspecified.

To summarise the collection, editions of the Hebrew Bible in the library's possession come from 11 European countries, predominately from present-day Austria with 50 editions dating from 1801 to 1930. They are mostly bilingual German-Hebrew editions of the *Torah* for schools that were produced by the Josef Schlesinger publishing house in Vienna. There are 28 editions from Germany, printed in Frankfurt am Main, Halle an der Saale, Berlin, Leipzig, Stuttgart and Hamburg.

With 19 editions originating in present-day Slovakia, it is the third most common country of provenance in the library's collection. In this group, six editions of the *First Book of the Torah* dominate, with five of them abridged for schools. There are also literary translations and poetic renderings of *The Song of Solomon* (six printings), *The Book of Esther* (three printings) and *The Book of Job* (one printing). In descending order, the editions of books from the Bible previously mentioned are followed by a literary treatment of stories from the Bible abridged for schools and then *The Book of Ruth* and *The Book of Nehemiah*. From among the prints that come from present-day Slovakia, 13 come from Bratislava, two each were produced in Nové Mesto nad Váhom and Trnava, and one each originated from Kosice and Sečovce (1). The oldest among them from 1879 is the *First Book of the Torah*, printed in Hebrew and German from the Sigmund Schreiber publishing house in Pressburg, as Bratislava was called at the time (*Sefer Torat Moshe*, 1879). Further printings were made between 1908 and 2007, mostly in Slovak.

Other European countries from where editions of the Bible can be found include 16 editions from the Czech Republic, mostly printed by Prague publisher J.M. Landau; 11 editions from Hungary, predominantly from Budapest, and the same number from Poland; seven from modern day Ukraine; and one or two each from Lithuania, Slovenia and Italy. There is a remarkable assemblage of printings from the United Kingdom, with the 1852 and 1880 editions of *The Latter Profits and Psalms* (translated from German), a series of edited books from the Bible, and *Biblia Hebraica* in Hebrew from 1925 with translations completed between 1997 and 2004 in English, French and Russian. Newer editions in the library have come for the most part from countries outside Europe, such as five editions

printed in New York and another five from Israel out of publishing houses in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

In terms of language, combination Hebrew-German prints dominate, followed by Hebrew-Russian prints from the territories of present-day Poland and Ukraine, and prints in the languages of the countries where they had been published, either in combination with Hebrew or separately.

Less than a dozen editions of the **Christian Bible** exist with the same number of printings, in total, of comprehensive editions of the Old and New Testaments. An exception is the oldest printing in the set, dated 1817 and published in London. This is a translation of the New Testament into Hebrew, a unique phenomenon in itself (*Brit Chadash*, 1817). Other editions were issued in Bohemia, Slovakia and the United States, with the books of the Bible translated into the official or local languages of these countries. They tend to be more recent.

The editions of the Bible (both Hebrew and Christian) come in a variety of forms, bound in leather, half-leather, cloth and paper, and they often have decorative title pages and frontispieces. Many contain manuscript or printed bookplates or other records of their previous owners.

In addition to the editions of books from the Bible, there are also **references to the Bible** that discuss its history and grammar **and provide aids for studying it**. The dominating edition in this group of literature is again a single English printing, this time of the *Concordance Hebrew-Latin Dictionary*, published in London in 1680 (Robertson, 1680). It is the oldest example of Bible literature found to date in the Museum of Jewish Culture (SNM).

It was the wealth of biblical literature the library in the Museum of Jewish Culture (SNM) had which prompted a suggestion to showcase it at an exhibition. In 2019, such an exhibition was held and met with a lot of public interest.

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