

# Old Testament Poetry

## Czech and Slovak Translations and Transformations

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0. In this lecture some samples will be presented, demonstrating how Bible versions inspired poets and music composers.

0.1. The primary function of translations is to communicate message of the original; the forms of the original are rendered in some translations faithfully, in others rather without respect to the structuring of the source. Both message and its formal expression can inspire creativity of poets and composers.

0.2. In the following presentation only some selections can be submitted. They are taken from two poetic books of the Hebrew Bible, which can be considered different in their primary function and in their modern use. Psalms were produced for mostly liturgical use, and they are still used for the same purpose. For their versions have been adapted to poetic and musical forms usual in various religious communities. In Song of Songs some traditional customs are reflected. None other biblical book attracted so much attention of poets, and also the musical compositions based on it are relatively numerous.

0.3. A speaker delivering his lecture in person can present melodies of compositions inspired by biblical poetry, by singing them or by playing them on some instrument. But such a presentation cannot be simply printed in the publication of the lecture. It would be possible to add sound tapes to the publication, but in this case we were not able to do that.

0.4. If the lecture is sent from a considerable distance, it is difficult to provide its musical components. Since they are here quoted to show their dependence on the natural articulation of Czech language elements, they are indicated by letter signs ac-

ording to the custom usual in Central Europe. Use of musical note signs would be technically more demanding and also less convenient, as the signs serving to indicate the height of tones would be more distant from the syllables to which they belong.

1. In accordance with the title of this conference the primary attention has to be devoted to *inspiration*.

1.1. The religious meaning of this term may be considered, as the Sacred Scriptures are indicated as its source.

1.2. Since also culture is indicated in the conference title, the aesthetic function of inspiration can be included.

1.3. Perhaps the function of this term may be extended to science, to invention of new methods and to originality of observations and solutions.

1.4. The focus of this lecture is inspiration of poetry and music by the Czech Bible version. In samples which will be presented this basis is *the Kralice Bible*. It was used according to the 1613 edition which has been and still is printed. This edition does not differ—as concerns selections quoted here—from the translation of Psalms and of Song of Solomon in the third volume published in 1582, as part of the Bible in six volumes prepared by the Unity of Brethren.

1.5. First the poetry and then the music will be dealt with, Song of Songs as object of also rather secular attention first, and then the samples from the Psalms.

1.6. Only few other references will be occasionally mentioned.

2. Poetic inspiration can be observed in Czech and Slovak translations and paraphrases of *the Song of Songs*, more than as in its poetic reworkings.

2.1. As a sample the proposal of poet Jaroslav Seifert (1901-1986; Nobel Prize for Literature 1984) may be mentioned, which was seven years later, in 1962, confirmed in the edition of fragments from the Qumran Cave 6.

2.2. For the *Kancyonál* published in 1659 in Amsterdam, Jan Amos Komenský (1592–1670) put Song of Solomon to verses, that it may be sung.

2.3. There are many quotations of and references to the Song of Solomon in Czech poetry, from the medieval poem “Otep myrhy” (cf. 1:13) to Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958). Perhaps best known is that on turtle-dove’s voice (cf. 2:12) in the poem “Máj” by Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1837).

3. The transformations of Old Testament *psalms* served mostly liturgical purposes. Some psalms were put in poetic forms for rather aesthetic concerns.

3.1. Czech poet Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870) used forms similar to his poems, well corresponding to the structure of Czech language. His psalm transformations are composed in strophes consisting of four verses with rhymes according to the pattern A-B-A-B. The Psalm 140 is presented in this form.

3.1.1. The corresponding form, with verses with five trochees, was used by Erben, as he was asked in 1858 to contribute to the volume to be given to the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph and to the Empress Elisabeth at their wedding. Erben selected for this purpose Psalm 45.

3.1.2. One hundred years later the translation of the same psalm was published, prepared by Jaroslav Seifert in cooperation with Stanislav Segert. The purpose was different: to provide a poetic translation of an Old Testament poem similar to the Song of Songs.

3.2. Psalms were presented in poetic forms by Slovak Lutheran poets.

3.2.1. The poems by Pavol Országh-Hviezdoslav (1849–1921) were inspired by biblical psalms; their message was transmitted in contemporary poetic style, even if the impact of the Czech Kralice version can be often observed.

3.2.2. Andrej Sládkovič (1820–1872), a Lutheran pastor, followed in his Slovak poetic paraphrases of psalms more closely the traditional Czech model. This can be observed on Psalm 44, published in 1862.

3.2.3. In his poetic rendering of Psalm 21, published in 1868, Sládkovič used an original device, repetition and extension of some verse elements. This rendering divided in five strophes has at the end of each of them refrain based on verse 4 of the psalm.

At the end, after the rendering of verse 14, the longest device is presented. In this device and elsewhere in this poetic reworking of Psalm 21 Sládkovič follows closely the Kralice model.

KRALICKÁ	SLÁDKOVIČ	KING JAMES VERSION
<i>a budemeť zpívati</i>	<i>budú ospevovať</i>	<i>so will we sing</i>
<i>a oslavovati</i>	<i>budú oslavovať</i>	<i>and praise</i>
<i>udatnosť tvou</i>	<i>udatnosť tvoju,</i>	<i>your power</i>
<i>ktěry vstavil jsi</i>	<i>vstavil jsi,</i>	<i>thou settest</i>
<i>na hlavu jeho</i>	<i>na hlavu jeho</i>	<i>on his head (!)</i>
<i>korunu</i>	<i>korunu</i>	<i>a crown</i>
<i>z ryzího zlata</i>	<i>rýdzozlatú</i>	<i>of pure gold</i>

4. Various versions of Song of Songs were provided by *musical accompaniment*. Here only one composed and performed relatively recently will be mentioned. And also two not completed attempts deserve some attention.

4.1. Shortly after the new translation of Song of Songs by Jaroslav Seifert and Stanislav Segert was published in 1956, it was performed in Prague with the music composed by Jitka Snížková-Škrhová (1924–1989). She served later as Professor at the Conservatory of Music in Prague.

4.2. Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959) considered to compose music to the same translation. As he died in 1959 in Basel, on his desk the text published in 1958 was found with a few lines of his composition. Jaroslav Seifert regretted that he was not informed about Martinů's intention, he would send him the first edition of the translation from 1956.

4.3. A few short drafts are preserved from the attempt to compose the music to Song of Songs in 1897. Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) was using the new translation published in the same year by the orientalist Rudolf Dvořák (1860–1920), Professor at the Czech University in Prague. Antonín Dvořák was attracted by the poetic beauty of this poem, but he stopped his work, as the “excessive sensuality” of Song of Songs did not conform with his morally rigorous standpoint.

5. Old Testament psalms corresponded better to Dvořák's deep and serious piety.

5.1. Already in 1879 Antonín Dvořák composed as his opus 52 music on Psalm 149 for men's choir with orchestra. This jubilant hymn to glory of the Lord was then adapted for the mixed-voice choir and published as opus 79 in 1888.

5.2. While staying in New York, Antonín Dvořák composed in March 1894 ten songs for solo and piano on texts, which he himself selected from the Book of Psalms in the Kralice version of 1613. Already this independent selection shows Dvořák's commitment to religious and also aesthetic values of Old Testament poetry.

5.3. "Biblické písně" – "Biblical Songs" are in its original form indicated as opus 99. In 1895 and 1896 songs 1–5 were adapted for the accompaniment of small orchestra.

5.4. The way how Dvořák selected verses for his Songs, also from more than one Psalm, can be clearly presented on the arrangement:

Song 1: Psalm 97:2–6; song 2: 119: 114, 115, 117, 120; song 3: 55:2, 3, 5–9; song 4: 23:1–4; song 5: 144:9, 145:2, 3, 5–6; song 6: 63:2, 61:2, 4, 5, 63:5–6; song 7: 137:1–5; song 8: 25:16–18, 20; song 9: 121:1–4; song 10: 98:1, 4, 7, 8, 96:12.

5.5. These songs are highly evaluated as the climax of song production. With help of genial inspiration the Old Testament atmosphere and style were adequately presented. Various kinds of expression were applied for this purpose. They are relatively simple. Especially song 4, based on Psalm 23, expresses the majesty with very simple devices.

5.6. The free verse of the Czech psalm version gave to the composer the necessary freedom. He was able to reflect the spirit of Czech language in the declamation aspect.

6. The *relations* between natural pronunciation of Czech language and the rhythm and melody in compositions based on Czech texts have attracted and will attract appropriate attention. As concerns Dvořák's Biblical Songs, Otakar Šourek pointed to these relations in his monumental work on Dvořák's life and music. The composer Leoš Janáček (1854–1928), who followed Antonín Dvořák in more than one respect, wrote several studies dealing with these contacts between language and music. And it may be al-

lowed to a non-specialist in music theory to mention how he used his impressions from declamation of poetry and listening to music for observations, for which he then found confirmation in the special studies.

6.1. These personal observations started by listening to Dvořák's symphonic poem opus 110 composed in 1896, entitled in Czech "Holoubek", in English "The Wild Dove" or "The Wood Dove". This composition is one of those based on the poems by Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870), published in the collection entitled "Kytice" in 1853. This poetry is well known even now, and especially a distant relative of the poet, who has among his ancestors many named Erben, is attracted to it. During listening to the "Leitmotiv" in Dvořák's "Holoubek", the pronunciation of the first strophe of Erben's poem was felt beneath the melody and rhythm.

6.1.1. This first strophe of Erben's "Holoubek" is presented here, with basic notes of Dvořák music. Perhaps it can be observed, that Dvořák's intervals between the pitches are somewhat larger and thus more expressive than the differences between the tones of syllables in simple declamation of poetry.

<i>Okolo</i>	<i>hřbitova</i>	<i>Around the cemetery</i>
c-d-es	f-es-f	
<i>cesta</i>	<i>úvozová;</i>	<i>(there is) hollowed-up way</i>
c-d	es-f-es-f	
<i>šla tudy,</i>	<i>plakala</i>	<i>(she) walked that way, (she) wept</i>
as	b-c es-des-es	
<i>mladá,</i>	<i>hezká</i>	<i>a young, pretty widow.</i>
des-b	as-f b-as	

6.2. It can be observed that both rhythm and melody in Dvořák's Biblical Songs correspond to the declamation of psalm texts. Melodies are indicated in the following samples by letters (v. supra 0.4). Length of notes is not indicated; all long syllables are at least twice longer than the short ones.

6.2.1. The first sample is the beginning of Psalm 23, the best known and most frequently read and recited psalm. Its melody is simple (v. supra 5.4). In the collection of Biblical Songs this psalm has number 4. The second sample is from Song 1, its beginning, rendering Psalm 97:2. The stringency of message is expressed by larger intervals, both in recitation and in the music.

### 6.2.2. Psalm 23:1

<i>Hospodin</i>	<i>jest</i>	<i>můj</i>	<i>pastýř</i>	<i>The Lord is my shepherd</i>
fis----	----	gis	fis--	
<i>nebudu</i>	<i>míti</i>	<i>nedostatku</i>		<i>I shall not want</i>
cis-dis-e	fis--	gis-fis---		

### 6.2.3. Psalm 97:2

<i>Oblak</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>mrákota</i>	<i>Cloud and darkness</i>
h-h	h	cis-as-cis	
<i>jest</i>	<i>vůkol</i>	<i>něho</i>	<i>are round about him</i>
g	g-g	H-H	
<i>spravedlnost</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>soud</i>	<i>righteousness and judgment</i>
fis-fis-fis-fis	fis	g	
<i>základ</i>	<i>trůnu</i>	<i>jeho</i>	<i>[are] the foundation (!)</i>
c-c	c-d	C-H	<i>of his throne</i>

7. A few additional references may be presented, pointing to some observations on relations between Czech language in the poetry and its expression in music.

7.1. One of these references is based not on research, but only on personal impressions. It seems that the liturgical recitation of biblical poetry from the Kralice version by Moravians and Slovaks indicates better the original intonation and rhythm than if these texts are recited by people from Bohemia. Perhaps even after four centuries the translators, who were mostly from Moravia, make their heritage audible.

7.2. Moravian folk songs were most competently studied by the composer Leoš Janáček. In his studies he pointed to the melody and rhythm of speech and traced these features in the melody and rhythm of songs. He devoted due attention also to the role of the word stress.

7.3. While the contribution to the 1992 conference on Bible held in Bechyně in Bohemia presented by Josef Vintř from the Institute for Slavistics at the University of Vienna deals with the new Czech translation of Gospels, his requirement for the traditional prestigious function of the Bible language has to be applied to the translating of Old Testament poetry as well. Such translations can well serve as inspiration for musical compositions.

7.4. Another lecture on the same conference deserves to be mentioned, even as it did not deal with Czech translations. Uwe F. W. Bauer of the University of Cologne (Köln) has demonstrated how the colometric arrangement in Old Testament translations helps proper understanding of the message. It can be added that the cola—usually halfverses—as prosodic units can serve also as musical units.

8. This lecture provided few results of systematic research, it was meant as suggestion to its various aspects, for specialists who are better qualified for conducting it. To trace contacts between language features and their musical expression may be a rewarding task.

### Abbreviations:

BCC—*The Bible in Cultural Context*. Helena Pavlincová and Dalibor Papoušek, eds. Brno: Česká společnost pro studium náboženství 1994.

CBD—*Česká Bible v dějinách evropské kultury*. Eds., publisher, year v. ad BCC.

PSS—*Pět svátečních svitků*. S. Segert, ed. Praha: SNKLHU 1958.

SNKLHU—Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění (Praha).

### Notes:

0.1. S. Segert, “Básnické překlady a převody biblické poezie”, Pp. 67–80 in *CBD*.

1.1–2. Cf. “inspiration”, *Encyklopaedia Britannica* 15th ed., 1974, 370 b.

1.4.a. *Bibli svatá*, Podle posledního vydání Kralického z roku 1613, Praha 1939.

1.4.b. The text is available in: *Bibli svatá. Podle původního vydání Kralického z roku (!) 1579–1593 (recte 1594)*. Kutná Hora: Česká biblická práce 1940. A photomechanical reproduction of six volumes was published by Schoening publishing house in 1995.

2.1.a. *Píseň písni*. Tr. Stanislav Segert and Jaroslav Seifert. Praha: Jaroslav Pícka (1956).

2.1.b. “Píseň písni”, pp. 23–38 in *PSS*.

2.1.c. *Píseň písni*. Praha SNKLHU 1964.

2.2.a. *Kancyonál, To jest kniha Žalmů a Písní Duchovních*. Amsterdam 1659.

2.2.b. Jan Amos Komenský, *Píseň písni Šalomounových*, ed. Zdeňka Tichá. Uherský Brod: Muzeum J. A. Komenského 1987.—Cf. ad 0.1, pp. 68–69.

2.3. Cf. *PSS*, 22.—Cf. 2.1.c., epilog by Jaroslav Seifert.



- 3.1. and 3.1.1. Karel Jaromír Erben, *Básně a překlady*. Ed. Antonín Grund. Praha: Melantrich 1938. Pp. 139–141, 320.
- 3.1.2. V. ad 2.1.b., pp. 210–211.
- 3.2.1. *Hviezdoslavove Sobrané spisy básnické* III. Turčianský Sv. Martin: Matica slovenská 1936. Pp. 27–33; 33–37; 37–40; 69–73.
- 3.2.2. Andrej Sládkovič, *Poézia*. Ed. Cyril Kraus. Bratislava: Tatran 1976. 545–550.
- 3.2.3. *Ib.*, 592–594.
- 4.1. Jitka Snížková-Škrhová.
- 4.3.a. Rudolf Dvořák, tr. *Píseň písní*. (1895) Praha: Grafikona 1918.
- 4.3.b. Otakar Šourek, *Život a dílo Antonína Dvořáka, I–IV*. Praha: SNKLHU 1954–1957. Cf. IV: 24.
- 5.1. V. ad 4.3.b., 76–77.
- 5.2. V. ad 4.3.b., 200–206.
- 6.a. Cf. ad 4.3.b., 205 and 284, n. 41.
- 6.b. Leoš Janáček, *O lidové písni a lidové hudbě*. Praha: SNKLHU 1955.
- 6.1.a. Cf. ad 4.3.b., 312–319.
- 6.1.b. *Kytice z básní Karla Jaromíra Erbena*. Ed. Fr. Papírník. Smíchov: Votava a Vaněk (about 1920)–Pp. 66–68.
- 6.1.1. Antonín Dvořák, *Holoubek – The Wild Dove*. Praha: SNKLHU 1955. Opus 110 (94).
- 6.2.1-3. Antonín Dvořák, *Biblické písně–Biblical Songs*. Praha: SNKLHU 1960.
- 7.1. Cf. ad 0.1., 72-73.
- 7.2. Cf. ad 6.b.
- 7.3. Josef Vintr, “Stylistické poznámky k českému ekumenickému překladu evangelií”. *CBD*, 17–26, esp. p. 24.
- 7.4. Uwe W. F. Bauer, “Die kolometrische Wiedergabe der Texte und die idiolektische Übersetzung als ‘conditio sine qua non’ für das Verständnis der Bibel”, *BCC* 31–40, esp. p. 31, concerning translations by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.–Cf. S. Segert, “Poetic Structures in the Hebrew Sections of the Book of Daniel”, pp. 261–275 (esp. p. 274, n. 22), in: Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, Michael Sokoloff, eds., *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical ... Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns 1995.