

Introductory lecture from the book by Dmitriy Shchedrovitskiy “Introduction To the Old Testament”

The Bible – A Key
to the Comprehension
of Life. The Book
Equal to the Universe

Three questions should be answered before we turn to the Old Testament. Question one: Which book is the most antique among those that humanity has been reading for the past 2000 years? Question two: Which book is the most popular, or has been read by the largest number of people over the last centuries? And question three: Which book has figured most prominently in history, culture, literature, philosophy and art? All of these questions may have only one answer: the Bible. And now we need to ask one more question: Is the Bible a heavenly revelation or is it just a human creation, a record of events which took place in ancient times, a work of brilliant poets, philosophers of genius, visionaries – but people alone, without act of God?

In order to give an answer to the last question (no substantial discussion of the Bible is possible unless we get it), it would be reasonable to look for some evidence in the Book itself. Let us wonder what information it should contain to prove its divine origin beyond a doubt. Let us presume that the Bible could expose the fundamental relativity theory. But it would by no means prove the Book's supernatural origin. The phenomenon could be explained in such a way: "Thousands of years ago there lived a man who was far more scientifically ca-

pable than Einstein himself". Or let us suggest that the Bible could contain the Mendeleev's periodic table. That would not be a proof either. An ancient sage could have foreseen or predicted that the properties of a chemical element depend on the charge of the nucleus. Otherwise the periodic system could have been communicated to our ancestors by some extinguished civilization, other worlds' dwellers at last.

Consequently, no scientific data fixed in the Scripture, even though they exceeded contemporary knowledge, could convince us of its superhuman nature. That is why we have to look for some other evidence, undeniable and clear, that would point out the divine source of the Bible.

Prophecy is such evidence. The Bible exactly predicts future events and their course, time, even the names of participants. It contains predictions of both close events and those that took place hundreds or thousands years after the corresponding book had been written – and since we possess quite precise information about the time each book of the Bible was written, it enables us to judge whether the prophecies they contain have come true.

The Bible itself provides the principles of distinguishing true prophets from false ones. It says that the words

of a true prophet should be revered, written down and later followed. It says (the speech is in first person – the Lord, the Creator of the universe, addresses Moses):

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put My words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in My name, I Myself will hold accountable.

But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in My name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die.'

You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?'

If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. (Deuteronomy 18, 18-22)

Consequently, a true prophet (and the Bible consists only of books written by true prophets) must speak in

the name of the Lord and provide clear signs to prove he is God's messenger, so his words must come true. The prophet in Hebrew is called נביא <na'vi>, or 'emanative', 'pouring out', 'exposing' something that should come true in the near or distant future. In ancient times the prophet was called חוזה <ho'ze> – 'beholding'. Unlike usual people seeing visible things, a prophet beholds the unseen world of spirit and narrates it to us. A prophet must be tested – therefore, he should predict some event that has to take place in the near future, and only after his words are proven there comes confidence in his prophecy about upcoming events.

In the Bible we can come across numerous examples of how a prophet predicted events of the near future and thus proved the truthfulness of his mission. In the very beginning of the Book of Amos written in the 8th century BCE we can read:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And he said: The LORD roars... (Amos 1, 1-2)

So, the prophet had predicted the earthquake two years before it actually took place. Not even today can scientists foresee earthquakes in such a substantial period.

Another example of a near future prediction can be found in 2 Kings. Israeli King Ahaziah (the 9th century BCE) lay injured and sent his servants to inquire of Baal-zebul instead of turning to God with a healing prayer. “Baal-zebul” (or “the lord of the altar”) is the Hebrew and Phoenician name of one of Knaan pagan gods, whose worship included debauchery and even human sacrifice. And when Ahaziah sent messengers to offer him a sacrifice, Elijah, God’s prophet, came to meet them and told them to go back to the king and say:

‘..Thus says the Lord: Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron, – is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of His word? – therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die.’

So he died according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken.’ (2 Kings 1, 16-17)

Besides predictions concerning the fate of a single man, private events, the Bible contains a lot of predic-

tions related to the future of whole nations. One should regard how hardly probable such a remote event could be. Let us figure how many factors influence everything that happens in our world, and how difficult it therefore is to predict the time, place and circumstances of an event. Nevertheless, the Bible provides numerous predictions of that kind.

Thus, for example, the Deuteronomy Book, written by Moses the prophet in the beginning of the 13th century BCE, includes a prediction about the future of the whole nation of Israel after they turn back from the Law of God:

‘The Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known.’ (Deuteronomy 28, 64)

In other words, in case the people that God Himself has chosen to glorify His name leaves Him, this people will be scattered about all countries. And if such a dreadful, severe prediction had realized, this people was to gradually disappear, blending into other ethnic groups. However, it goes on as follows:

Among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting-place for the sole of your foot. There the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit.

Your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, with no assurance of your life. (Deuteronomy 28, 65-66)

You do not need to possess profound knowledge of Jewish history to agree that this prediction has come true to the letter. The Jewish people was scattered about all countries after the Second Temple had been ruined in 70 CE, could find no peace anywhere, was persecuted, chased, annihilated. And now we wonder: how could it have been predicted beforehand, 14 centuries before the aforementioned events? Is it possible for man to predict the essence of the fate of a whole people scattered all over the world – a unique fate, unrepeated in the history of the mankind?

Another place in the Deuteronomy shows us how God promises to reassemble the dispersed Jewish people in the land that its forefathers owned:

Then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again

from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you.

Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back.

The Lord your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it... (Deuteronomy 30, 3-5)

This prediction could not have come true by chance. For it says that a people deprived of its land and scattered throughout thousands of years all over the world will again come together and restore the state in the same country, which will have been under numerous great empires. Nevertheless, this promise was exactly realized in the middle of the past century: the Jewish state was restored in 1948. The realization of this prediction cannot be denied because it happened right before our eyes.

Another Biblical book, the Book of Isaiah, who lived in the 8th century BCE, or about 600 years after Moses, contains the following words that describe the gathering of Israel:

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold...' (Isaiah 43, 5-6)

These words do not just predict the gathering of Israel, but also mention the location of the country, which will hear from God "Give them up" – it means that He will force its inhabitants to let Jews go. None other than we ourselves have seen that God said it to a great northern country – the Soviet Union – by means of political events. And it caused a wave of Jewish emigration, "the iron curtain" was raised. This prediction can not either be denied because its realization took place in our time.

The Book of Jeremiah, who lived in the 6th century BCE, describes the same future events as follows:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth... (Jeremiah 31, 8)

Consequently, the Israelites' main exodus was to be made right from the "northern country". And "the northern country" in regard to the Holy Land is Russia – moreover, Jerusalem and Moscow are located almost on the same line of longitude. It has to be mentioned

that in times of Jeremiah this territory was not covered by any developed human settlement...

Ezekiel, who also lived in the 6th century BCE, predicted the following:

Thus says the Lord God: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt.

The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by.

And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.'

Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, the Lord, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do it. (Ezekiel 36, 33-36)

Since the Jewish War against Rome when Jerusalem went to ruin, Israel's cities and settlements were falling into decay for 1878 years, and valleys once flourishing were turning into a desert (see Chapter 5 "Harvests

And Jubilees. Scattering And Repatriation of Israel” and Chapter 14 “Sinai, Seir and Paran. The Last Cord Of Moses' Sermon” of the Introduction To the Old Testament). However, the prediction came true in the 20th century: “the ruined towns” became inhabited and the deserts of the Holy Land started turning into gardens. Thus, our contemporaries have witnessed the realization of this prophecy as well.

Many predictions of the Old Testament are related to other ancient nations as well as modern ones. Let us turn to the prediction about the fate of the great empire of antiquity Assyria, which flourished in the 9th and the 8th centuries BCE. It can be found in the Book of Nahum. He lived in the beginning of the 7th century BCE, whereas the prediction came true at the end of the same century. It should be mentioned that Nahum’s words about the coming destruction of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, sounded to his contemporaries even less believable than words about an alleged downfall of New York would sound to us today. In those days non-believers could react to such a warning only with laughter and mockery, for Assyria was then more powerful than ever, with numerous lands and nations. And all of a sudden Nahum the prophet says the following:

The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; He protects those who take refuge in Him, even in a rushing flood.

He will make a full end of His adversaries, and will pursue His enemies into darkness. (Nahum 1, 7-8)

The prophet foresees “a rushing flood” in the great city that lived securely. Another place in this book provides a prediction concerning the future of the Assyrian king:

He calls His officers; they stumble as they come forward; they hasten to the wall, and the mantelet is set up.

The river gates are opened, the palace trembles. (Nahum 2, 5-6)

And this prediction found a precise realization! In 612 BCE the troops of Babylonia and Media – Assyria’s rebellious dependent lands – united, went through Assyria and lay siege to Nineveh. But the walls of the city were impenetrable, and the city stood surrounded for two years. Then the besiegers impounded the river Ti-

gris, the water flooded the city wall and made a breach in it. The troops broke into the city through the opening and slaughtered the citizens. Nahum the prophet had foreseen it several decades earlier correlating the surrender of the city with “a rushing flood”: “The river gates are opened, the palace (the king’s palace is meant) trembles”. This prediction along with other biblical prophecies has been literally realized.

The Bible contains some predictions concerning Jesus Christ’s earthly life. Here is one of them. This is what King David, Jesus’s forefather who lived a thousand years before him and left the great Book of Psalms for us, predicted about the coming Messiah (note that this is a first person prediction: David identifies himself with his descendant – the Messiah):

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.

My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; You lay me in the dust of death.

For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me.

My hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones.

They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots. (Psalms 22, 15–18)

Ten centuries later, in 34 CE, every word of this Psalm came true on Mount Calvary: Jesus’s arms and legs were slain when he was on the cross. Herewith, his “clothes” were divided by Roman soldiers, and his coat, or chiton, was so precious that it was not torn apart, but the soldiers cast lots for it, so that it could go to one of them. All of this is described in the Gospel Book in detail.

Besides, there are ample historical prophecies concerning the whole human race, successive change of empires, civilizations, epochs. For instance, chapters 2, 7–8 and 11–12 of the Book of Daniel (the 6th century BCE) describe the global history beginning with the Babylonian Kingdom up to the present time. The contents of these chapters strike our imagination by the precision with which successive events over 2500 years are predicted.

Moreover, the Bible suggests numerous exact dates

of future events. Thus, the Book of Daniel gives us such a prediction:

“Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a Most Holy place...” (Daniel 9, 24)

Seventy weeks (or seventy times by seven years) makes 490 years. Upon the expiry of 490 years a great man of God is predicted to come, and he will atone for human sins. The Hebrew word צדק <'tsedek>, which is used here and translated as “righteousness”, means justification of sinners or criminals, and in the context of Daniel’s prophecy it will be everlasting, final. It goes on as follows:

Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an Anointed Prince, there shall be seven weeks; and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. (Daniel 9, 25)

The Hebrew words עד-משיח נגיד <ad-Mashiah Nagid> stand for “until the time of an Anointed Prince” – “until the Lord’s Anointed (Messiah) Who rules”. Seventy weeks start from the moment when “the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem”. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE and resettled the survivors to the great city of Babylon. But after the empire fell under the attacks of Persians and Medians, the Persian rulers issued regulations that gave the Jews an opportunity to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple to their God and worship Him in the holy place. The final order to surround Jerusalem with walls and reconstruct it was issued in 457 BCE by the Persian tzar Artaxerxes I. The reconstruction and population of Jerusalem lasted “seven weeks”, or 49 years. “Sixty two weeks”, or 434 years more passed and the last, seventh week came – the seven-year Christ’s public teaching, which ended with his execution. Now if we add 490 years to 457 BCE plus one year of passing from one era to the other – and we get 34 CE. Namely, it is 33/34 CE (the biblical year starts from autumn) – the year when Jesus was crucified.

And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself (Daniel 9, 26) – KJV

Jesus Christ was crucified exactly after all the discussed weeks had passed, but as though he were not put to death, for he was risen!

It goes on as follows:

...and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. (Daniel 9, 26)

In 70 CE, 36 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Roman troops under the military leader Titus defeated rebellious Judea, razed its towns to the ground, destroyed its capital city, Jerusalem, desecrated and burnt the Temple of God; the war lasted till 73 CE afterwards. It is doubtless that no human could have predicted so accurately and closely all these events six centuries before they actually took place.

The next verse says:

He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall make sacrifice and offering cease... (Daniel 9, 27)

What other week could be meant here? The thing is that the Jewish War lasted seven years, from 66 to 73 CE. In the middle of this week the Temple was destroyed – the only place where, according to the Bible, the holy sacrifice of domestic animals was allowed. Thus, as it had been predicted by the prophet, sacrifice and offering to God, the Creator of heaven and earth, ceased in “half of the week”. But this verse contains also “He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week...” What covenant is spoken about here? The Good News that God confirmed a New Covenant with His people through Jesus Christ had spread widely about Judea by that time. The apostles had been teaching within and outside the Holy Land for 36 years. A great number of Jews as well as representatives of other nations came into the New Covenant and accepted the Gospel in their hearts and minds after they saw how precisely Daniel’s and other prophets’ predictions about the coming of the Messiah were realized.

The final words of Daniel’s prediction are:

...and in their place shall be an abomination that desolates, until the decreed end is poured out upon the desolator. (Daniel 9, 27)

Indeed, since then the Jerusalem Temple has been in desertion. The desolator of the Temple, Roman leader Titus, was struck by God's punishment: he suffered a cruel disease, apparently, brain cancer, and not having reigned for two years, died in pains – “the decreed end” was poured out upon him.

What is the reason for such an unusual review of Biblical prophecy, great predictions of future events? In order to find an answer to the fundamental question, which was asked at the beginning of this book: what is necessary for a reasonable study of the greatest book of humanity? If the Bible is only a creation of men, even though greatest poets and wisemen, it should be treated properly, but in case it transmits the words of the Lord Himself, the Creator of the universe and each of us in particular, then it requires quite a different approach. And the word that most precisely expresses this approach is reverence.

Exegetes compare the Word of the Bible with the sea,

deep and untraceable. And all we can think, say and even read about the Bible – with a small sea drop. However, even a drop possesses the taste and all qualities of the sea water. Through a tiny drop of the Biblical Truth we will try to touch the multifaceted meaning of the Book, with its godly mysteries, spiritual world, depicted in symbols. Besides, the Holy Scripture has been considered to be the key which helps a man to reveal the meaning of his personal life, the Ariadne's thread which leads the seeker to the mystery of the world. Why could it be possible? And what is the connection between the Bible and the universe? The thing is that the Bible and the universe, according to the Scripture, have one and the same author – God. The first three verses of Genesis go like this:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. (Genesis 1, 1-3)

The Word of God, the Spirit of God, the power of crea-

tion, which came from the Creator's bosom, "mouth", formed the universe. And with the same word יהי <yehi>, "Let there be", was the Bible created. The Bible says about a prediction to this or that prophet: ויהי <va-yehi> or והיה <ve-haya> – "and there was" a word of the Lord to the prophet. In cases like this we can see the same word used for the creation of the world. And when we read the following words of the Psalm about the formation of the universe:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of His mouth...

<...>

...For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded,
and it stood firm. (Psalm 33, 6–9)

we can attribute them to the creation of the Bible: "For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded," and the Holy Scripture "stood firm".

The Bible was written down throughout almost 1500 years by dozens of people, and the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, spoke through each of them. When exegetes describe how the Spirit of God interacts with the spirit of a prophet, they compare the Lord with a musician

and the prophet with a musical instrument. Evidently, the condition of the instrument, its tuning and order mean quite a lot for the music, but of course, the main work is done by the musician. Thus, prophets were God's instruments, though not blind or passive, but alive and acting sensibly. And in the Gospel, in Peter's message, there is proof to the fact that all the books of the Bible were written down under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, which is called here "the Spirit of Christ", or the Spirit that anoints prophets to serve (as we know, the Greek for "Christ" is "the Anointed").

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry,

inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when It testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. (1 Peter 1, 10–11)

It is interesting that this extract points out the "search and inquiry" that prophets made, while the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, spoke within them. Here we can see a wonderful combination, a striking consonance

and harmony of the divine force, the Holy Spirit, and the spirit of the prophet himself, who is fully and creatively engaged in God's revelation. The Bible contains the following words concerning the question:

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place... (II Peter 1, 19)

Our world has, indeed, sunk in the darkness, and so, one does not often know their way, nor the way for the human kind, but the word of God shines in this darkness and gives us the opportunity to see.

...Until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. (II Peter 1, 19-20)

No one can "interpret" any prophecy on their own, or by means of their own mind and beforehand, but when this or that prediction comes true, people see

evidently what God has foretold.

because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (II Peter 1, 21)

The most ancient part of the Bible is the Pentateuch, in Hebrew תורה <Torah>, "the Teaching", which was written down in the 14th century BCE and since then has been rewritten very accurately, up to every sign, on the skin of "clean" animals – calves and lambs, etc. Produced for ritual, liturgic reading, the Torah is made as a leather scroll on wooden roll-handles. During the liturgic reading it is unrolled on a special desk and moved from one handle to the other in order to find the needed verse.

The Torah, as well as the whole Bible, is inherently unified. It touches upon numerous events, tells about various people, but a single Spirit breathes in each word, manifesting Itself in particularities and on the grand whole. Its entire text testifies about the single Creator of the universe, the harmony of creation, the mission of man; its exposed and mysterious aim is to confirm God's singleness, tawhid, which is manifested in versatile phenomena of the world.

When we take a narrow look at the universe, which is ruled by the same laws at all points, we start to realize that, like the Bible, it is the unity of variety. There is a reason why ancient commentators of the Bible compared the Torah scroll with the universe. Unrolling the scroll is like the expansion of the universe, whereas rolling up is its contraction. Only in the 20th century did physicists conclude that the universe expands and shrinks, whereas biblical exegetes had known it thousands of years before. One of the commentaries to the biblical text explains that the name of God יהוה <Shadday>, “the Almighty”, could be explained as follows: “the One Who said “Enough” (the Hebrew word ש <she> means “the one who”, דא <daj> – “enough”). This explanation is followed by a tale that claims that the created universe started expanding with great speed and then God said to it: דא <daj>, or “enough”.

The universe could be compared to a book, and all of us, living within it, are like characters of the greatest work of art. Just like a literary work is produced by the word, the world was created by the word as well: “And God said, ‘Let there be...’ And it was so”. Our fates, every single life, unravel the greatest plot in their own way and are woven into the most complicated compo-

sition of the world that we live in. This particular Book is referred to by the Psalmist King David, who addresses God and remembers his having been created:

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In Your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are Your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them! (Psalm 139, 16–17)

David is aware of himself being written into the Book. This Godly Book is at the same time the Bible, the universe and personal life of each of us. In order to conceive this interrelation, we need to leave “the point of view” and pass on to a “space of view”, to perceiving the world as a whole, but not as a number of “squares”. The Book is whole and single. The Bible teaches us how to comprehend this wholeness.

How did the books of the Bible reach our days? At present humanity has at its disposal quite a large number of lists of Biblical books. Thus, there are Torah papyrus fragments that date from the 5th century BCE.

They were found in Egypt, on Elephantine Island, where there was a Judaic colony at that time, and in other places. Some time ago Israeli archeologists uncovered silver plate talismans with Pentateuch texts on them produced from the 9th to the 8th centuries BCE. Stone and clay records of the Bible excerpts, which are 2500 years old, have been found in the Palestine and Mesopotamia. Papyrus fragments of the Book of Jeremiah, 1 and 2 Kings date from the 3rd century BCE. As to the whole corpus of the Old Testament in Hebrew, the oldest lists by 1947 bore the date of the 8th–10th centuries CE. There had been no knowledge of any earlier manuscripts.

In 1947 in Qumran region in the near of the Dead Sea in the Holy Land, an Arab goatherd boy discovered precious leather scrolls in pottery jars left by the ancient Essene community. They lived there about 2000 years ago, had common property, worked together and studied holy books. Further archeological investigation led to striking results. Several hundred scrolls and numerous fragments formed remnants of the library amounting to more than 600 books. The Dead Sea scrolls contain all biblical books, except the Book of Esther, a number of apocryphal books (i.e. literature in the scriptural

style, books which belong to the range of the Biblical literature), as well as works of the teachers and poets of the community, which include prophecy, predictions, psalms and a detailed code of Essenes who called themselves “sons of the light”. Thus, we have at our disposal almost all biblical books in Hebrew in the lists that date back to the period from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE (the Essene settlement was destroyed by Roman troops during the Jewish War in 66-77 CE).

Besides, we possess very ancient translations of the Bible. In the 3rd century BCE, when King Ptolemy II Philadelphus started gathering his famous library in Alexandria, he wished to have Greek translations of all Jewish sacred books, so he summoned 70 scholars from Jerusalem in order to translate the Pentateuch of Moses and other prophecy books as soon as possible. This text is called “The Septuagint”, or “Translation of the seventy”. Consequently, besides the traditional Jewish Masoretic text, we have at our disposal the Greek text dating back to the 3rd century BCE. Very early translations into Syrian (Aramaic) language have also been preserved: Peshitta, or “simple”, “folk” text, datable to the 1st–2nd centuries CE; and Targums – Jewish transla-

tions of the first centuries CE, translations into Coptic – the 3rd century, Old Armenian – 4th–5th centuries, Old Ephiopian language (Ge'ez) – 4th–5th centuries, etc.

The conclusion can be drawn that the text of the Bible, according to all historical, archeological, linguistic and literary data, has maintained its integrity.

It should also be mentioned that throughout the centuries the strict Talmud rules for “sofrim” (scribes and scholars who, creating new scrolls of the Torah and other books of the Bible, rewrote it accurately up to each symbol) have been obeyed. The warning that teachers have passed to their learners remained from the ancient times: “My son, be very careful when you rewrite the Word of God, because, if you miss or add one sign, you may destroy the whole universe!” The perception of the Bible scroll as the universe can be traced throughout thousands of years and contributes to the exact reproduction of the holy text. Indeed, the Hebrew language is such that if you change one single letter in a word, you may get an absolutely different meaning. It is evident that in this case it could be fatal.

So, we have a canon of the Old Testament books. The

Greek word κανων <ka'non> is derived from the Hebrew-Phoenician word קנה <ka'ne> – “measuring stick”, “straight pole”, “rule”, something used for measurement, for reference. The canon, the list of books accepted as holy, was formed throughout many centuries, and was finally approved in the 1st century CE. After the times of Moses, when a prophet stood the test described in the Torah and was acknowledged as God’s true messenger, his speech accepted the right to be put down in a special book bearing the name of the prophet; it started being rewritten and passed on from one generation to another as heritage. The canon of the Old Testament books had been created by the time when Jesus Christ lived. The Gospel quotes his words, pronounced after the resurrection:

...‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ (Luke 24, 44)

The Bible has maintained its three-part form of the Old Testament till now: the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Bible) – תורה <To'rah>, the books of the

Prophets – נביאים <Nevi'im>, and Writings – כתובים <Ketu'vim>. All these three parts are shortly called תנ"ך <Ta'nakh>.

Such three-part division was mentioned earlier than the New Testament: in the Book of ben Sirach (who lived in the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE):

The Law, the Prophets, and the later writers have left us a wealth of valuable teachings... (The foreword to the Book of ben Sirach)

The third part of the Scripture is called the Psalms in Luke 24, 44 after the main book that it contains, whereas Jesus ben Sirach relates it to “the later writers”. The traditional Jewish title for this very part of the canon is כתובים <Ketu'vim> – “written [expressions, creations]”.

The word “Bible” itself is derived from the Hebrew – Phoenician name of the city of Gebal (on the territory of modern Lebanon), which in Greek was named Βύβλος <'Byblos>. Due to the fact that this city used to serve as a mediator in the Egyptian papyrus trade with Greece, its name passed on to papyrus, then – to books on the whole, and finally – to the unique collection of

books, the greatest “sacred library”, gathered in one volume, which to this day is called “the Bible” (from the Ancient Greek word βιβλία <'biblia> – “books”).

Let us now particularize the names of all Biblical books separately. The Pentateuch, or the Torah, includes: the opening Book of Genesis; its Hebrew name, בראשית <Bere'shith>, which means “In the beginning”, is derived from the first words of the text: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth”. Its Russian title traces back to the Greek language, but not to Hebrew: Γενεσις <'Genesis> means “origin”, “birth”, “source”, “beginning”. This book narrates the birth of the universe, the origin of man and a true faith. The second book of Moses is the Book of Exodus, and it narrates the exodus of the sons of Israel from the Egyptian slavery and how the people of Israel received on Mount Sinai the Law of God, which later became the foundation of universal morality. In Hebrew the book has the name of שמות <She'mot>, which means “Names”, for it starts with the enumeration of the names of Israel's forefathers, God's people forefathers. In Greek it has the name of Ἔξοδος <E'xodos>, which means “exodus”. The title of the third book, Leviticus, is in Hebrew ויקרא <Va-yi'kra>, which is translated as “And He called”,

according to the opening words of the book: “And the Lord called unto Moses...” It focuses on the laws of ritual cleanness and the cleanness of the heart, on regulations concerning sacrifice and priests, who were called Levites, for they belonged to the tribe of Levi. The Greek version of the book’s name is Λευιτικόν <Leviti'kon>. The fourth book, Numbers, in Hebrew is named במדבר <Ba-mid'bar>, which means: “In the desert”; the God’s people is numbered during their journey in the desert. Therefore, the Greek name of the book is Αριθμοί <Arit'moi> (this word has the same root as “arithmetics”), or “numbering”. The last book, Deuteronomy, which repeats and generalises the commandments of God given through Moses, is called in Hebrew דברים <Deva'rim>, or “[spoken] words”, according to its opening words: “These are the words...”, and in Greek – Δευτερονόμιον <Deutero'nomion> – “Second Law”, or “Repetition of the Law”.

The Torah is followed by the books of the first Prophets. They are the Book of Joshua, Judges, two Books of Samuel (in the Christian tradition – the First and the Second Books of Kings), two Books of Kings (in the Christian tradition – the Third and the Fourth Books of Kings). In other way they are called Former Prophets

– in Hebrew נביאים ראשונים <Nevi'im Risho'nim>. These books describe the events of the 8th-9th centuries BCE. They are followed by Latter Prophets, נביאים אחרונים <Nevi'im Akharo'nim> in Hebrew. Their authors lived in the period from the 8th to the 5th centuries BCE. Apart from the large books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, they include 12 more books of Minor Prophets. And finally, Writings, כתובים <Ketu'vim>, contain: Psalms, the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Job, the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and two books of Chronicles. These books were written throughout the period from the 9th to the 6th centuries BCE.

All in all the number of books amounts to 22, 24 or 27. The thing is that the First and the Second Books of Samuel are sometimes considered as one book, the same thing is with the First and the Second Books of Kings, etc. And still, the most common view is that there are 27 books, which meets the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet that bear some mystical meaning (22 of them are main and five more are so-called final forms). Hebrew-Phoenician alphabet is the first one in the history of the human kind, the first letter writing, the origin of all alphabets in the world. It gave

rise to the Greek writing, which in its turn – to Latin and Old Slavic alphabet writing, from which the Russian alphabet was derived. The same number of books, 27, was later included into the canon of the New Testament for the same reason.

As we mentioned before, the canon of the Old Testament had been practically formed by the time of Jesus Christ, and even earlier, however, 20 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Roman troops, in 90 CE, the Sanhedrin (the supreme council of the most prominent sages, scribes and scholars of the Law) summoned in Jamnia, a Galilee town, for the study of controversial issues of the Scripture. It was the time when the books were finally chosen and put in the order that remained in the Scripture until the present days. However, many other books of high spiritual and poetic value were not chosen to be in the canon due to various reasons. The Orthodox and Catholic Bibles include these so-called deuterocanonical (belonging to the second canon), or hagiographical (from Greek *ἅγιος* <'agios> – “saint” and *γραφῶ* <'grapho> – “write”), “describing saints”, books as addition to fully canonical ones. These are the Second and the Third Books of Ezra, the Books of Tobit, Judith, Wis-

dom of Solomon, Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, Letter of Jeremiah, Baruch, three Books of Maccabees. There are non-canonical fragments in the books of canon. The books of the Jewish and Protestant canons do not contain those fragments. It is interesting that Hebrew originals of some of these books and fragments that had been considered lost were found in Qumran. The fact that in Hebrew literature they were widely spread has been confirmed.

Lastly, there are apocrypha, or “hidden”, “secret” – from Greek *ἀπόκρυφος* <a'pokruphos> – “mysterious”, “hidden”; that is the name for the books that belong to the broader range of Biblical literature and that for some reason were denied as unreliable or not meant for common reading. The Biblical apocrypha such as the Book of Enoch, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Sons of Jacob, Ascension of Isaiah, the Book of Jubilees, Apocalypse of Isaiah, Apocalypse of Baruch and some others remained in the Ethiopian translation of the Bible (in the Ge'ez language). The fragments of some of them have been found in Qumran. Part of them has reached our times in Old Church Slavonic, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic and other languages. These books are outstandingly interesting, and many of them

reach us with the pure, untainted God's teaching. One day they were withdrawn and discarded because they did not meet some dogmatic statements, though they had been widely spread beforehand.

Now let us say a few words about the means of recording and reading of the biblical original Hebrew text. The thing is that the Hebrew language belongs to the Northwest Semitic family and is kindred with such ancient tongues as Amorite, Ugaritic, Phoenician-Canaanite, Old Aramaic, etc., and only has written characters for consonants. Thus, the written form of the word "human" in this system would be "hmn". In fact, Old Church Slavonic has the same writing version with tittles. The school of Masoretes, which existed between the 7th and the 10th centuries CE in the Palestine, introduced special diacritical signs in order to represent vowels in texts: vowels, intonation and other peculiarities of speech were indicated by points, dashes and other marks under, above or near letters. These marks served to create the Tiberian vowel notation system (after Tiberia town in the Holy Land). "Masora" in Hebrew means "tradition", "tale". Masoretes intended to preserve the Biblical text from any corruption, not only

its written form, but also oral, for by that time, by the 7th century, the number of people who knew the Scripture by heart and who could recite the text the way it had been recited by their forefathers had significantly diminished. The Tiberian Masoretic school systematized all rules of fixation and pronunciation for the Biblical text thus bringing to the conclusion the centuries-long work that had been carried out by their predecessors. The calculation of all letters in every book, all the words, all the signs, as well as of the common number of letters in the Scripture was conducted. Even now sofrim – the scribes who rewrite scrolls – meticulously verify the same parameters while writing a new scroll, so that any mistakes have become close to impossible.

After the Qumran manuscripts were discovered, it became obvious that the Biblical text had been carefully preserved before Masoretes as well. Apparently, there was no need of diacritical marks because ancient Israelites lived in their land for centuries, and there were many among them who knew the Scripture by heart and passed on the knowledge to their disciples by word of mouth. After such favourable circumstances disappeared, when only few scholars remained, the neces-

sity occurred to set down in writing all the rules for the preservation and fixation of both the text and special intoning used for reciting the Bible. Special signs – “teamim” – which go along with the Hebrew text are used for such intoning.

Let us briefly touch upon the traditional approach to the comprehension of the Scripture. As the ancient saying goes, “The Torah has seventy faces”. It means that each Biblical verse has 70 (!) levels of interpretation. The most classical of them are four, which are denoted by four Hebrew words: “Peshat” – “simple meaning”, direct interpretation (historical context); “Remez” – “hidden hint”, allegoric explanation; “Derash” – “inquiry”, the interpretation of symbols, concealed under the veil of direct narration; and lastly, “Sod” – “mystery”: it stands for the mystery of Godly, spiritual life, “showing through” the verse, which can be perceived only by spiritually endowed people. These four words form the abbreviation of “Pardes”, which means “paradise” of wisdom (the word is derived from the Old Persian language, Avestan: e.g. paradise in English, Paradies in German, etc.)

... The meaning of the Bible is inexhaustible. There is a wonderful legend about St. Augustine. Once he

walked along the seaside thinking about God’s majesty, when he saw a little boy, who scooped seawater with a spoon pouring it into a hole. “What are you doing?” asked St. Augustine. The boy replied: “I have dug a hole and I want to pour the sea in it”. Then St. Augustine explained to the boy that it was impossible, but the boy looked at him intently and said: “And how do you attempt to receive in your mind the fullness of God’s wisdom?” And he disappeared. And still, even a slight touch on God’s wisdom, expressed in the Holy Scripture, fills us with happiness, love and the breathing of endless life.