CHAPTER ELEVEN
THE GEORGIAN VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Georgian version of the New Testament remains one of the least well-studied versions. This is partly due to its commonly accepted status as a secondary or even tertiary version—but also to the obscurity of the language itself, the relative scarcity of key tools and editions, and even the continuing political instability and isolation of Georgia and Georgian scholarship since the demise of the Soviet Union. Yet the results of twentieth-century research commend the Georgian not only as a rewarding field of study in its own right, but also as a valuable resource for the twenty-first-century task of writing the history of the New Testament text.

The translation of the New Testament into the Georgian language (k'art'uli) is bound up with the coming of Christianity to eastern Georgia (k'art'li; Greek “Iberia”). Apart from late legends celebrating apostolic missions to the Caucasus, archaeological evidence from burials in Urbnisi and the ancient capital of Mc'xet'a indicates that Christianity had a presence there by

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2 The recent publication of digital tools and resources on the internet greatly improves accessibility. See the discussion of the Armazi Project and TITUS Index below.

3 See Elguja Khintibidze, Georgian Literature in European Scholarship (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 2001).

4 The system of transliteration used is that of the Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/roman.html). Romanized forms of names occurring in print are retained.
the third century, perhaps brought by Jewish immigrants. The traditional national tale points to the fourth century as the period in which the Georgian royal family adopted Christianity, crediting the influence of a foreign slave woman named Nino. Although the historicity of the Nino tale is much disputed, Christianity did in fact make major inroads into Georgia in the fourth century. By the fifth century, Christianity was the dominant faith in Georgia.

Native traditions ascribe the invention of the Georgian alphabet to P’arnavaz, a third-century BCE king of Georgia. The more widely accepted account follows the Armenian tradition that the missionary Mesrob Mashtoc’ (d. ca. 440) devised the Georgian alphabet after having done so for Armenian. Although a Georgian inscription unearthed at Nekresi has been dated to the first or second century, the dating is highly questionable. Indisputably pre-fourth-century inscriptions from Georgia are in Greek or Aramaic, not Georgian. Hence, no clear evidence exists for a pre-Christian Georgian alphabet, and it appears likely that the alphabet was devised as part of a Christian initiative during the late fourth or early fifth century, though the legends associating it with Mesrob/Mashtoc’ are tendentious.

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11 Rapp, “Georgian Christianity,” 139.