The Church Slavonic tradition of Biblical translation is based on a principle of scrupulous faithfulness: the earliest translations, in the ninth century, appear to have aimed at one-to-one correspondence at least between phrases, usually between words; later versions, especially from the fourteenth century onwards, established regular equivalences not only between Greek and Church Slavonic lexical items, but even between word-formational elements and syntactic constructions (Mathauserová). Such a maximally faithful approach was bound to encounter certain difficulties. The translator faced with terms for concepts or objects unfamiliar to the Slavs had to make a hard choice: either to retain an unintelligible Hebrew or Greek word, or to substitute an approximate Slavonic equivalent, whose native connotations might be inappropriate to the translated text. Where a word in Greek had a range of possible meanings, the translator had to exercise some degree of judgement in choosing among them, with the help of context or exegetical tradition. Metaphors, which are often problematic in translation, were also liable to obscure the sense of the text. All these types of difficulty were particularly likely to confront those who translated poetic compositions, such as the Book of Psalms, into Church Slavonic (MacRobert, 1991; Thomson, pp. 797–825). This paper examines a range of examples from the Psalms and analyses the ways in which they were resolved, drawing on a number of East and South Slavonic psalter manuscripts, both commentated and plain; among the latter the East Slavonic manuscripts FпI2 T28 Amf Luc 8662 Sf64 FпI4 J B Vat and the South Slavonic manuscripts Ox Hval Nor provide the main focus of interest. The manuscripts are listed by century, provenance and text type in the appendix, where their present location or edition is supplied. In text they are indicated by short sigla: first those of any relevant commentated psalters, then those of the focus group, then other plain psalters in approximate chronological order. Where more than one manuscript is cited, normalized orthography is applied.
A question mark after a siglum means that the reading of the manuscript in question is unclear and to some extent conjectural.

Several aids to interpretation were in principle available to the translators and to their readers. In the first place we may assume the philological and theological grounding which the first translators, SS. Cyril and Methodius, undoubtedly possessed – S. Cyril probably knew Hebrew as well as being learned in Greek – and which some of their successors would also have had. Secondly the interpretative tradition which resulted from the use of the psalms in Christian liturgy was available to all. Thirdly the medieval Orthodox Slavs had at their immediate disposal some of the commentaries written to explicate the meaning of the Psalter. Two of these were translated into Old Church Slavonic at an early date. The catena traditionally associated with Athanasius of Alexandria, but latterly attributed to Hesychius of Jerusalem (Jagić, 1906), was probably translated by some time in the tenth century. It is found in association with the earliest Church Slavonic version of the Psalter and exhibits a number of ancient linguistic features (Jagić, 1907 and 1917). It is attested in manuscripts from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries and circulated widely among the East and South Slavs, even reaching the Catholics of the Slavonic rite in Croatia. It was excerpted for biblical glossaries in medieval Russia from the thirteenth century onwards (Kovtun, especially pp. 17–34, 398–420). The popularity of this catena is hardly surprising: it encompasses the whole text, including the Biblical Canticles, which constituted the Psalter as the Orthodox Slavs knew it, and its laconic allegorical glosses and comments on each versicle could readily be organized in formats (alternating verse and comment or parallel columns) which facilitated use of the resulting manuscript either for study or for devotional purposes. Evidence of such multiple function can be indirectly seen in the plain psalter manuscripts, without commentary, which however retain traces of copying from commentated exemplars: five instances are known to me, mostly East Slavonic: Sluc and T34 (MacRobert, 1993), Amf (Stichel, pp. 160–3), Sf64 (MacRobert, 1996, pp. 160, 165), but also Serbian, Xlud, ps. 74:9, where scribes have reproduced passages of commentary in otherwise plain psalter manuscripts, presumably through inadvertence.

The other commentary on the psalms which was translated for the benefit of the newly converted Slavs, that by Theodoret of Cyrrhus (Patrologia Graeca 80), circulated less widely. Although it is thought to have been translated in tenth-century Bulgaria, it is extant only in