

## **A Church Slavonic Primer** **by Aleksander Brooks**

### **Preface**

The purpose of this primer is to explain Church Slavonic with practical examples in order to follow and understand the services of the Church better. The alphabet will not be taught as such, as you will learn letters through learning words, but there are links to alphabet charts on the main resources webpage. Grammar will be explained in a simple manner as it is met in texts.

### **Introduction**

In these lessons, I will begin with using phrases and words from the Divine Liturgy and examine some of the common hymns, then additional frequently sung hymns from other services, and next the Gospel and Epistle readings.

What may be the most important point to make is to *pay attention to the accent mark and be sure to stress that vowel*. If a wrong vowel is stressed, words are often incomprehensible and grate the ears. A helpful aspect of Church Slavonic is that accent marks are always present (unless if you have a text transliterated into modern Russian characters, which I don't recommend).

There are several marks written above words to which you need to pay attention. *There are three different types of accent marks, but they all indicate the same stress*. (They are acute, written at the beginning and middle of words, grave, written at the end of words, and circumflex, written in certain plural words.) I will identify these accents as well as other punctuation marks and signs as they are met.

There is also a breathing mark (a carryover from Greek) that has no effect on pronunciation.

I will use a transliteration system that will be explained as needed. For pronunciation, I will put a transliteration inside slash (/word/) marks.

### **Lesson 1 - Lord, Have Mercy**

The most common phrase one meets in Church Slavonic is, most likely, "Lord, Have Mercy." So we will begin here. However, we will begin in a roundabout way.

Have you ever noticed how some translations of "O Heavenly King" have that "O" in the front and some of them don't? Besides translator and/or editor preference, there is a further explanation for this. In Church Slavonic, there is a special form (that is, **case** or **inflection**) of words for this way of addressing someone, which is referred to as the **vocative case** (think of vocal; calling out to someone). Use of the vocative case is pretty widespread in Church Slavonic, and our above phrase will be a good example.

Though I have never seen it translated this way, you could translate the Church Slavonic phrase as “O Lord, Have Mercy,” because “Lord” in this phrase is in the vocative case (notice the comma, which, besides “O” (and an exclamation mark in certain situations), is all we have in English in order to set apart a word in the vocative).

Thus, “O Lord” is **ГѠсподѡ** /gospod'i/ (господи) in Church Slavonic (the accent in this word is the **acute**; the ' in the transcription indicates that the previous letter, "d" in this word, is soft because it is followed by a soft-indication vowel (this will be explained in more detail later). The indication that **ГѠсподѡ** is in the vocative case is in the final letter of the word. This is a very important concept in Church Slavonic (as well as many other languages for that matter) that is called **inflection**: *a word's meaning or function changes according to the case ending.*

(Note: As a major concession, I will also print Church Slavonic words in modern Russian font (a transliteration, not a translation), not because I in any way support use of such a font but because it is an unfortunate fact that many service books and liturgical music texts insist on using a modern Russian font, and, therefore, you will also need to be able to read in this font. As an aside, this does have one benefit, and that is that it will also make it easier for you when you study modern Russian or other modern Slavic languages.)

The second half of our phrase is also a good example of another difference between Church Slavonic grammar and English grammar. In our phrase in English, we understand by context and syntax that we are requesting or urging (or possibly demanding) the Lord to have mercy. In Church Slavonic, verbs in and of themselves can contain much more information and can show this request, which is called the **imperative mood**. Verbs also change endings (as well as beginnings, that is, they take prefixes) and usually change more drastically than nouns. This change of a verb indicates its category or what type of action it is performing (and who is performing that action).

Thus, **помѡлѡи** /pom'ilui/ (помилуй) is "have mercy." Now, I know your first reaction may be, "Hey, it's written /pomiloi/!" I will answer, "First of all, don't depend on transliteration for your pronunciation. Listen to how it's pronounced and imitate and learn how to pronounce new words without depending on a transliteration." We, however, do need to have some system at the beginning to get an idea.

This may be a good place to explain a few points about Church Slavonic pronunciation. There is slight variation (nothing close to what takes place in English), but, *basically, each letter of the alphabet has one sound and it is always pronounced that way.* Therefore, the above transliteration /pomilui/ (stressed “i”

pronounced like "ee" in feet) conveys each letter with its one sound value. What is in the place of "u" in the original Church Slavonic word (the squiggly, 8 like letter) is pronounced "oo" (as in boot) by itself. The following letter is called "short i" ("i" again pronounced like "ee" as in feet). As far as pronunciation, this letter adds a "y" type sound. Think of "yes" and isolate the "y" from the word, making it short in length. Now pronounce "oo" and slide into your "y." If you start saying this faster and add "pomil" at the beginning, you will have said, "have mercy (...I'm tired of learning this word!)." It needs to be emphasized that the resulting ending of the word, the "ui," should not end up sound like "oy" in toy (which is why I'm using such a transliteration).

To untrained ears, it may sound like the same thing, but it really does have a different sound, which possibly could be compared to singing a b sharp instead of just a b. The more and more you listen to Church Slavonic, you will get more accustomed to hearing slight differences in sounds. (Above I said, for instance, that there is one sound value for each letter, but there are really two for each consonant, and at some point you should start hearing the difference.)

Now that we have come this far, you may protest that the word where **рѣчѣ** should be in the phrase in your liturgy book doesn't look the same. It's probably the following: **Рѣчѣ**. This is because certain words in Church Slavonic are abbreviated. Don't worry, however, the words that are abbreviated in this way are sacred words and those that are met very often (so hopefully you should learn them more easily). As you can see, letters are taken out of the word and replaced by a sign. This sign above the word is called a **titlo**. There are **titla** (plural) that contain letters, as above, and a titlo by itself that we will see in the future.