

The History of Biblija365

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The interactive mobile application Biblija365, developed and launched in Croatia on March 1, 2017, has been operational for six years. Behind this title, we find the first Croatian interactive mobile application intended for Bible reading, but also for different other social activities that the Biblija365 organization team organized or supported, and which were organized under the title B365+. Today, the B365 team's activity can be seen through the presence of the now widely known and used application for Bible reading, through the social engagement in promoting Bible reading together with the annual "Public Reading of the Bible," and through organization or support of numerous conferences that place the most important book in the world at their center.

Having interviewed the person who came up with the idea and who has been the coordinator of the whole project, pastor Ratko Medan; having researched the documented materials through the archive of posts made by the organization team; and also based on my personal experience working on the application content, in this work I would like to present how this project originated and developed while remaining faithful to its original goal – namely, to popularize the reading of the most important Book in the world: the written Word of God.

1. Motivation and Beginning

In the spring of 2016, pastor Ratko Medan was thinking about his relationship with God, as well as the relationship of his congregation with God. He was also thinking about their common basis in his Word, trying to come up with a practical way to further unify the Evangelical Pentecostal Church "Stijena spasenja" in their everyday walk through the Bible, and had an idea to start Biblija365. Of course, the idea immediately grew in scope. Understanding that our modern age allows an individual to use different social media to reach the wider society with the Bible, the pastor of the Zagreb-based church "Stijena spasenja" decided to use smartphones to accomplish that.

Pastor Medan's striving to find confirmation that daily Bible reading was the recipe for success in a godly and God-fearing life in examples of God's people

throughout history; his reflection about possible ways that one community can go through Bible readings together to persevere on that godly and God-fearing way; his understanding of the advantages of technology in the modern world; and also the encouragement in these considerations given to him by the married couple, Hrvoje and Petra Novačić, resulted in a simple answer – a Bible application. After the IT expert Samuel Koprivnjak decided to join the project of creating the application, pastor Medan says that he just knew that the whole thing would come to pass. This was also the turning point at which the idea for daily Bible reading expanded from the local into the global sphere. In September 2016, a project team of volunteers got together, and it included the following people: Samuel Koprivnjak, Hrvoje Novačić, Petra Novačić, Jeremy Bohall, Petra Bohall, Marko Romanjik, Ivona Čuturić, Danijel Benko, David Fartek, Tomislav Krpan, Matija Bogdanović, Željka Kiš, and Ratko Medan. Together they defined the purpose of setting up the Bible application, their target audience, and the reason for the start of the project and set the goal of launching the application on March 1, 2017.

From a local desire for the church community to communally and daily follow Bible readings and read the Bible once a year, this project team started to consider things globally, wishing to make this reading available to everyone, especially those who never had a Bible in their hands. What later became the motto and the definition of the application was this – popularization of Bible reading. This phrase was repeated many times by many coworkers and written down on all platforms of the Biblija365 application, as it came to be known, and it developed from two truths. First, we live in a nonreading culture, and, second, we live in a Bible-nonreading culture. In this nonreading culture, the team wanted to make the Bible closer and readily available to read through a new medium, namely, an application that the modern man can find on any portable device and which can help the reader, through different existing plans, to read the whole Bible in one year, in 15-minute daily intervals. In this way, the popularization of the Bible became the common title both for those who were willing to grow in their faith and godliness, and those for whom this was the first time they have encountered God's Word. So, Evangelical Pentecostal Church "Stijena spasenja" from Zagreb, following one of the tenets of the Reformation – *Sola scriptura*, which points to the authority and the importance of Holy Scriptures, through Biblija365 became the bearer of the same vision in the Croatian society through "translating" the Bible into a language that is "newer" than the national one – the language of technology. And all this took place in the year when we celebrated 500 years of the Reformation.

By the time the application was launched on March 1, 2017, many volunteers and partnering associations of different Christian denominations, from different areas of expertise, had worked on translating and transferring the Bible into a technological language that is available to all. Interestingly, it was an anonymous

donation, while the project was still in its initial stages and unknown to the public, that encouraged and motivated the first steps in the organization. Many volunteers and associations will remain unnamed because listing them all would be too long for this article, but some of the more important institutions and associations that Biblija365 has continuously worked with to this day can be mentioned: EPC “Stijena spasenja,” NGO Fokus, The Biblical Institute Zagreb – Center for Biblical Research, The Croatian Bible Society, The Protestant Evangelical Council, The Gideons International, The Bible Project, the Partner association, Evangelical Theological Seminary, and others. The designer, David Fartek, gave the project and the application its visual identity, while Damir Bralić, an architect and designer, made the logo B365. When the application was about to be launched, this logo could be seen on many posters and adverts all over Croatia which promoted the B365 application, and, through other media content (HKR, 24sata, Index.hr, Vijesti iz kulture...), in effect promoted the Bible in Croatia.

2. B365 and B365+

The activities of the Biblija365 volunteers can be viewed through two titles which cover two wider areas of activity. B365 refers to reading the Bible through the application, while B365+ refers to the social engagement that practices or encourages projects promoting biblical values.

2.1. B365 Application

Biblija365 (B365) began its work as the first Croatian interactive application, unique in the world, offering continuous and specialized Bible reading plans. Bible League International gave the Biblija365 rights to use the *Contemporary Croatian Translation*, an online Bible version that was still being made at the time. From October 2017, the translation could not be used anymore, because it was not completed yet. Hence, the Croatian Bible Society gave B365 rights to use the Bible in Šarić translation so that Bible readings could continue as planned. In the first year since its launch, two Bible reading plans were offered: a Bible reading plan for six days a week, with the seventh day left for reflection and potential catching up with reading, and a beginner plan to read the New Testament for children and young people (B365lite). This plan included five days of five-minute readings in a week, which would make it possible to read the whole New Testament in a calendar year. With time, topical reading plans were added for certain occasions: readings for Marriage Week, readings for Lent called “Challenge 40,” “Advent-Christmas” for the advent period, and “30 days with Jesus.” While in the first two years of the application the reading plan followed first the Old and then the New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs, later this plan changed and since

2020, the calendar Bible reading has been starting with the first day of the new year (January 1, 2020). The plan which B365 still offers contains a five-day Bible reading plan with the chronological sequence of Old Testament texts, which are read parallel to the New Testament texts.

However, besides the aspiration to read the biblical text in a year by taking 15 minutes each day, the interactive application offered different content as well. In partnership with The Bible Project, since the EPC “Stijena spasenja” is the owner of the rights for the translation of the materials into Croatian language, the B365 has been offering translated and synchronized video materials in the Croatian language from the start. These video materials give short overviews of biblical books and topics in a theological and modern way. As new material was coming out of the amazing factory of The Bible Project, a team of translators and synchronizers, and theological and literary editors, redacted and adapted that material to be used in new versions of the application. Together with the everyday Bible text, from the very beginning, the application offered short reflections by the English preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, who became so beloved in the reading community that, after one year of W. Busch’s reflections from the book *365 times Him*, made possible by the Split publisher Euroliber, the readers asked for Spurgeon to return, and his reflections can be found among the daily devotionals on B365 in 2022.

Together with the possibility to write personal notes and the encouragement of literary spiritual creativity through means of a contest which prompted a formation of a three-member expert committee in the year when we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, an invisible team of supporters behind the application in that first year followed its readers through motivating posts on their website or Facebook, rejoicing when they had read 25 % of the Bible or when they were halfway there, thus encouraging them not only in their reading, but in their reflection and asking of questions, and also testing their understanding through different challenges. Readers had many questions and some of them were answered by biblical theologians Dr. Gregory Thellman, Dr. Ervin Budiselić, and Dr. Danijel Berković, and after reading almost every book, the readers could participate in carefully designed quizzes with clearly defined rules and win many awards (Cinestar tickets, chocolate rewards, books, HM gift cards, Starbucks coffee, board games, summer selection, B365 T-shirts, cooking set, coffee cups, stationery, three-day trip, etc.). All this was tirelessly reported in the application itself, on Facebook, and the website. Victories of individual participants were equivalent to victories of the organization team, who went through this first phase of the “race” together with the readers, acting as coaches and supporters. After the first year of readings, many people reflected on the significance of the most important Book in their life through posts and reflections. Such an ending underscored the leitmotif of the whole project, which was to introduce a wide audience to the timeless content of the most widespread, translated, and influential book

of all times – the Bible, a book that to some already is and to some might become the living God’s Word.

Besides the mentioned moderation of reading plans, the addition of some thematic plans, and the change of devotional authors, in 2021 the application introduced 52 cards for weekly memorization of key Scripture texts that could be used in digital or paper form. Following new projects of The Bible Project, the same year saw the announcement of a new video series “How to Read the Bible.” At the beginning of 2022, the application became even more unique and interactive by allowing access to exclusive materials in form of photographs, maps, and models of different biblical locations inside the biblical text. This happened in cooperation with Bibleplaces.com and included accompanying historical-biblical explanatory comments with every photograph. It was here that Dr. Dalibor Kraljik and I joined many other devoted members of the B365 team, and after five years of loud verbal and prayer support for this project, gained a chance to join in ourselves and use our work and talents to contribute to the application development through the choice of photographs and accompanying biblical, historical and theological comments that bring new life to biblical texts for the modern reader.

2.2. B365+ and the Social Engagement

The abbreviation B365+ refers to the social engagement that implements or encourages Biblija365 projects or projects of their partners and associates who promote biblical values and principles. Since Biblija365’s primary activity takes place in the virtual world, this is how the announcement of Biblija365 work was described on their official website: “So that our interaction would not only remain in the ‘cloud,’ this year we will organize different humanitarian and socially useful activities.” Parallel to the development of the reading application, in the fall of 2016, the organization team started considering and setting in motion different social activities. The first year of the launch was extremely eventful and filled with social work because that was the year when we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, so that part of the work was trying to raise awareness in Croatian society about the spiritual significance of that historical event. One part of this engagement took place through humanitarian activities in 2017, helping associations in Zagreb, Osijek, Karlovac, Pula, and Šibenik.

The second part of this social engagement was the support or organization of conferences, forums, and lectures, especially in the year celebrating 500 years of Reformation. Biblija365 partnered with the Biblical Institute and organized lectures and a presentation of the book *Christianity on Trial*, by one of the most influential lawyers in the USA, Dr. Mark Lanier, which took place on April 6, 2017, in the Croatian Chamber of Commerce in Zagreb. NGO Fokus, as one of the partners of the Biblija365 project on the REF500 platform, together with the

Businessmen Association “Partner” and the student association “STEP,” organized lectures by Dr. Dražen Glavaš, on the topic “How to Be a Successful (Student, Employee, Entrepreneur...), and Not Lose Your Soul” on May 17, 2017, in the Student Center in Zagreb, and by Dr. Albert M. Erisman, on the topic “Global Work and the Challenge of Corruption,” on May 29, 2017, at the same location. Both lectures were the result of the initiative by students and young people from the Biblija365 platform, who wanted to contribute to creating an environment that values work, integrity, and other recognizably biblical values. The team of Biblija365 participated in the National Day of Prayer, which took place on May 20, 2017, in Pula, where representatives of many Christian communities from all over Croatia gathered.

Dr. Vishal Mangalwadi, the author of *The Book that Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*, gave lectures on October 5 and 6, 2017, at the Croatian Chamber of Commerce in Zagreb on the significant influence of the Bible upon the development and progress of Western civilization. Dr. Stanko Jambrek, the author of the book *Reformacija nekad i danas*, gave a lecture on October 17, 2017, on the topic “Reformation Then and Now.” Another undertaking that was a part of the Biblija365 project on the occasion of commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, happened on October 25, 2017, in the Croatian Chamber of Commerce in Zagreb, where a public forum “The Word of Reformation” took place. The participants of this forum were Professor Dr. Peter Kuzmič (the dean of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek), Professor Dr. Mario Cifrak (the dean of the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb), Associate Professor Dr. Dean Slavić (professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb and the author of the book *Biblija kao književnost* and Dr. Stanko Jambrek (the Church history lecturer at the Biblical Institute in Zagreb and the author of many books). The topic of this public forum was a dialogue on the Bible as the foundational text for the whole civilization, which has formed the cultural, social, moral, and religious image of Europe. On the festive anniversary of Reformation Day, celebrated with a ceremonial academy at the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb on October 31, 2017, with a live broadcast on the Croatian national television, Biblija365 was also announced and a biblical text was read from the mobile application. An unbound edition of the Epistle to the Romans was presented to the attendees, prepared by Stanko Jambrek, Zoran Grozdanov, and Ratko Medan, designed by Damir Bralić.

In partnership with the Biblical Institute’s Center for Biblical Research, Biblija365 started a social activity of public reading of the Bible in 2018, which then became one of the main social branches of activities of both organizations. Their invitation to the first event read: “Bible365, Center for Biblical Research, Biblical Institute, and NGO Fokus proudly present to you a unique event of public reading that will take place in the great hall of the Croatian Music Institute on October 31,

2018, at 7:00 PM, on the occasion of the Reformation Day celebration. You can expect a public reading of St. Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Romans, accompanied by a classical guitar and video production. The readers are Dalia Matijević, Dorta Jagić, Dr. Danijel Berković, and pastor Giorgio Grlj."

This event was repeated next year at the same location on April 19, 2019, on Big Friday. The biblical texts that were read spoke about suffering in various life circumstances. The event was covered by the media (Studio 4, live broadcast on "Hrvatska uživo" ("Croatia live"), and *Vijesti iz kulture* ("News from the culture") on Croatian national television, International Catholic Agency, and others), and therefore the public reading of the sacred, biblical text in a secular space, as well as the promotion of the Bible itself, gained significant media coverage. In November 2019, the B365 application was presented at Interliber, the International Book Fair in Zagreb.

This incomplete list of all the recorded social activities followed and often organized by the Biblija365 team confirms the space and the topic this project wants to fill and present to Croatian society. Because of the pandemic, these social activities had to be put on hold in the last two years, but new activities are already being prepared. Biblija365 wants to carry out these activities on at least two platforms. The public reading of the Bible is becoming its platform, and together with the Biblical Institute's Center for Biblical Research, the team is thinking about taking this idea to other towns and their secular spaces. Another platform that Biblija365 wants to use to contribute to the Christian development of Croatian society, and whose plans and organization are already in motion, is the continuation of conferences that would have the Bible as their central theme.

Conclusion: A Biblical Baton

There are always reasons to be ashamed of something. Looking at the world, and especially through its media magnifying glasses, perhaps it would not be bad if there were more shame in the world, so that Germans would not have had to come up with a new word, "Fremdschämen," which summarizes the idea of "feeling ashamed because of others" concerning reality shows. However, one should never be ashamed of God's Word. Perhaps one's life can be endangered because of it, but he or she should never be ashamed of it. This written Word was spoken, transmitted orally, transcribed, translated, explained and interpreted, studied and transmitted, printed, typed, scanned, photographed, uploaded, and copy-pasted by people who had various motivations, but were never ashamed. People had an opportunity to receive this Word by listening to priests and preachers who stood in the same space with the listener or by listening to the Word read from another part of the world via audiobooks. They had an opportunity to receive this Word through reading: first from the scrolls, then from paper, books, ebooks, computer

screens, tablets, and smartphones. The Originator and Author of the Bible found collaborators throughout human history so that people could get to know him through his Word.

Even by thinking about all the mentioned ways of transmission of the Word of God throughout the history of humankind, which, preserved in its original form, found ways to reach the modern man of every epoch, we give praise and a crown of laurels to God who made this possible. Nevertheless, we also remember with gratitude all those people in history who carried the Bible as a baton and reached their goal to hand it over to the next generation. This text wants to tell another story among many similar ones that transpired in history: a story of God's collaborators who, faithfully and through dedicated labor, proud of the talents they received from God, humble and thankful, wanted to contribute and be a part of this biblical relay race, thinking first about their contemporaries but also the next generation. As the paper has "suffered" many things during the history of human shame and as the human ear heard many things, in the same way modern media equipment may absorb many "Fremdschämen" scenes. Nevertheless, the same paper media, as well as all forms of spoken media, may serve to announce to all creation the message of its Creator and Savior. While pastor Medan was the "first runner" of his relay race team as a faithful servant of God among those who are like him and who live in a peculiar age in which God's Word came to people through an app, the historical biblical baton is steered by the Creator who, according to His will, opens the eyes and ears of all who find themselves in the audience.

Therefore, let us become a part of this biblical, historical relay race, by carrying God's Word first of all through our reading of it and then by promoting to others the meaning and transformational role of God's Word for every life. This can be achieved by the use of a simple application B365, which through its wide access wants to enable everyone to meet the Living Word, but B365 is also just one among many tools offered to today's people for approaching the words of the Living God. While work on a project like this is its reward and an image of Christ's Body made up of numerous members with different roles (from the idea's originator, thinkers, partners, translators, good content notifiers, negotiators, e-mail writers, meeting presiders and attendees, synchronizers, recipients of comments and criticism, designers of new materials and improvements, preparers of questions and quizzes, question readers, askers and answerers, publishers, promoters who acquire rewards, take photographs, give awards, readers, application mistake reporters, repairers, and uploaders...), nevertheless God also gives specific and motivating rewards. For there is no greater joy and motivation for the Body of Christ than to know that a whole family has spent a year in fellowship with God's Word, that a seven-year-old has read through the whole Bible, that a grown man cried hearing the public reading of God's Word, or that one Catholic community in Slavonia started its annual public reading of the Bible. These are instances of the

instantaneous fruit of the labor that God allows us to see and which gladdens the hearts of all of us belonging to the “instant generation,” but whose long-term fruit can only be hoped for, just like all of those before us have hoped in faith.