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## Aesthetics of the Bible

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*The Bible is a monument of aesthetic culture. Old and New Testaments are different art paradigms: a view of the world as a result of creation, a view of the world in its relation to the apocalypse. Three aspects. 1. The Bible – a work of art. 2. Art books of the Bible. 3. The Bible – soil and an arsenal of the Christian art.*

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*“The Bible is first of all a book of high artistic value”*

*Maxim Gorky.*

Gorky's words taken as an epigraph do not only describe an aesthetic appeal of the Bible (Averintsev, 1977; Belenky. *About the mythology and philosophy of the Bible*; V. Bychkov. *Aesthetics of late antiquity*, 1981; I. Diakonov “Hebrew literature”; M. Dyakonov and I. Dyakonov, 1985; M. Rishskiy; “The Old miniaturist reading Psalms, 1966; Schiffman, 1987). Poet A. Maikov, who translated the Apocalypse, exclaimed enthusiastically that the Bible is “a wonderful book” and should be considered “on the part of the high poetry it is filled with.” Defining the principles of his own translation, he emphasized: “I tried to make almost interlinear translation of the script, following the Greek text, but at the same time maintaining the charm of the language, which is poured into our Church Slavonic translation ...” This translation as the poet was convinced is filled with beauty and strength. F. Dostoevsky,

having become acquainted with A. Maikov's creation wrote to him: “Your translation is great, but unfortunately, not everything”.

Russian philosopher Vladimir Rozanov, in his article “Biblical Poetry” noted a surprising rusticity of biblical narration and its striking simplicity: “There is no fiction, not even in the intention, nothing is decorated. Yes, but everything is fine...” And further: “Reading the Bible elevates, ennobles, and informs the readers of the same sacred shade, i.e. the mood is extremely serious, to the solemnity and tragedy, which it possesses. Noted by many experts aesthetic value of the Bible invites to a more detailed look into the aesthetics of the Bible. Of course it is not a treatise on aesthetics, but the Bible arose in the culture that can be characterized by its own aesthetics, and the Bible bears its stamp. Fundamental principle of the biblical world outlook is the

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idea of creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ...” begins the Biblical narration of creative activity of the Creator. The Creator of the world himself is perceived in the aspect of a great artist. Philosophy of creation is the principle in its essence aesthetic and an artistic one, it reveals the process of emergence of the new. The Lord acts as an artist or artist acts as the Lord. For the artist always creates a new world, he creates it with the power of his talent as a sovereign and free subject. Oeuvre is the free deployment of the artist’s creative power. No one may restrict the freedom of the creator, and any desire for it has a detrimental effect on the work. Creativity does not need any grounds; it is spontaneous and is the reward in itself (Berdyayev. 1989). The Lord creates as a true artist, freely, subject only to its own impulse, and limiting his creative power only to the aim set by himself. The artist creates a new world, the world of art, only by the power of his talent. Perhaps here is the root of the drama of the artist, he appears to be a theomachist, enters into competition with God. The book of Exodus telling about the withdraw from Egyptian captivity to the Promised Land says: “Therefore the people chided Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink ...And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses and said, Why is this that thou hast brought us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying What shall I do unto these people? ... And the Lord said unto Moses; Go on before the people and take with thee ...thy rod ...and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so” (Ex.17, 1-6). Lord ends up every day of creation by assessment of everything made and created. “...And God saw that it was good,” “...And God saw everything that He had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:4, 8, 10, 12, 18, 31). This assessment –

“goodness” of the created includes assessment of the aesthetic as well. The world that God created is perfect. The beauty of the world is a consequence of creativity, and it is in perfection of the world. “There’s nothing He created imperfect” (Syriac 42:25). In the forty-third chapter of the “Book of Wisdom of Jesus son of Syriac,” we find the clearest expression showing the perception of the created world from the perspective of beauty: “The greatness of height, expanse of cleanliness, sight of the sky in a glorious appearance! The sun, when it is a herald of them at sunrise: a wondrous creation, the matter of God! ... Beauty of the sky, the glory of the stars, shining decoration ... Look at the rainbow and glorify the Maker of it, it is beautiful in its splendor!...” The beauty and grandeur of the world is a sensuously perceived feature of the created world indicating the wisdom of the Creator. The beauty of the world is in harmony, consistency and appropriateness of diverse objects and phenomena in the world. Psalm 103 Of the Synod Bible, Psalm of David on the creation of the world, is a hymn expedient to the harmonically created world. “You put a limit, which does not go over. ...You sent the springs in the valleys: between the mountains flowing water, watered all the beasts of the field, wild donkeys quench their thirst. They lift up their voices among the branches. You’re watering the mountains from an altitude of thy, fruit of thy ground is saturated. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and herbs for the benefit of man to make food of the land and wine that makes glad the heart of man, and oil, from which shines his face, and bread which strengthens man’s heart ... He made the Moon to indicate the time, the Sun knows its west. You’re stretching the darkness of night ... and it is, how manifold your works, O Lord are! All hath wisdom you have ...”.

Harmony of the world is expressed, above all, in the idea that created world is in conformity with the crown of creation – a man. Everything

is proportionate to man, and he crowns the creative process. The aesthetic aspect of creation is expressed thus in the concept of harmony. Harmony is closely linked with such concepts as symmetry, rhythm, proportion, measure ... All of them capture qualitative and quantitative determination of the object, its organization and integrity. Harmony serves the legitimate structurally organized, established integrity. The Bible's aesthetics is in harmony with characteristic feature of the whole aesthetics of antiquity. This perception of the world creation formed the basis for the so-called teleological proof of the existence of God, which can be called "an aesthetic" evidence. Thinkers of the past recovered one of the features of this evidence, it is an appeal to ordinary consciousness, the experience of direct intuition, habit to perceive the beauty of the surrounding world and appeal to the product of self-mastery. The latter is perceived as a complete, integrated and efficient. Expediency is a feature of beauty, or rather; the beauty is a form of expediency being. Expediency in nature is an evidence of conscious goal as a motive of the formation law. Echoes of this logic can be heard today. So the beauty and harmony of the world must in accordance with the "aesthetic" logic serve as evidence of the Creator being. The importance of the aesthetic aspect of Creation is reflected indirectly in the so-called theological proof of the existence of God. It represents, as I. Kant wrote, "the oldest and most suitable for the ordinary human mind argument" (Immanuel Kant. Critique of Pure Reason. SPb, 1907. p. 358). L. Feuerbach was of the same opinion. He wrote: "This is the most popular and in some respects the most clear and convincing evidence. Evidence of a simple that is uneducated human mind knowing nothing about the nature, as it is the only one, at least, the only theoretical foundation and support of theism among the people. (L. Feuerbach, Selected Philosophical Works in 2 vol. Volume

2. Moscow, 1955. P. 630). Both Kant and Feuerbach noticed one important feature of the proof of God's being, its conformity to ordinary consciousness, common sense, and experience of everyday practical life. The world as a whole is perceived similarly as things created by man; the world is precisely a creation. And as every creation is characterized by integrity, harmony, expediency. Expediency is a feature of beauty. Appropriateness of the nature is a proof that the world was created. And the Testament itself from an aesthetic point of view is an expression of harmony, unity of the different, links of the different in unity. In the book "Genesis" the plot, associated with Noah, who escaped after the flood is narrated. When Noah built an altar and offered burnt offerings of animals, "... the Lord smelled the soothing aroma and said the Lord in his heart, I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of the man's heart is the evil from his youth" (Gen. 8.21). God made a new testament, after the testament with Adam. "And God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him: I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you ... I set my rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of the everlasting covenant between me and the earth" (Gen. 9, 8-9; 13). Rainbow is a visible sign of unity of heaven and earth. Harmony of the created things says about its structuring, i.e., the harmony itself implies difference in a unified whole. Harmony, – said V. Shestakov, – represents not only the presence of ... the whole and its qualitative and quantitative organization, but disunity of the whole, the qualitative distinction and even opposition of elements on the background of uniting them integrity. Harmony is the result of the struggle; at its core is the antithesis, contrasts, discord.

Polarity is extremely important for biblical aesthetics – light and darkness, spirit and body, a sinner and a saint, the heavenly world and the

earthly world. Supreme harmony is born in their encounter. The highest perfection is reached through the fight.

Dualism of God and Devil is revealed through the aesthetic aspect as opposed to a single entity – a beautiful world. The very existence of the devil in a single world tells about its complexity, contradictions, and duality. The existence of the devil points out to one of the poles of duality, when God points out to the other. Aesthetic value is synthesizing and crowning a dynamic process of confrontation. Excellence embraces good and evil, removes the conflict between them, and they appear to be different essences of the united beauty of the world as its intrinsic essence. According to the Old Testament it is more obvious that Devil and God are companions, rivals and helpers in it. In the New Testament they are in an open confrontation and struggle.

The aesthetics of light plays an important role in the Bible. Light is the God's creation. Creation of the world is the beginning of the creative activity of the Lord. Light produced by the word of God is both the image of God (because of the light He can be sensibly interpreted), and the reason for his cognition, and communication between man and God. Aesthetic perception of light is a characteristic feature of the ancient mind, a trait of human culture.

Light is the first principle of the world beauty. Light in the Bible comes in opposition: light – darkness, day – night, wisdom – stupidity. Sufficiently clear separation of these pairs' poles comes through in the New Testament, as for the Old Testament, the relationship between darkness and light is more complex. Darkness is also divine; God comes out of darkness, darkness is time of revelations and comprehension of the truth. Here, darkness and light are not opposed to each other; they are next to each other, though their delicate balance is fraught with future confrontation. There is a certain parallelism: in

the Old Testament God and Devil also act more like allies, while in the New Testament they are opposing forces.

**The Bible as a work of art.** Bible as a work of art represents a kind of "duology". Old and New Testament implement different artistic ideas in their contents, each of which is characterized by their own understanding of the world and human, and forms of relationship between human and God. God in the Old Testament is above all the demiurge, the creator, boundless both in his love and hate. He created the world and intervenes actively in the course of its development. Man confronts him as a finite and limited being, constantly forced to seek assistance from God. Spatially and temporally separated, God and man come into personal contact. The man's body lives in the corporeal world, and here he solves his cases. He can tolerate, suffer, fight, win and die but it is due to real circumstances of specific situations. God can intervene and interfere in the course of Earth processes, falling with the power of his punishment or by sending aid, but it all comes from outside. Power of God does not limit the wealth of human individuality.

The New Testament primarily describes God as a spirit. And as a spirit he is in every person. The main thing here is this new understanding both of man and God as the infinites (the microcosm and macrocosm) and their direct interaction (the God-man and God living in people). Fundamentally new vision of man demanded new ways and means of artistic expression – the Gospel and Revelation. They appear to be the forms of comprehension of this new truth lying beyond the rational understanding. Man acts as infinity; he is able to move to unlimited perfection and has bottomless depth and complexity.

A characteristic feature of the biblical world outlook is its epic. The world is portrayed from the drama of the Creation to the tragedy of the Apocalypse. The entire history of this world is

presented in it: everything that was, is and will happen to the earthly world. This is the logic of the biblical world view. This is largely due to the priority of human values in specific situations of the Bible. The Old Testament depicts the world in terms of its origin, from the beginning; New Testament shows it in terms of the end, from the standpoint of the Apocalypse. But there is a significant fact that the end of one world is the beginning of a journey into another world. The apocalyptic view is comprehension of the present through the prism of knowledge of the future.

The artist, therefore, faces the necessity of corrections, modifications, or destruction of the work in the righteous fury or humility when the life of their own heroes is not subject to him. And the Lord as the greatest artist was not free of these contradictions and spiritual torments. This seems to be an aesthetic aspect of the story of the flood for example.

**Heroes of the Bible.** The Bible as any work of literary art is the Humanities area. Considering the Bible as an artistic phenomenon, we pay attention to the diverse world of human types, people with different mentality, overwhelmed by different passions, great and low, heroes and sufferers, victors and martyrs. In a sense the Bible's books are a hymn to man, for a man is the crown of its creation. Even God, this great creator, has created nobody more magnificent than man. «You made him a little lower than the angels, and you have crowned with glory and honor him,» – said the author of the 8th psalm about a man (Psalm 8:5). The Bible gives a wide range of characters; they express the value of life and its charm, despite all the hardships and troubles. An anthem to optimism and eternal life is, for example, the image of Naomi with her grandson at the hands from the “Book of Ruth.”

Tragedy and tragic hero is one of the features of the biblical narration. The mighty hero Samson

was blinded and taken captive by the enemies, he sacrifices himself taking many enemies to the grave with him.

Old and New Testaments depict different types of heroes. In the Old Testament hero is primarily a man of practical affairs. All his activity is aimed at overcoming the external circumstances, defeating enemies that even spaciouly oppose him.

The protagonist of the New Testament is the figure of another type. The dominant idea is to transform himself and the inner world. There is no spatial opposition “hero – enemy”, which involves a real death of the enemy (that is why, for example, David killed Goliath). The main enemy of a man is the man himself, the imperfection of his spirit and conscience, which must be awoken and got to speak in full voice. The man appears to be the creator of himself through arduous spiritual, moral activity. Real, physical death of Jesus on the cross is a pledge of spiritual rebirth of everybody. And here lies a fundamental difference of self-sacrifice of Christ and Samson.

In the New Testament there is a hero who triumphs over the corpse of the defeated enemy. Man triumphs over himself, breaking through the abyss of his own spirit to his moral heights. Perhaps the most striking example is the fate of Mary Magdalene, a demy-monde woman, who became a saint. The combination of human polarity of good and evil, of sin and virtue, of human and divine, of physical and spiritual origin predetermined tension and drama of his inner world, through which conflicts a supreme harmony of true humanity was built. The man turns out to be bottomless and inexhaustible. Therefore, the structure of the story of Christ's life is fraught with many real-life situations. These are the issues of motherhood and fatherhood, trust and betrayal, teachers and disciples, authority, self-sacrifice, i.e., human

problems and values. Thus, the life of Jesus Christ throughout the subsequent history attracts the attention of artists.

**The image of the prophet.** In the Bible we are confronted with two forms of narratives about the prophets. The first is the story of the prophet; the second is the words of the prophet.

The Prophet, first of all is God's chosen one. Each of the prophets does not forget to stress that he does not speak on his own behalf, he was elected by God.

Not everyone enters without hesitation on this path. Prophecy is a duty, obligation, sanctified by the God's will. The essence of this duty, task, and the Prophet's mission is teaching people on behalf of God. To do this, the prophet must be clear, the rule of law. And God took care of it.

"To burn with word" is the main mission of the prophet. His weapon is a bright, expressive word with help of which he should bring truth to people. The prophets are people who have realized their purpose and are overwhelmed by the "one, but a fiery passion," following the path of explanation of the new truth. "Voice of the prophets is, above all, the voice of moral conscience" – wrote S. Averintsev (Averintsev, 1983). Neither fear of punishment or wrath of those in power, no promises of riches could get the prophets to refuse to tell the truth both the rulers and the people who have forgotten the laws of righteous living.

Denunciation of evil, the pangs of those in powers, and the pain of suffering – this is the pathos of the prophets' speeches. In addition, the prophets put forward and develop new ideas, ideas of universal peace and unity of people. The time will come, and "their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4). Then the prophet of another era will raise the banner of people's

commonality people and proclaim the slogan: "All men are brothers."

Prophets were beaten and left and right. The charge of false prophecy, exile and martyrdom was the reward of the prophets. Persecution, contempt, ridicule of the crowd is not uncommon in the lives of the prophets.

**Genres of the Bible.** The Bible is a multicolored mosaic, polyphonic symphony, in which different voices merging into a powerful code are heard. In order to solve their artistic ideas Bible uses various forms and genres of literary art. In this sense, the Bible is a real encyclopedia of art, from folklore and anonymous to the personality stained. Tales, proverbs, sayings, legends, epic paintings, ritual songs, testimony, and chronicles, the home story, lyrical poetry, philosophical aphorisms found their place in the Bible.

A characteristic feature of the biblical narrative is its similarity with a parable. Here we can distinguish two aspects. Firstly, the Bible itself presents a monumental parable about the world being from the first to the last day. Secondly, the parable in the true sense of the word presents a structure element of the biblical text.

Parable is a small genre of poetic or prose character. This genre appeared in the era of pre-literate cultures within the frames of folklore. At the dawn of its history a parable was a story on moral and ethical theme having mainly didactic, instructive nature. As a genre of literary creation parable is close to fable and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish them, but still these two genres have some differences. If we talk about structure, the fable has more rigid and specific one than the parable. Structural elements of the fable are clearly distinguishable: the introduction, the exposure, the main part of the story, and finally resume, morality, i.e. "moral of the story." In the parable structure is more elastic, less orthodox. Of course parable is not free from didactic and

instructive tone, but it is more general in nature, characterized by some degree of generalization.

Language of parable and fable has much in common language, both in parable and fable words are used in their direct, immediate meaning, as a rule, there are no metaphors.

Both genres are based on the use of allegory. Allegory is the kind of depicting an abstract idea in a clearly perceptible way. Both genres use widely a symbol. Allegory is unambiguous, symbol is polysemantic.

For example, a parable told in the book of Judges: “The trees once went to anoint a king over them, and say to the olive tree, you come and reign over us. But the olive tree said to them, Should I cease giving my oil, which honor God and men, and go sway over trees? And then the trees said to the fig tree, you come and reign over us. But the fig tree said to them, Should I cease my sweetness and my good fruit, and go sway over trees? Then the trees said to the vine, you come and reign over us. Vine said to them, Should I cease my wine which cheers both God and men, and go sway over trees? Then all the trees said to the bramble, you come and reign over us. Bramble said to the trees, If in truth you anoint me as king over you, then come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”

The parable in the Old and New Testaments in this second sense performs various functions. The difference is determined by the functioning of the parables in the specific context of a book. Thus, in the parables of the Gospels, which are an essential means of Christ’s teachings presentation, philosophical sense is the main characteristic as opposed to the moral and didactic character of the Old Testament parables.

Parable in the Gospels is intended to present vividly a new spiritual truth, and thus in a manner that is dominated by moral principle. In the Old Testament parable is mostly a figurative

illustration containing the assessment of a person or an act. Moreover, this assessment of itself comes out of the parable content and does not require detailed explanation.

Clarity comes from a specific life situation and experiences of everyday life, when anyone understands clear practical significance of vines and thorns. Therefore, the conclusion that power is not always a decent does not require any special explanations.

The New Testament parable is generally divided into two parts: the story itself and explanation of the story. The second part of tells the basic idea of the narrative so that it influenced on the listener most heavily.

Disciples of Christ asked the question: “What might this parable be?” (Luke 8:9), which specifically concerns the parable of the sower. Or another one: “And came to him, his disciples saying, Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field” (Matt. 13:36). Mark the Evangelist says: “Without a parable spoke he not to them, and expounded all things to his disciples in private” (Mark 4:34). The question why Christ said to the people in parables was answered by Jesus this way: “It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matt. 13: 2).

The need for the parable was caused by a number of moments: the novelty of the idea, and the hostility of the environment, and the desire to unite the disciples, who were to carry the idea further. The main element of the explanatory part of the parable is comparison. Proverbs-aphorisms take a special place. They surprise not only by the juicy idea expressed in the refined form, but by the wealth of colors, including laughter, humor, irony, sarcasm.

**Art books of the Bible.** Lyrical love poetry with sophisticated imagery characteristic for Middle Eastern poetry is expressed in “Song of Solomon.” For the poetic hearing some images

sound clearly and continue to delight by both its elegance and depth of feelings: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm: for love is as strong as death, jealousy is as cruel as the grave ...”(Song of Songs 8:6).

Others are not so familiar: “Your neck is like the tower of David built for an armory, two breasts are like two young roes – twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies” (*The Holy Bible*: 4,5).

Psalms (from the Greek Psalterion) is another book of the Old Testament, with its timeless aesthetic value. Book of Psalms is a collection of one hundred and fifty Psalms. Psalm (Greek psalmos; Lat. Psalmus) is a religious song, sung accompanied by plucked instrument. The Psalms have different themes, content focus, but are united by life outlook. They represent a form of communication with God, who acts as an individual power. Psalms reflected the diversity of household situations and expressed subtle shades of feelings of suffering and troubled personality. The book is a true encyclopedia of the human soul and his feelings world.

Artistic value of the Psalms is not only in the fact that it has inspired poets of different eras, and therefore the tradition of poetic versions of the Psalms was developed. It set the tradition of creating the cycle of poems, book of poetry, where every single poem is an independent monad on the one hand, and on the other is an integral unit of the whole, occupying a particular place of integrity.

**The Bible in History of Art.** K. Marx once remarked that ancient Greek mythology was the ground and an arsenal for Greek art. We have every reason to rephrase these words in relation to the Bible. It was and is the soil and the arsenal of the entire European culture.

The constant appeal of artists to the Bible is not the result of creative bankruptcy, not the result of a lack of imagination, not an attempt to use well-known to the mass consciousness images, but the live need to interpret artistically the issues that were raised and resolved in the pages of the Bible again and again. The fact is that these problems relate to the eternal problems concerning the most important and vitally meaningful aspects of human existence. For example, the story on the life of Jesus Christ embodied the most important aspects of human being. Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary is the eternal theme of motherhood, as long as the woman in joy and suffering will give new life to the world, this problem will excite any artist. Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate is the problem of relations between the authorities and the creator – artist, philosopher, religious leader, a relationship that was initially dramatic, because power is always on guard of the present, and the creator of the new has always attempted upon its being. Jesus Christ and the Apostles is the problem of “teacher-disciple” relationship: as long as the world is and one generation comes after another, the teacher will remain the central figure of generations. Finally, Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot is the eternal problem of trust and betrayal.

The value of the Bible is not limited only because it represents material, themes, plots, ideas to new artists for new works. It continues to be a living aesthetic phenomenon, a living form of cultural heritage, which, in the words of Andre Malraux, is “not amount of works that require worship, but the force that helps to survive.” And one of our goals is to comprehend the wealth of aesthetic values of the Bible, because only in this case, we can draw up the power that it has.

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*Библия является памятником эстетической культуры. Ветхий и Новый Завет имеют различные художественные парадигмы: взгляд на мир как на результат сотворения, взгляд на мир с точки зрения Апокалипсиса. Три аспекта: 1. Библия – произведение искусства. 2. Художественные книги Библии. 3. Библия – почва и арсенал Христианского искусства.*

*Ключевые слова: Библия, эстетика, красота творения, герои Библии, жанры библейского повествования.*

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