

THE THEOPHANEIA SCHOOL: AN *EKPHRASIS* OF THE HEAVENLY TEMPLE

«Before his death abba Bessarion said: “A monk, like the Cherubim and the Seraphim, must be all eye”».¹ This was not Abba Bessarion’s own saying, but a citation from another source. He was possibly citing from the *Corpus Macarianum* (the authorship of which, following A. G. Dunaev’s hypothesis, can be identified with Simeon of Mesopotamia),² but more likely he was drawing on the common tradition that held equal authority in both Egyptian monasticism, to which abba Bessarion belonged, and Syrian monasticism where the *Corpus Macarianum* was written.

Abba Bessarion’s saying appropriates the ascetic interpretation of the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the Divine Chariot, the detailed account of which can be also found in one of the Macarian Homilies in the beginning of the Collection II. The relevant passage of the homily reads:

For the soul that is deemed to be judged worthy to participate in the light of the Holy Spirit by becoming his throne and habitation, and is covered with the beauty of ineffable glory of the Spirit, becomes all light, all face, all eye. There is no part of the soul that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. That is to say, there is no part of the soul that is covered with darkness but is totally covered with spiritual eyes of light. For the soul has no imperfect part but is in every part on all sides facing forward and covered with the beauty of the ineffable glory of the light of Christ, who mounts and rides upon the soul.³

Here, the human soul is transformed into the Divine Chariot that ascends to its original place in the Holy of Holies of the Heavenly Temple, the legitimate place of the Ark of Covenant, portrayed in the vision of Ezekiel as the Divine Throne...

Merkabah mysticism (literally, «the mysticism of the Divine Chariot») was well-known to Christians from the books of the Old Testament and other Second Temple Jewish non-biblical writings preserved solely in the Chris-

¹ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Bessarion 11.

² See Dunaev’s monograph in: Преподобный Макарий Египетский, *Духовные слова и послания. Собрание тунa I* (Vatic. graec. 694) / Изд. подг. А. Г. ДУНАЕВ (М., 2007²) (forthcoming). This volume also contains my review of the first edition of the book. In his monograph A. G. Dunaev revisits the old hypothesis of H. Dörries about the authorship of Simeon, convincingly supporting it with new evidence.

³ Collection II, Homily 1. Critical edition: H. DÖRRIES, E. KLOSTERMANN, M. KROEGER, *Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios* (Berlin, 1964) (Patristische Texte und Studien, 4) 1–2. English translation: Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* / Tr. G. A. MALONEY, S.J. (New York, 1992) 37.

tian tradition. What role did this mystical teaching play in Christianity? Could this mystical saying cited by the author of the Macarian Homilies simply be a coincidental recurrence of the Jewish tradition?

No, it could not be coincidental. Partial evidence can be found in the saying of abba Bessarion with which we began our introduction. Given his Egyptian rather than Syrian abode, it is clear that, at least, in early monasticism this mystical tradition was equally universal in Syria, as well as in Egypt.

Long before the Greek philosophical vocabulary became the standard conceptual vehicle of Christian doctrine, Christians natively and universally drew on the symbolic liturgical language of the Jewish Temple. This language is dominant among New Testament authors and remains influential in the Christian literature of the second century A.D. A rapid paradigm shift, however, occurs in the second century, in the works of the Apologists who increasingly resort to the language of Greek philosophy and shy away from Jewish symbolism in their exposition of the Christian faith. Starting from the fourth century A.D., every question of Christian doctrine becomes a subject of lengthy treatises parsed exclusively in the terms of ancient Greek philosophy, without any reference to the liturgical symbolism.⁴

This does not mean of course that the liturgical symbolism was completely forgotten in the formulation of Christian doctrine. Still, historically patristic scholarship developed with an understanding that Christianity had been totally Hellenized and had fully rejected its Jewish cultural roots. The use of Jewish symbolism was visible only in poetic metaphors scantily interspersed in Church hymnography and ascetic literature. According to this approach, which still reins even in contemporary patristic scholarship, all references to the Old Testament symbolism conveyed through the imagery of the Divine Chariot (the Merkabah), the Holy of Holies, the Temple, or the details of the temple worship found in dogmatic and ascetical works of the Church fathers should be interpreted as rhetorical devices and stylistic embellishments. Any serious student wishing to get to the dogmatic core of patristic theology must treat this verbal cosmetics as pointless husk.

The first scholar to offer a substantively different perspective on these critical issues was Alexander Golitzin, the main author of the current collection and the founder of the Theophaneia School that emerged around him at Marquette University in Milwaukee (USA).

Golitzin's first serious effort to develop a new interpretive framework in this field of studies was his monograph on Dionysius Areopagita.⁵ Dionysius

⁴ For the partial discussion of this process, see: V. M. LOURIE, *History of Byzantine Philosophy: Formative Period* (St.-Petersburg, 2006) (in Russian) [В. М. ЛУРЬЕ, *История византийской философии. Формативный период* (СПб., 2006)].

⁵ Hieromonk Alexander (GOLITZIN), *Et introibo ad altare Dei*. The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1994) (Ἀνάλεκτα Βλατάδων, 59).

Areopagita became at one and the same time the most convenient and the most inconvenient source for testing a fresh methodology of reading patristic texts. He was most convenient, because few other authors drew on liturgical symbolism so saliently in their formulation of Christian dogma. And he was most inconvenient, because his own cultural heritage had stronger connections to platonic rather than Jewish traditions. At the least, the platonic connections of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* lie on the surface while its Jewish core is deeply concealed, in many respects even more deeply than is shown in Golitzin's analysis.⁶

Golitzin's approach to Dionysius Areopagita was one of the routes leading to a reconsideration of the conception of the «Christological corrective» developed, according to Golitzin's favorite teacher, John Meyendorff (1926–1992), by Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas for understanding Dionysius. If, however, one reads Dionysius Areopagita in the language of liturgical symbolism in which it was originally written, the text's Christology is impossible to miss, and it becomes clear that the *Corpus Areopagiticum* does not require any «Christological corrective» since it already is internally Christological. Golitzin discusses this issue in detail in one of his articles included in the current collection, «Dionysius Areopagites in the Works of Saint Gregory Palamas: On the Question of “Christological Corrective” and Related Matters».

Golitzin's methodology proved to be even more prolific when it was later applied to the ascetic literature, and in particular, to the dogmatic controversies surrounding asceticism. The formation of the new methodology was partly helped by Golitzin's turn to early Syrian fathers, especially to Aphrahat, the Christian authors who flourished even in the fourth century A.D amid the dense Jewish-Christian environment. The appreciation of the Jewish-Christian character of the Syrian fathers began in 1960s and especially in 1970s, a generation before Golitzin. The works of Antoine Guillaumont (1915–2000)

⁶ I think that from the historical point of view, the appearance of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* was closely connected with the revival of the Jewish-Christian lore about the Dormition of the Theotokos that was taking place in Palestine in the middle and the second half of the fifth century. See M. VAN ESBROECK, Peter the Iberian and Dionysius the Areopagite: Honigmann's thesis revisited // *OCP* 59 (1993) 217–227. See also В. М. ЛУРЬЕ, Время поэтов, или *Praeparationes Areopagiticae*: к уяснению происхождения стихотворной парафразы Евангелия от Иоанна, в: Нонн из Хми-ма. *Деяния Иисуса* / Отв. ред. Д. А. ПОСПЕЛОВ (М., 2002) (Scrinium Philocalicum. Т. I) 295–337. Republished with small corrections under the title «Дионисийский субстрат в византийском юродстве. Время поэтов, или *Praeparationes Areopagiticae*» in: *Amsterdam International Journal for Cultural Narratology* (2005) N 1, Spring: The Many Faces of Narratological Agenda. Research Application to Literatures and Cultures vis-a-vis History and Tropology: <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/narratology/lurie.htm>

and Robert Murray focusing on the Jewish-Christian background of Coptic, and in particular, Syrian Christianity and monasticism reached a remarkably successful resonance with the existing intuitions of Golitzin, acquired during his studies of the Byzantine patristic tradition.

Such has been the course of development of the ideas currently advocated by the Theophaneia School. It is now apparent that such long-lasting patristic «puzzles» as, for example, the «anthropomorphite controversy» in the history of Egyptian monasticism can be properly understood only against their Judeo-Christian background. Or consider the teaching of Symeon the New Theologian and other Byzantine fathers about the spiritual priesthood in the soul of every believer. This teaching can be understood only if one sees a human soul as the microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm of the Heavenly Temple — the human soul is a smaller Temple that mysteriously encompasses the Heavenly Temple with its eternal priesthood.

All these themes receive attention in the articles of the current volume written by Alexander Golitzin and his disciples starting from the late 1990s. Their work has made clear that the language of Jewish liturgical symbolism has never died in Christianity and has continued to be used for expressing many vital theological ideas, some of which have never been articulated in other doctrinal schemes.

One of the principal tasks of the Theophaneia School is to better understand the Jewish «matrix» of Christianity, further exploring the range and nature of the Jewish mystical traditions appropriated by Christian authors. This part of the Theophaneia School's research is guided by Andrei Orlov who has become the first and closest disciple of Alexander Golitzin, assisting his teacher in the formation of a new theological school.

The purpose of this volume is to gather together for the first time a certain «critical mass» of publications, otherwise dispersed in various journals, in order to demonstrate a new scholarly method — the method of investigating the theological tradition that chose to express itself in the liturgical language of the Heavenly Temple.

Basil Lourié