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FREEDOM FROM THE YOKE OF SIN WAS WRITTEN.
Cultural Value of Literacy in Formative Old Slavonic Authors
Contextualized within Byzantine Tradition: Transformation,
Continuity and Conflict

Grammatophobic Thesis and Grammatocentric Antithesis

It is all too easy for us to overestimate the value of writing as a defining mark of civilization. In fact, civilization itself is usually identified with the existence and use of writing, while the state preceding the emergence of writing in a certain cultural area is relegated to the pre-civilizational, even pre-historical.¹ No wonder, in the popular discourse the crucial moment when Slavs are considered to have entered civilization is usually identified with the coming into being of Slavic literacy within the context of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition. In fact, as we shall see, the “world shattering” effects of this event from the Slavic perspective is clearly understood and appreciated by the earliest authors of Slavonic literature. For them, as in many ways for us too, writing was the etalon of dignity for a given people or culture. However, little were they aware that this appreciation of writing and literacy, which for all intents and purposes was inherited from classical Byzantine culture, represented the end result of a long and at moments contradictory process of transformation.

The old cliché goes that Byzantium as a civilizational phenomenon is an amalgamation of Greek culture, Christian religion and Roman legal and political tradition. We shall subtract the third element as inconsequential for our exploration and shall focus on the preceding two factors in regard to the valuation of writing and literacy, and how their complex interaction influenced the way early Slavonic authors saw their native literate culture in whose very formation they themselves participated.

Archaic and Classical Greek attitudes toward writing and literacy were rather negative. This is reflected in Plato. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato disparages writing as leading to forgetfulness and loss of thinking ability, as

¹ For an in-depth discussion on the role of literacy in cultural history cf. Powel (2012) and Harris (2001).

well as profanizing knowledge (*Phaedrus* 275a-b, 343b). In his VII Letter (343b.), Plato denies the possibility that “innermost thoughts” could be expressed in words, especially in an “unchangeable form” as in writing.²

At this point it should be made clear that the original Greek ambivalence about writing and literate culture most probably is connected with a wider *grammatophobic* sensibility³ clearly noticeable among early Indo-European cultures, most prominently in the Iranian and the Indian one. It should be stressed that both their magisterial religious traditions – the Zoroastrian and the Vedic, preferred oral-auditory transmission of knowledge rather than textual, relegating writing to the sphere of the profane. In fact, the Iranian epic *Shahnameh* claims writing was invented by demons (*Shahnameh* IV, 790-606; Firdausi, 1905, p. 127). As for the way how the Vedas were transmitted long after writing was known in India,⁴ we have the first-hand testimony of Yijing (635-713), the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim:

The Vedas have been handed down from mouth to mouth, not transcribed on paper or leaves. (I-Tsing [Yijing], 1896, p. 182)

The *Mahabharata* also testifies to the existence of a tradition explicitly proscribing the writing down of the Vedas:

... they who reduce the Vedas into writing, have to sink in hell (*Mahabharata* XIII, 23; *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa – Anushasana Parva*, 1893, p. 176-177).

If Greek *grammatophobia* represents a thesis, then Hebrew *grammatocentrism* is its cultural antithesis. In the Hebrew Old Testament writing is given sublime glory, since the Divine Law is *written* “by the finger of God”:

And He gave unto Moses, when He had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Genesis 24: 12; 31: 18)⁵

It is similar in Egypt. The words of the gods in order to be deemed valid have to be first put in writing by the god Thoth.⁶ Furthermore, Thoth is authoring books “with his fingers”:

² On the complex and often controversial issue of the interplay between orality and literacy cf. Goody (1987, 2010) and Ong & Hartley (2012).

³ About the social ramifications of this sensibility cf. Fischer (2003), p. 54-56.

⁴ For more information on the primacy of oral transmission in classical Indian context cf. Rocher (1994).

⁵ All Biblical verses are quoted following the English Standard Version (ESV, 2001).

⁶ Called also – “the Lord of books” (Budge, 1904, p. 401).

Thoth, the mightiest god, the lord of Khemennu, came to thee, and he wrote for thee the *Book of Breathings* with his own fingers. (Budge, 1904, p. 409)

In later Jewish mysticism, as represented by the *Sefer Yetzirah* (see Hayman, 2004), one of the Kabbalistic foundational texts, an account is presented of the creation and constitution of the universe where the means by which this creation is realised are the very Hebrew letters (*Sefer Yetzirah* 5: 3).

Here the individual letters of the alphabet are assigned discrete functions in the process of constructing the universe. A point of interest is a claim that the letter *Heh* (ה) is made to be “king of speech”, thus most obviously declaring the primacy of the written over the uttered. Thus, the role of writing as a method for recording speech, where speech comes logically first and writing later, is reversed (*Sefer Yetzirah* 5: 7).

In the archaic Indo-European setting the instantiation of historical memory is an oral-auditory phenomenon reflected in the notion of “immortal glory”, “imperishable fame”, “unending renown”, i.e. *κλέος ἄφθιτον*.⁷ From the viewpoint of the Hebrew community in the Middle East, the immortal memory is contained in the written text spanning across generations. The archaic Greek hero aches for his deeds to be sung about long after he is dead, but the Biblical hero longs for his experiences simply *to be written down*:

Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book!
That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever! (Job 19: 23-24)

The Botched Synthesis

As far as clichés go, there is another one that sees in the cultural iteration of Christianity a meeting point between Judaism and Hellenism. If that is so, then we would expect that it would also reflect the different, if not opposing views on writing and literate culture, which we have observed in the Greek and Hebrew cultural circles. Exploring the New Testament canon, it definitely seems so. Here, the *grammatocentrism* of the Old Testament is conspicuously less prominent. First, Christ is traditionally represented as not having written anything. Then, there are passages in the New Testament that seem to ascribe secondary role to written culture. Thus, Apostle Paul puts forward the opposition between the Spirit and the “letter”, giving precedence to the former:

⁷ More on the etymological background of the Greek concept of “immortal glory” and its cross-linguistic cognates within Indo-European context cf. Beekes (2010), p. 712-713.

And you show that you are an epistle from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3: 3)

He goes as far as to say:

Who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament — not of the letter, but of the Spirit; **for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.** (2 Corinthians 3: 6)

Within the conceptual field of the New Testament, and especially the Pauline corpus, the following pairs of opposing associations can be made in regard to the notions of the “letter” and the “Spirit”:

“Letter”	“Spirit”
Old Testament	New Testament
Bondage ⁸	Freedom ⁹
Hagar and Ishmael	Sarah and Isaac
Mt. Sinai	Jerusalem
Law	Grace ¹⁰
Moses	Christ

And yet, the New Testament documents has also passages that are in line with the Old Testament Hebrew vision of reverence for the written word, for the *book*. Thus, Christ himself uses the metaphors connected with the art of writing as symbols of Divine immutability and as a way to offer assurance to his disciples:

Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are **written** in heaven. (Luke 10:20)

Not to mention the rather numerous instances of use in the New Testament of the formulaic phrase – “it is written” (*γέγραπται*), as a conversational method of appealing to the commonly recognized and undoubted authority of the Hebrew Scriptures (Matthew 4: 7, 21: 13, 26: 24; Mark 1: 2, 14: 21; Luke 19: 46, 23: 38, 24: 47; John 8: 17; Romans 2: 24, 3: 4, 3: 10; 1 Corinthians 1: 31, 3: 19, 9: 9; 2 Corinthians 2: 9; Galatians 3: 10, 3: 13 etc.). Also, the metaphor of the book of the “Eternal Gospel” carried by an angel (Apocalypse 14: 6) in John’s Apocalypse, as well as the numerous mentions of the “Book of Life” (*βίβλος τῆς ζωῆς* or *βιβλίον τῆς ζωῆς*)

⁸ Colossians 4: 25.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 3: 17.

¹⁰ John 1: 17.

(Apocalypse 3: 5, 13: 8, 17: 8, 20: 12, 20: 15, 21: 27, 22: 19),¹¹ and last but not the least the mysterious “Book with seven seals” in the hands of Christ the Lamb, testify to the lasting presence of the book as a powerful symbol of the everlasting endurance of God’s will, into which men can find firm solace. In fact, the symbolic value of “the book” within the New Testament and the Early Christian Church doesn’t receive one-sided treatment, but is construed as a bi-pole, where the emphasis on the literary and the emphasis on the non-literary mode of communication are in dynamic tension. Perhaps this uneasy balance is most cogently illustrated in the following phrase from the Apocalypse:

Blessed is he **who reads** and those **who hear** the words of the prophecy...¹²

Since the New Testament contains within itself strains that stand both for the affirmation of the value of writing and its devaluation, it could have been expected that Christianity would make a synthesis of them. If we follow the Christian authors in the first centuries of the new faith, parallel with the reverence for Scripture seen in the meticulous exegesis *ad litteram* of the Old Testament we also find strongly expressed view that writing, the Holy Scripture, could at most serve a secondary role in the task of establishing and spreading the Christian message. Thus, Irenaeus of Lyons says:

There are many tribes of barbarians, who believe in Christ, who achieve salvation that is written in their hearts not by ink on paper, but by the Spirit, accurately keeping the olden tradition received. (*Libros quinque adversus haereses*; Irenaeus of Lyons, 1857, p. 15)¹³

Later, the same idea is expressed by John Chrysostom (*circa* 347-407):

In all reality, we wouldn’t have had the need of the assistance provided by the Holy Scripture, but instead, the only thing required would have been to lead lives so pure that the grace of the Spirit could make superfluous all books; thereupon, just as they are written by ink, so our hearts should have been inscribed by the Spirit. (*Commentarius in Sanctum Matthaeum Evangelistam*; Migne, 1862, p. 14-15)

¹¹ Also, there is a single instance of use of the metaphor “Book of Life” in one of Paul’s Epistles – Philippians 4: 3.

¹² μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας... (Apocalypse 1: 3. Cf. *Ἡ Καινὴ Διαθήκη*, 1987, p. 589).

¹³ Here and in other places, the translations from Greek into English are mine if not stated otherwise.

Isaac of Nineveh (*circa* VII Century) also stresses the superiority of the Spirit over the book:

Until man has received the Comforter, he needs written documents, in order to fix in his heart, by images, profitable recollections... But when spiritual force enters and dwells in the intelligible forces of the operative soul, then there are fixed in the heart instead of written laws spiritual commandments, which the heart learns secretly from the spirit, which does not need the help of sensible material by the medium of the senses. (*Mystic Treatises*; Isaac of Nineveh, 1923, p. 62)

This almost sounds like a paraphrase from Plato's *Phaedrus*. Isaac, furthermore, envisions an inter-generational chain of transmission of language as a vehicle for praising God in a manner that reminds us somewhat of the transmission of the Sanskrit language as a vehicle for the Vedic hymns within the Indian cultural context. Thus, he says:

The use of sensory words was bestowed upon rational natures by the Creator, and they were first employed by the creatures to praise the Creator, as it is written in the Book of Job. Hence, we men were assigned by the Creator in a sensory manner to make use of sensory words, which are transmitted from fathers to sons. (Преподобний Исаак Сирин, 2006, p. 75)

From the middle of the first millennium such statement that disparage the value of writing slowly disappear from the Christian discourse. While both the thesis and the antithesis seemed for a while to live in a form of a dynamic tension, the synthesis wasn't achieved, and this dynamic tension was decisively overturned in favour of writing. We have seen how some of the early Church Fathers saw in books and written transmission only a "second best thing" inferior to the guidance of the Spirit, but this "second best thing" in time took more and more prominence. The Christian Church began to see itself as a bastion of literate culture. The very physical object of the Scripture became to be venerated and beautified with jewels and casings, taking part in the act of the Christian Liturgy. Christians later on, in opposition to adherents of pagan religions, perceived themselves as being the people who principally used books in their worship. The exalted respect for written discourse left its mark on Byzantine poetics too. As an illustration to this claim we can offer the prologue of the famous *Akathist Hymn*¹⁴ dedicated to the Virgin:

¹⁴ The Akathist Hymn is usually dated in VI Century, but its authorship is uncertain, although sometimes it is attributed to the Syrian ecclesiastical poet Romanus the Melodist (*circa* VI Century AD). The authorship of this prologue, on the other hand, is traditionally ascribed to Patriarch Sergius I of Constantinople (610-638), who have allegedly composed it in 626. For more information on the subject see: Vellez (1962, p. 192-197).

Τῇ ὑπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ τὰ νικητήρια,
ὡς λυτρωθεῖσα τῶν δεινῶν εὐχαριστήρια,
ἀναγράφω σοι ἡ πόλις σου, Θεοτόκε•
ἀλλ' ὡς ἔχουσα τὸ κράτος ἀπροσμάχητον,
ἐκ παντοίων με κινδύνων ἐλευθέρωσον,
ἵνα κράζω σοί• Χαῖρε Νύμφη ἀνύμφευτε
(*The Akathist Hymn*, 1919, p. 26).

Unto you, O Theotokos, invincible Champion, Your City,¹⁵
In thanksgiving ascribes the victory for the deliverance from sufferings.
And having your might unassailable,
Free me from all dangers,
So that I may cry unto you:
Hail! O Unbridled Bride! (Limberis, 1994, p. 149)

The key word here is the virtually untranslatable verb “ἀναγράφω”, which is constituted from the prefix “ἀνα-” /ana/, which can denote movement upwards and the verb “γράφω” /grafo/ - “to write”. So literarily, the meaning of the word would be – “to write upwards”, “to offer writings upwards”. This composite word in Classical literature usually is attested to mean: “to engrave and set up publicly”.

Hence, paradoxically, in the poetic imagination of the author of the *Akathist Hymn*, which from the very beginning was intended to be **sang aloud** in church, it is not the sounds from human mouths that ascend in praises upwards to the Virgin, but the **written letters**.¹⁶ Sergey Averintsev says poignantly that in this particular case metaphor and reality have switched their places (Аверинцев, 1977, p. 195).

Slavs as the Inheritors of the *Book*

It is exactly this state of affairs that the Slavs have inherited from Byzantium at the time of the creation of the Slavic literary culture stemming from the missions of Cyril and Methodius and their immediate disciples in the IX Century. The invention of a new alphabet for languages of the peoples entering the Church's fold was nothing new at that time. In this we are reminded of the creation of the Gothic Alphabet by Bishop Ulfilas (circa 311–383), the Armenian Alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots (362-440), followed soon by the Georgian Alphabet and the Caucasian Albanian Alphabet.¹⁷ All of these different scripts, regardless their divergent external

¹⁵ Constantinople.

¹⁶ In this sense, it is a nod to Psalm 45:2 of the Hebrew Bible, where its author exclaims - “my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.”

¹⁷ For a general overview of the process of creating new writing systems in the early Christian era see: Coulmas, 2004.

forms, closely follow the pattern of the Greek Alphabet, both in the way they represent spoken language and in the layout of the order of letters.

Within this context, the very presence of an alphabet and the resulting book culture was seen by the Slavic Christian authors almost as a *seal* confirming their belonging to the Faith. In this way writing and literacy became a constituent of the identity of the new Slavic Christians, which was contrasted to their own *illiterate* pagan past and to the equally *illiterate* present of the contemporary pagan Other. A striking case in point for this serves a curious episode recorded by the anonymous author of the Slavonic *Longer Life of Constantine the Philosopher* (Cyril), the creator of the Slavic alphabet, contained together with the *Life of Methodius*, his brother, within the so-called *Pannonian Legends*, an Old Slavonic work from the X Century. There, an encounter of Constantine with an adept of the ancestral Khazar (in all probability shamanistic) religion is described, during his mission to the Khazar Khaganate in 860 on behalf of the Eastern Roman Empire. Constantine is asked by the Khazar:

Why do you¹⁸ take all of your stories from books, which you carry in your hands? We,¹⁹ as if having consumed the entire wisdom, take it out directly from our chest, without taking pride in Scriptures like you. – The Philosopher²⁰ responded: I shall answer you thus: If you chance to meet on the road a naked person, and he was to tell you – “I possess plenty of clothes and gold”, would you believe him? – No! - he²¹ answered. – So, I say the same in regard to you. – spoke the Philosopher. (and continued) – If you have consumed the entire wisdom, could you please tell me how many generations have passed till Moses and for how many years did each generation last? – Since he didn’t know how to answer, the man kept silent. (Киселков, 1923, p. 17)²²

The message brought home by this passage is as simple as poignant, namely it seems that wisdom is equated with book learning while not leaving any alternative. This view regarding the value of writing and literacy, their virtual “apotheosis” is received with gusto by the Slavic Christians. That this represented a pan-Christian phenomenon by that time we can infer from another episode, which structurally is almost identical to the aforementioned concerning Constantine-Cyril and the Khazar. It comes from the eastern edge of the Christian ecumene, and it is contained in the Syriac *Life of Isho‘sobran* (see *Chabot*, 1897), dedicated to Isho‘so-

¹⁸ Christians.

¹⁹ The Khazar shamanists.

²⁰ Constantine – Cyril.

²¹ The Khazar.

²² Here and in other places in this paper the English translations from Old Slavonic are mine.

bran of Adiabene († 620), Zoroastrian convert to Christianity, written by Isho'yahb III, the Catholicos of the Church of the East (649-659). Patriarch Isho'yahb recounts how when Isho'sobran converted to Christianity, he asked the priest Isho'rahmeh, who baptized him, to be taught the Christian doctrine from the Bible. Isho'rahmeh in turn offered his son Isho'zeh as a suitable teacher. When that was settled, Isho'sobran asked the boy: "What, according to the rules, one has to start learning first?" Isho'zeh answered: "The letters, of course, are learned first and foremost, then one learns how to read syllables, after which the Psalms are read, and gradually one becomes able to read the whole Holy Scripture." To this, Isho'sobran objected: "It is useless to learn letters. Instead, why don't you teach me first how to intone by heart at least ten Psalms?" To this the boy started explaining that he shouldn't learn the doctrine by "mumbling like the Magi"; on the contrary, if one wants to learn the whole Scripture, he should do it by mastering the letters first. However, Isho'sobran insisted upon his own, so the boy reluctantly agreed to teach him without using letters, but through memorizing by heart the words of the Scripture. The narrative also describes how Isho'sobran made his memorization through "swinging the neck in the manner of the Magi" while repeating the contents in a strong rhythmic voice.²³ Finally, the boy's father Priest Isho'rahmeh objected to the oral-auditory method of learning the Holy Scripture, and told Isho'sobran that it is still necessary to learn the letters first. Isho'sobran at last agreed, and the story ends with the report that as he finally "obeyed" and "mastered the letters", he learned how to read the Psalms and consequently all of the books of the Bible (Пигулевская, 1979, p. 18-19).

From both these narratives we can infer two main points:

- 1) In the self-perception of the Christian cultural community, writing and reading have acquired the status of the "only correct method" of mastering the doctrines and acquiring spiritually relevant knowledge. Hence, literate culture became a hallmark of identity for the Christians in opposition both to the Zoroastrians in the Sasanian Empire and the "outer" pagans such as the Khazars, with their predominantly oral-auditory culture.
- 2) Learning through reading and writing for the Christians was deemed to be by its very nature practically superior to oral-auditory methods of learning. In the *Life of Isho'sobran* this is implied by the fact that the

²³ Most probably we have got here a description of the mnemonic methods used by the Zoroastrian adepts, which included specified movements of the head when memorizing different sorts of phonetic units. (Cf. West, 2010, p. 32.) For more information on the Zoroastrian sacerdotal culture and their methods of knowledge transmission cf. Boyce (1970), p. 22-38, and also Boyce (1979).

role of Isho 'sobran's teacher in the story is given to a mere boy. The message is clear: With the help of letters, even a young boy is superior in knowledge to a grownup lacking mastery of the letters. In the *Pannonian legends* the same message is conveyed by the embarrassing fact that the Khazar apparently wasn't able to reproduce even banal numerical facts, being handicapped by the lack of letters, something that Cyril, and by extension Christianity, was master of.

As befitting neophytes, Slavic Christians took the reverence for the *written* word to laudatory extremes, surpassing even Byzantium in this. In fact, a glimpse to what extent letters and literacy were highly valued by those, who were intended to be its beneficiaries, we can get from the *Laudatory Homily on Constantine the Philosopher* written by Clement of Ohrid (*circa* 840-916). In this homily the praises the author bestows Cyril use such a language that it is impossible to distinguish whether he is talking about the enlightenment coming from the baptismal font, i.e. the act of Christianization, or the one coming from the function of the newly created letters, making these two notions almost conterminous. For him, the books made accessible to the Slavs through the creation of the new alphabet by Constantine - Cyril served as the very instrument of salvation:

He,²⁴ according to the prophecy, made the tongue of the stammers speak distinctly,²⁵ and **by the way of books** he led everyone towards salvation (Климент Охридски, 1970, p. 426).

And in the ensuing praises for his teacher, Clement continues:

I bless your God-directed fingers, through which the freedom from the yoke of sin was **written** for my people. (Климент Охридски, 1970, p. 427)

Here we get the idea that was unheard in otherwise overtly *grammatocentric* Byzantium, namely that literacy is tantamount to means for salvation that almost bestows to the alphabet and the act of reading and writing an eschatological dimension. This dimension seems to be also implied in the short treatise *On the Letters* authored by Chernorizets Hrabar, where he eulogizes and defends the creation of the Slavic alphabet. Here also, the creation of letters is taken to be an expression of God's special love for mankind:

Then God, lover of men, Who governs everything and does not leave mankind without knowledge, but leads everyone towards knowledge and salvation, showed mercy to the Slavic people and sent to them Constantine, also called Cyril, a just and truthful man. He created for them thirty-eight letters,

²⁴ Constantine-Cyril.

²⁵ Isaiah 32: 4.

some modelled upon the Greek letters and others especially suited for the Slavic tongue. (Черноризец Храбър; 1967, с. 158)

In passages like the afore cited we found no trace of the idea expressed by Irenaeus that there could be tribes “who achieve salvation that is written in their hearts not by ink on paper, but by the Spirit.” In the worldview of the Slavic Christian authors the very notion of this becomes a self-evident impossibility. We could go even further. In their “psychology of the letters” they have apparently resolved the Pauline opposition between the letter “that killeth” and the Spirit “giveth live” by collapsing this juxtaposition in the (implicit) idea that Spirit giveth life thorough the letter. For authors such as Clement of Ohrid and Chernorizets Hrabar not only that there is no contradiction between grace and the letter, but they deem the letter sort of manifested grace. With the invention of the Slavic alphabet by Cyril Slavs became capable to participate in this grace, and Chernorizets Hrabar even attempts to turn the tables on the Byzantine teachers of the Slavic Christians by implying that the “Slavic letters are more holy and worthier of respect since they were created by a holy man, while the Greek ones were made by pagans.” He also sees perfection in the Slavic alphabet bearing witness to the “hand of God” as being involved in its creation, something that the Greek one is lacking, which according to him is manifested in the swift creation of the Slavic letters by a single person against the gradual development of the Greek script taking the effort of many men. At this Slavic instance we finally got to a point of full reversal of the early Christian misgivings about writing and literate culture contained in the very New Testament. From the sceptical stance of the New Testament and some of the early Church Fathers we come to the assertive self-consciousness of the Christian Church as the repository of literary culture, culminating in the view of the Slavic authors about the letters as instruments of grace and salvation, thus making the triumph of writing within Christendom complete.

And yet, on a later date we can sometimes discover unexpectedly the old Pauline devaluation of the “letter” surfacing in Slavic Christian spirituality. This brings some sense of surprise in view of the nearly total dominance of reverence for the written word, the Book within Eastern Christianity from middle Byzantine times on, which was passed on the Slavic acolytes of the Faith. Thus, in mid XX Century we have got Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov (1896-1993), who in the biographical work devoted to his spiritual master Monk Silouan of Mt. Athos (1866-1938) shares his musings on the role of the Bible in the life of the Church in such terms that most certainly would become a cause for scandal if heard in

those sullen quarters of Christendom where the doctrine of *sola scriptura* reigns supreme:

If the Church somehow got devoid of her Tradition, then she would cease to be what she is, since the serving of the New Testament is the service of the Holy Spirit “written not by ink, but by the living God, not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Cor. 3: 3-6).

If, on the other hand, we are to imagine that for one or another reason the Church lost all of her books, i.e. the Old and the New Testament, the works of the Holy Fathers, the liturgical books, then the Tradition would be able to restore the Scripture, not in exactly the same words, certainly with another sort of language, but nonetheless, in its essence this new Scripture would still express “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 1: 3), a manifestation of the one and the same Spirit, who constantly acts in the Church, being her fundament, her essence.

The Holy Scripture isn’t deeper and more important than the Holy Tradition, but as already said, it is just one of its forms. (Схиархимандрит Софроний Сахаров, 2011, p. 96)

These passages read almost like a footnote to Irenaeus with his claim that the Spirit is able the guide without the help of books those “accurately keeping the olden tradition received”, while at the same time this concept of Silouan diverges strikingly from the discourse we have seen present in the foundational ecclesiastical authors of the Slavs.

Still, it is questionable to what extent the hallowing of writing and literacy done by those ecclesiastical authors, who obviously were clerics and prelates, touched the masses of the Slavic laity in the Balkans. Perhaps they felt almost superstitious reverence for the written word, a phenomenon not that uncommon among unlettered folks. We cannot be sure. But we shouldn’t overlook when thinking over this issue the fact that among the South Slavs the oral-auditory transmission of relevant knowledge essential for building communal identity continued well into the modern era. Of course, this is represented by the epic poetry and the folk bards of the wider Dinaric area admired by Goethe and in whom Milman Parry (1902-1935) discovered his Homer. However, even they succumbed to the gravitational field of the reverence for literacy when the preponderance of modern education showed its force even in their mountain valleys.²⁶

²⁶ Within this context the issue remains to what extent to which “literary” Christianity affected the inner mountainous areas of the wider Dinaric region even during the Middle ages, especially if we take into consideration the sway of the “Bosnian Church” (regardless its contested relationship with Bogumilism) held in the area and to what degree it could be considered a “religion of the Book” on pair with the Latin and Byzantine Churches of the time. Having this is in mind it becomes possible to surmise that wider acceptance of literate culture in the area came only in the modern era.

In the history of the cultural evaluation of literacy rarely we are able to get a snapshot of the exact moment when in a given local community the transition between orality/aurality and literality happens. And sometimes this can border on the hilarious. Vladimir Dvornikovich (1888-1956) in his *Characterology of Yugoslavs* gives us an illustration of how those venerable South Slavic folk bards adapted to the new cultural norms of total preponderance of literacy. Dvornikovich shares his experience of observing a bard from Bosnia in the first half of XX Century performing a song of his own making accompanied by *gusle* while pretending to read it from a blank sheet of paper upon which he traced imaginary lines with his finger! When asked by Dvornikovich why does he do that, the bard answered it was easier for him to sing the song if he imagined that he actually read it. Then he went on to describe the whole process of creating and performing his songs in the following way: The first step is conceiving the song in his mind, the second step is singing it aloud, then writing it down, after that learning it by the heart from the notes, and finally singing it in front of an audience while pretending to read from a blank sheet of paper (Дворниковић, 1939, p. 574).

With this slightly comical note we shall end our cursory exploration of the pathways by which the cultural valuation of writing and literacy was absorbed and developed by the Slavs. We have seen how this wasn't a straightforward process, but a meandering one, and at moments seeming that it could achieve synthesis during the early Christian era, but soon it decisively swung towards excessive reverence for the "letter". However, the Slavs weren't just passive recipients of already formed cultural norms regarding literacy from Byzantium, but in the persons of their earliest ecclesiastical authors they creatively transformed them in the direction of even stronger reverence for the written word, and at moments, as seen in Chernorizets Hrabar, consciously taking this point as a means not only to assert a position of equality *vis-à-vis* their erstwhile Byzantine instructors in the Faith, but even superiority.

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Igor Radev

FREEDOM FROM THE YOKE OF SIN WAS WRITTEN.

Cultural Value of Literacy in Formative Old Slavonic Authors Contextualized within Byzantine Tradition: Transformation, Continuity and Conflict

S u m m a r y

The phenomenon of writing, as well as literate culture in general, within the discourse of the formative Old Slavonic authors of IX-XI Century is valued as a pinnacle of human accomplishment. This attitude represents a continuation of the similar trend already present in Byzantine culture of the time. However, the stated attitude was an end result of a transformative process within Christianity beginning from a starting point of much more skeptical valuation of literacy, as we can infer from the New Testament, especially the Pauline corpus and some early Christian authors. The paper shall attempt to trace the reasons behind the transformation of this earlier attitude during the first centuries of Byzantium towards what we choose to call – *grammatocentrism*. In continuation, we shall explore the pathways of transmission and the extent to which this *grammatocentrism* was appropriated by early Slavonic authors and in turn used to assert their own identity vis-à-vis Byzantium. Finally, an account of the cultural conflict premised upon the *grammatocentrism* that has played out during encounters with intellectual worldviews downplaying the value of literacy.

Keywords: literacy, Old Slavonic, value of literacy, grammatocentrism, cultural conflict