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**BIBLICAL STORY'S LEXICAL REPRESENTATION IN RUSSIAN  
POETRY OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup>-20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

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### Abstract

The article is dedicated to the functioning of the biblical units in the poetic text. Exploring the Bible language influence on fiction discourse, the authors introduce the concept of “poetic bibleism”, defining thus an exact or transformed quotation from the Bible, used in a poetic text for ideological and thematic correlation with Scripture. The content of some Russian poetry texts is related to the retelling and commenting on the biblical narrative, and there is an important role of poetic biblical units. The essence of such a text is not just a retelling of the biblical story, but its author's experience, development, and even reinterpretation. In such a situation, bibleism is introduced as a sign and token. The basis of the biblical text interpretation tradition was mostly set up by Afanasy Afanasyevich Fet in his poem “Abaddon”. The poetic text of the twentieth century, as well as the poems of A. A. Fet, is focused on the interpretation and transformation of the biblical narrative. From this point of view especially significant is the poem by Maximilian Alexandrovich Voloshin “Vision of Ezekiel”, which not only reproduces the biblical conflict in poetic form, but also reinterprets the meanings marked by bibleism, as well as the “Biblical Verses” by Anna Akhmatova and “Candlemas” by Joseph Brodsky, which is characterized, on the one hand, by an accurate following of the gospel plot as a whole, and on the other – a significant increase in the narrative volume due to the detailed description of what is happening.

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*Keywords:* Bibleism, interpretive situation, marker, poetic discourse



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## 1. Introduction

The problem of bibleisms functioning language and text, which became the subject of linguists' attention in the 90s of the XX century and in the beginning of the XXI century (Alekseev, 2016; Etkind, 1998; Frolova, 2010; Katermina & Solovyova, 2019; Onoprienko, 1997; Romanova, 2003; Semenova, 2003, etc.), remains relevant to the end of the second decade of the XXI century, including in the field of research of the poetic text (Fomina, 2014; Kicheva, 2012; Klimovich, 2010; Sergeeva, 2019a).

When considering the influence of the Holy Scripture language it is necessary to introduce the concept of "poetic bibleism" into the fiction discourse (Sergeeva, 2011; Sergeeva, 2019b), which is understood as an exact or transformed quotation from the Bible (from a lexical unit to a microtext), used in a poetic text for ideological and thematic correlation with the Scripture. Bibleism is used to "remind" the addressee of a problem, character, moral conflict, or plot situation in the old or New Testament, and can become a significant poetic text element. The content of some Russian poetry texts is directly related to the retelling and commentary of the biblical narrative, which is often directly indicated by their names. In the poetry of XIX-XX<sup>th</sup> centuries, such texts are relatively few, however, is often very significant to the author's texts such as "Abaddon" by Afanasy Fet, "Biblical Verses" by Anna Akhmatova, "Armageddon", "Vision of Ezekiel", "Judas the Apostle" by Maximilian Voloshin, "Isaac and Abraham", "Candlemas", "Flight into Egypt", "Christmas Star" by Joseph Brodsky. In these poems, interpreting well-known Bible stories, the number of biblical units is very large (Leah, Michal, David, Lord, Abraham, Simeon, the prophetess Anna, the lamb, the angel of strength, sacrifice, temple, etc.). It should be noted that the essence of this text is not just a paraphrase or a reference to the corresponding story, but the author's poetic experience, development and even reinvention.

## 2. Problem Statement

Bibleism as a marker of Holy Scripture plot expands and transforms the content associated with the semantics of a particular lexical unit. Such bibleism can become the basis of a text whose main content is not just a reference to the events depicted in the Bible, but an experience of an eternally relevant plot with reference to the present and in accordance with the feelings and thoughts of the protagonist, as it is presented in the works that served as the basis for the analysis.

Based on the use of a certain set of lexical units in the biblical narrative interpretation in the lyric text, either the event canvas of the old or New Testament is associated with the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist, or the events of Holy Scripture, projected on the poet's understanding of a certain situation, turn into a poetic retelling of the biblical story, often with a rearrangement of accents or commentary. Consequently, bibleism can organize an interpretive situation in which the inner world of the character correlates with the content of the sacred text, or becomes the basis of a more or less accurate retelling of a fragment of the corresponding plot. An example of the first situation can be the poems of Anna Akhmatova "Confession" and "December 24, 1971" by Joseph Brodsky, the second – "Abaddon" by Afanasy Fet, "Vision of Ezekiel" by Maximilian Voloshin, "Biblical Verses" by A. Akhmatova and "Candlemas" by J. Brodsky.

In both cases bibleism is introduced as a sign and token. Such a marker can be a proper name that is inextricably linked to the corresponding plot (Rachel, Lot, etc.), a common name or superlative nomination (star, shepherd, Tree of Knowledge, Ark of the Covenant, etc.), as well as a direct quote. Poetic texts that develop and transform the biblical narrative through the use of the listed vocabulary can be described as interpretive ones.

### **3. Research Questions**

The basis of the biblical text interpretation tradition was mostly set up by Afanasy Fet His poem “Abaddon” is associated with the correlation of the content of the Apocalypse with the poet's modernity. However, the text of the Apocalypse is not only reinterpreted from the point of view of the story outcome – the end of the world or the year of trials, but also transformed in order to maintain the poetic metre, increase expressiveness and build a single compressed plot, aiming at the climax of the lyrical narrative.

It is the obvious reduction of the text of the Apocalypse, while maintaining the unity of the development of the selected storyline as the main one, which can be considered the main feature of the interpretive retelling by A. Fet.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to highlight the plot transformations and features of textual interpretations of the Holy Scripture in the poetic works of Afanasy Fet and authors, following his principles of the biblical text recreation.

### **5. Research Methods**

The basic research methods are contextual analysis and comparative method.

### **6. Findings**

In the process of analysis there were a highly significant plot transformations and text interpretations. This is primarily a change in the beginning, which we see in the Apocalypse, because the Fet's lyric character either does not need the calls of the heavenly voice, or does not consider the very mention of this voice significant. A much more concise description of the picture presented to the narrator: the poet omits “was set in heaven”, apparently as a matter of course when describing God and immediately highlights the center of the poetic composition:

The angel, the lion, the calf and the eagle -  
all of them six-winged - hold the throne...

In the text by A. Fet “four beasts” are lion, calf, eagle and angel, that, on the one hand, is in full compliance with Christian symbols (including the symbols of the apostles-evangelists), and with another – allows to describe the creatures around the divine throne very succinctly: in the context, is omitted a detailed description of the appearance and behavior of the four “beasts” that “Revelation to John” are described like

lion, calf, eagle and man. The “six-winged” is one-word epithet that replaces the whole construction of “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him”.

The poetic text omits a rather lengthy description of the locus in “Revelation” (“And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal”), from which only the lexemes “lightning” and “thunder” remain as the most vivid sign of the presence of the deity. There is also no description of the elders praising God. This episode is a side event for the author, whose poetic narrative is centered on a retelling of only one dramatic “Revelation” story: the appearance of locusts and the associated suffering of all earthly creatures. A. Fet, omitting other episodes of the Apocalypse, chooses this one, on the one hand, as the most vivid, dramatic and impressive, and on the other – as allowing the work to end not with the destruction of the world, but with the display of severe trials for humanity to end not with the destruction of the world, but with the display of severe trials for humanity.

In contrast to the rather voluminous gospel text, a small poem can only present one storyline and one lyrical climax, and therefore only one episode is fully embodied. This also determines the selection of lexical units used in the text of A. Fet – biblical units that verbalize the storyline and provide an undoubted proximity to the content of the selected fragment of “Revelation”: angel, stars, lion, calf, eagle, throne, horse, locusts, teeth, sting, pit, smoke, etc.

Probably one of the most illustrative examples of the difference between the use of words in a sacred and poetic text is the use of the lexeme angel in the first line of a poem. First of all, a detailed description of the appearance of the third “beast” (“the third beast had a face as a man”) does not meet the requirement of the need for brevity of the poetic text; second, in the semantic structure of the lexeme “angel” present some “belonging to the divine sphere”, and finally, the use of this biblical unit necessary for the author to compensate the repeated omission of the word “angel”, which in the poem much less frequency than in the “Apocalypse” (3 word usage, and one of them, “the angel of the pit” – the nomination of “the fallen angel”, “anti-angel”).

Omission of a significant number of details, “compression” to 20 poetic lines of the plot, which in the Scripture takes up several pages, which is a characteristic feature of A. Fet's interpretation of the Apocalypse text. So, further, the poet excludes from his text all events up to the trumpet of the third angel.

Two stars falling from the sky in a poetic text are united: “And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters <...> and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit: and he opened the bottomless pit”, focusing on the episode which the author presents as the main. The fall of the star that marks the end of the world in the text of A. Fet is much more intense and, on the one hand, devoid of biblical details, and on the other – more detailed. The comparison “like a candle” is omitted as insufficiently intense. It also omits a detailed indication of where exactly the star fell, since it is only important that the star fell “to earth”:

Sounding angel is flying pass,  
Star with a crash is rushing to the earth,  
The earth is now broken to bottomless pit,

Smoke, like from oven, is breaking out of it.

It should be noted that the lexeme “star” is used along with the biblical units, not distinctly marking as such (the pit, the smoke, the oven, the earth, to sound), and unbiblical vocabulary (fall, fly, pass, is broken, break out); thus the scope of the biblical narrative expands and actualized occurring partly outside play a well-known religious story; although the plot of the piece as a whole is reproduced almost completely.

Using the previously listed biblical units, A. Fet recreates the events presented in the Scripture. However, the poet uses non-biblical vocabulary in the biblical narrative, which includes seminal intensity in the semantic structure and makes the reproduced narrative more expressive: passing, flying, broken, escaped.

The angel in the poem “Abaddon” is not just sounding (trumpeting), but is in active motion. For example, to fly pass, i.e. “quickly fly, pass, run, etc.” (Evgenieva, 1987). Since the verb “to fly” can be perceived simultaneously in the biblical meaning (“to fall”) and in the meaning of “to rush” (Evgenieva, 1986), the star is perceived as ‘rushing towards the earth. The story, despite its brevity, has a strong impact on the reader, because it depicts not just a falling star, but a rapidly falling star, which also makes a sharp sound. No less significant is the image of the smoke that the pit spews (to break out – “quickly, with force to manifest, to go out” (Evgenieva, 1985a). And the sounds made by locusts are terrifying: “...knocking menacingly, out of the smoke, the locusts came out, unto the horse,” (menacingly -menacing, i.e. “inducing fear, horror, threatening trouble, death” (Evgenieva, 1985b).

Similar techniques for inflating tension and compressing meanings can be identified in the poems by Afanasy Fet when describing the appearance of locusts. The source text: “And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth <...> And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails...”.

A long text is reduced by the poet to a few lines of verse:

With its wings, knocking menacingly,  
Out of the smoke, the locusts came out, unto the horse,  
Teeth like the lion’s, scythe like the wife’s,  
Scorpion sting on the tail – backside.  
... They will torment, they will sting you, that’s it  
Call for the death – and no answer for thee...

It should also be noted that in the poem “Abaddon” the repetitions, typical for the Scripture, are removed in the original text (smoke, torments, etc.). Only one repetition, which is fundamentally important for the poetic text, is used: “You will call for death, and death will not come” (“Call for the death – and no answer for thee”).

Extremely revealing is the transformation of the description of the “angel of the pit”, which in “Revelation” is limited with the words “And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the

bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon". In the work of Afanasy Fet we see the only context that expands the text of the Apocalypse:

Proud and glorious, shining angel beneath,  
Is king Abaddon of the bottomless pit.

Perhaps Avaddon's being "proud and glorious" is a legacy of the poetic tradition of Byronic romanticism, which includes a romantic idea of demonic beauty.

The poem ends with a very revealing fragment, also missing from the Apocalypse:  
Let all the creatures know,  
What the Lord wants you to be tempted so.

The final lines of the poem most clearly demonstrate the difference between the lyrical plot and the original text, connected primarily with the statement that the Lord does not want the destruction, but the test of his creation. Indeed, the purpose of the author of the text considered is not just to retell a culturally significant text and show the end of the world, but to focus on the anxiety of the atmosphere of time.

The poetic text of the twentieth century, as well as the poems of A. Fet, is oriented if not to transformation, then to interpretation of the biblical narrative. Especially significant from this point of view is M. Voloshin's poem "Vision of Ezekiel", where a significant fragment of the biblical "Book of Ezekiel" is reproduced close to the text. For the author of the poem, it is extremely important to accurately, although also more concisely than in the original text, convey the impression of the appearance of the Lord, so not only individual biblical units are used, but entire text fragments, somewhat transformed and abbreviated by the author:

The light was revealed on the river of Chebar.  
In the swirling storm he moved –  
A cloud, carried by the supreme forces –  
Four-armed, six-winged,  
With bovine, avian and human,  
And lion faces from different angles.

The poet draws an unambiguous parallel between the "daughter of Jerusalem", which Ezekiel prophesies about, and his homeland. It is to Russia that the menacing words that end the work belong:

Let them beat you, stone you,  
They lash impure flesh with whips,  
You will become a barren and trampled field...  
For loved by a jealous love –  
So I tell you, I am your Lord!

The last lines of the poem differ from the text of the Bible, which is important for an interpretive lyric work, which not only reproduces the biblical conflict in poetic form, but also reinterprets the meanings marked by biblical units. This can be explained in two ways: either the author specifically omitted the words "I will not be angry anymore" and "I will forgive you everything", because there is no forgiveness for the country where everything high, bright and holy is committed; or he, counting on the knowledge of any modern reader of these lines of Scripture, implies God's promised forgiveness. Apparently, the second

interpretation, which follows from the phrase “loved by a jealous love” used in the text, will be more accurate.

In addition to the text of M. Voloshin, the most illustrative examples of interpretation of the plot of Scripture using the selection of lexemes used in it are “Bible Verses” by A. Akhmatova, where the name of each poem immediately correlates it with a certain biblical narrative. Thus, the poem “Rachel” from this cycle, the closest to the original source, reproduces the story from the Book of Genesis, which is immediately indicated by two proper names, and then – two more that determine the perception of the plot, so the presence of those common nouns that are perceived as biblical units only in the context, is not so significant, although it is directly related to the story of Jacob:

A man met Rachel, in a valley. Jacob  
Bowed courteously, this wanderer far from home.  
Flocks, raising the hot dust, could not slake their  
Thirst. The well was blocked with a huge stone.  
Jacob wrenched the stone from the well  
Of pure water, and the flocks drank their fill.  
But the heart in his breast began to grieve,  
It ached like an open wound.  
He agreed that in Laban’s fields he should serve  
Seven years to win the maiden’s hand<sup>1</sup>.

The number of biblical units used in the poem (Rachel, Jacob, stone, to drink, seven years), on the one hand, clearly demonstrates the following of the plot of St. John Gospel. On the other hand, it shows that there is no need for their excessive use and the use of only those lexical units that are fully markers of the corresponding plot: “And there he saw a water-hole in a field, and by the side of it three flocks of sheep, for there they got water for the sheep: and on the mouth of the water-hole there was a great stone <...> And Jacob was in love with Rachel; and he said, I will be your servant seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter. < ... > And Laban got together all the men of the place and gave a feast. And in the evening he took Leah, his daughter, and gave her to him, and he went in to her”.

It should be mentioned, however, that the author sometimes replaces the actual biblical vocabulary with synonyms and uses a large number of non-biblical lexical units.

It is significant that the text that is closest to the biblical narrative (and that is how it is perceived) has a number of significant differences from it, not only related to style and word usage, but also partly to plot changes. The transformation of the original source is determined by the specificity of the lyric text of the twentieth century. This is primarily the omission of rather lengthy, but insignificant for the author and contrary to the requirement of brevity of the poetic text, details typical of the biblical narrative: “Then Jacob said to the herdmen, My brothers, where do you come from? And they said, From Haran. < ... > And weeping for joy, Jacob gave Rachel a kiss. <...>. And Laban gave Zilpah, his servant-girl, to Leah, to be her waiting-woman...”. Compare with the poem:

But silver-loving Laban lives

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<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere “Rachel” by Anna Akhmatova – translation by D.M. Thomas, British novelist, 1976.  
[Translator’s note]

In a web of cunning, and is unknown to grace.

He thinks: every deceit forgives

Itself to the glory of Laban's house.

And he led Leah firmly to the tent

Where Jacob took her, blind and innocent.

Since the poems of A. Akhmatova are dedicated to the story of love, the text does not mention the story of the slaves and the sons born to Jacob by Leah and the other women-slaves. At the same time, additional plot elements appear, verbalized only by the names of the main characters, without using other biblical vocabulary:

And Jacob dreams the hour of paradise:

In the valley the clear spring,

The joyful look in Rachel's eyes,

And her voice like a bird's song...

The specificity of the lyric due to the addition of the image of the inner world of the characters and describe their feelings ("But the heart in his breast began to grieve"; "He thinks: every deceit forgives..."); a picture of feelings and words, impossible for the characters of the Scripture:

And the youngest daughter of Laban groans,

Tearing the thick braids of her hair.

She curses her sister and reviles God, and

Begs the Angel of Death to descend.

The statement of the stating type about the love of Jacob is transformed into an expressive rhetorical exclamation, which belongs equally to the character and the author:

For you, Rachel! Seven years in his eyes

No more than seven dazzling days.

During the interpretation of the ancient plot, everyday details appear (this wanderer far from home, Flocks, raising the hot dust, Of pure water, and the flocks drank their fill) and the degree of expressiveness of the text increases (the stone is not big, but huge; fell in love – the heart began to grieve, ached like an open wound; tearing the thick braids). In addition, beyond the limits of biblical word usage, the imagery that is natural for a poetic text – metaphors, epithets and comparisons (to ache like an open wound; dazzling days; high night, the hour of paradise).

It is significant, however, that in the same mini-cycle A. Akhmatova placed the poem "Michal", which is characterized by a high degree of transformation of the biblical narrative, including due to the low use of biblical units. Nevertheless, two proper names, used in contact, immediately explain which fragment of the Scripture was the source of a poetic reinterpretation of the poem "Michal", which combines two biblical stories – from the 16 and 18 chapters of the Book of Samuel. The poet changes the text of chapter 16 almost beyond recognition, the image of the creative process becomes the main one at the beginning of the poem, and the name of king Saul, as well as his fear and hostility towards David, are not mentioned.

In the second part of A. Akhmatova's work, we see a clear transformation of a short verse from chapter 18: "Now Saul's daughter Michal loved David". The biblical units are actually missing (except for the names of the characters and the apocryphal name Lilith). This is a typical work of the poet's love lyrics:

...In her soul is grief and resentment,  
And yet, Michal wants – David.  
Paler than death, her lips are clenched.  
In her eyes, green, frenzy thrills and glints...<sup>2</sup>

The description of the character's feelings and appearance, as well as the introduction of the character's direct speech, is a feature of modern literature that is absent from this fragment of the Book of Samuel. That is why the story was developed without the use of the biblical units:

Words are spoken deeper than her will:  
"Most likely, they gave poison in my drink,  
And disoriented my soul with darkness  
My sauciness – now my shamefulness!  
A vagrant, an upstart, a shepherd!"

It should be noted that among the poetic texts that interpret those described in the Scripture, one of the most interesting is "Candlemas" by Joseph Brodsky. For this poem is typical, on the one hand, strict adherence to the plot of the gospel in general, and on the other a significant increase in the volume of the narration due to the details of what is happening.

The use of the names "Saint Simeon" and "Anna the prophetess" is quite sufficient to identify the plot, which in general develops after the biblical one. Simeon's speech is also rendered extremely close to the text of the gospel. However, in the poem of J. Brodsky there are obvious changes, both plot and lexical-stylistic, both private (for example, the name of the temple – the church is "russified", and the lexeme "pagans" is replaced by the complex name "peoples of heathenish faith"), and affecting the perception of the narrative as a whole (the sequence of presentation changes, and the predicted Simeon is reported not at the beginning of the story, but immediately before the character's appeal to God, the verse-characteristic of Simeon and the fragment dedicated to Anna are omitted as not significant for the described event).

J. Brodsky introduces a description of details that do not need biblical vocabulary to depict: domestic ("he in his innocent dream", "quietness solemn enthralled them"), and figurative-descriptive ("resembled a scaffolding"; "that temple, like motionless woods, them embraced"; "yet, barely brushing the columns, the echo of Simeon's words flew above their heads for some time, as an injured dove"), and symbolic ("and only the boy with an incident beam was lightened"). It is significant that the poet does not use the lexeme "Christ", but the lexeme "Son", perhaps emphasizing that the infant is still just a child who is not yet called by any of the divine names.

The author enriches the poetic narrative by transmitting the feelings of those present and even shows the thoughts of Mary, as well as composing the words of Simeon that are absent from the Bible:

And Simeon, addressing to Mary, proceeded:  
"Behold: In this child on your shoulders, there lies,  
the cause of ones' fall and of other ones' rise,  
the subject for dispute, the reason for arming"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere "Michal" by Anna Akhmatova – translation by Don Mager, 2017 [Translator's note]

<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere "Candlemas" by Joseph Brodsky – translation by Joseph Brodsky [Translator's note]

The final part of the poem, dedicated to the departure of Simeon from the temple, which does not exist in the Scripture, is particularly significant. It not only describes the process of leaving the temple and “leaving” earth life in general, but also describes the Christ Child as an incarnate light that is stronger than death:

And only the sight of the Infant, with light  
around his crown, the soul of the strider  
was bearing in front of his eyes, as a kind of  
unquenchable lamp, through that ultimate door  
to absolute darkness, where never before  
had come to enlighten his passage a human.  
The lamp was alight, and the road illumined.

The biblical units are absent in the given fragment, and this demonstrates the possibility of creating a poetic narrative that interprets the biblical text even without such units.

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, it can be approved that a deviation from the biblical text in the poetry of the twentieth century may even be associated with the deepened meaning of the gospel narrative for a reader, and marker signs that clearly indicate the biblical plot do not necessarily have to be numerous.

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