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## The Biblical Theme in the Historical Monographs of Georgy P. Fedotov

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**Abstract.** The article stresses that Georgy P. Fedotov's systematic reference to the Bible enabled him in his historical monographs (*Abelard, St. Filipp Metropolitan of Moscow, Saints of Ancient Russia, Spiritual Poems*) to reconstruct the spiritual reality of past eras and symbolically perceive the present. Fedotov intended to know *The Gospel in History*, Russian religiosity, exploring it on the material of hagiographies of saints, spiritual poems, folk faith, apocrypha, and prologues. Fedotov considered the history of Russian culture in terms of a "living chain," an integral phenomenon existing due to the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition. However, "The sacred tradition of the Church is included in the general stream of historical tradition, all complex, always muddy, human weaving truth and falsehood." Fedotov raised the question of the relationship between scientific criticism and biblical exegetics: how can we reconcile exegetics of sacred texts, which assume that the Bible is an inspired book, and historical criticism, which by its very nature cannot share such a position, being aimed at comprehending objective historical reality? He solved it convincingly practically through hermeneutic religious analysis of hagiographic monuments and spiritual verses. In his *Spiritual Poems* Fedotov explores folklore material compared to biblical texts, hagiographies, and apocrypha, to comprehend the peculiarity of religious "Weltanschauung" and popular orthodoxy. In spiritual verses, there was a transformation of biblical images (Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Last Judgment) under the influence of folk faith with pagan features. In folklore texts, Fedotov reveals how Christ, from savior and redeemer, turns into a king and dreadful judge. The image of the Mother of God merges in the popular consciousness with the image of the mother earth, suffering from people. Eschatological prophecies are based on impressions from icons, frescoes, and lubok pictures. Fedotov's historical monographs illuminate various aspects of Russian religious consciousness regarding Holy Scripture, considering dogmatic biblical exegetics and historical criticism. All the mentioned facts allow us to assert that Fedotov was the leading secular biblical scholar of the Russian diaspora.

**Keywords:** Holy Scripture, biblical studies, Georgy P. Fedotov, exegesis, hagiology, historical criticism, spiritual poetry

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In the creative legacy of the Russian émigré thinker Georgy P. Fedotov, the exegetical component has an essential and currently underestimated significance<sup>1</sup>. For Fedotov, as for most Russian thinkers who were forced to leave their homeland after the revolutionary events of 1917, the Holy Scripture and the Sacred Tradition were not simply a tribute to tradition and spiritual experience gained in the course of personal formation within a particular cultural and historical context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but often the semantic center of the entire creative and religious-philosophical formation<sup>2</sup>. The Bible is thus the book that, in Fedotov's case, makes it possible not only to make sense of the present and make predictions for the future<sup>3</sup> but also to reconstruct the spiritual reality of past eras. Contemporaries and researchers have repeatedly noted that the object of all Fedotov's work is *holiness*, which in turn goes back to the Bible. He looked for holiness in the monuments of Russian religiosity — ancient Russian hagiographies of saints, spiritual poems, and folk faith. As a medievalist, having attended seminars of Ivan Grevs and Ferdinand Lot, Fedotov was also well acquainted with Western hagiology.

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the very importance of biblical texts and Orthodox tradition in Fedotov's thought has never been questioned. For instance, as early as 1991, Academician N.I. Tolstoy wrote about the publication of *Poems of the Spiritual*. Tolstoy referenced the publication of *Spiritual Poems*, stating that "it is written from strictly Orthodox-theological positions, using theological terminology and relying on theological dogmas" (Tolstoy N.I. A few words about the new series and G.P. Fedotov's book "Spiritual Poems". In: G.P. Fedotov's *Spiritual Poems* (Russian Folk Faith by *Spiritual Poems*). Moscow: Progress, Gnosis; 1991. P. 9).

<sup>2</sup> Fedotov's standpoint is close to that of Protestantism: "As important as sacred tradition is in Orthodoxy (in contemporary theological schemes it also *includes* Holy Scripture), the tradition of the Church remains indefinite in its boundaries. It has no canon of its own, like the Word of God. It is preserved in the books of the Fathers, worship, iconography, modern theology, and the religious consciousness of the faithful people. None of these traditional sources (except the dogmatic determinations of the Ecumenical Councils) is thought to be infallible. The sacred tradition of the Church is included in the general flow of the historical tradition, which is complicated, always murky and humanly weaves together truth and falsehood" (G. P. Fedotov. *Orthodoxy and Historical Criticism*. In: G.P. Fedotov. *Collected Works in 12 volumes*, vol. 2: *Articles 1920—1930 from the journals «Path», «Orthodox Thought» and «Bulletin of RCSD»*. Moscow: Martis; 1998. P. 220

<sup>3</sup> The ability to sometimes very accurately predict the future, inherent in Fedotov, was rightly noted by Fr. Alexander Men: "History taught him, allowed him to be a prognosticator (not history itself, of course, but a careful and objective approach to events). Men A. Georgy Fedotov. URL: <http://www.vehi.net/men/fedotov.html> (accessed on September 10, 2021).

Nevertheless, what guided Georgy Fedotov in his work when he turned to biblical texts and tradition? Why and how did he apply biblical exegesis and the interpretation of the holy fathers to the knowledge of the spiritual past, and what substantiates their necessity in Fedotov's studies in principle? In what follows, we will try to determine what importance Fedotov's exegetical work played in his 1920s and 1930s studies<sup>4</sup>. We will focus mainly on the thinker's monographic works devoted to the problems of Russian religiosity.

It should be noted at once that biblical exegesis and the very principle of viewing and interpreting historical events and spiritual reality in connection with the Scripture or even through its prism were characteristic not only of Fedotov's émigré period of life and work, which began in 1925 but can also be easily found in his earlier historical and journalistic writings. Thus, already in his 1918 article on the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, he wrote: "Now that thought is persistently searching for all the most distant roots of the events that led to Russia's destruction, let it not seem farfetched to suggest the proposed convergence: The Slavonic Bible — and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The connection with the past is infinitely deeper than our contemporaries realize. Breaking with the fathers and the faith of the fathers, more often than not, only newly asserts this faith" [1. P. 110].

Thus, Fedotov doesn't argue the reception of symbolic interpretation of the present through the Bible's text, which is quite typical for Christian thought. He proposes to search for the origins of the present in the spiritual past of the Russian people, inextricably linked to the biblical Church Slavonic text<sup>5</sup>, tradition and "the faith of the fathers." "Hence the great importance," Fedotov continues, "of *The Gospel in History*" precisely as a book, as a literary fact [1. P. 110]. Biblical exegesis is thus the key to understanding the spiritual reality of the past, and it is, in turn, inextricably linked to the present. Therefore, understanding *The Gospel in History* and the Bible in general, hagiographic literature, apocryphal tradition, and folk faith as they were present in the spiritual culture of past eras makes it possible to understand the actual historical reality and spiritual reality. In this regard, Fedotov views the history of Russian culture as a "living chain," as he writes about it in his pre-Emigration article *The Face of Russia* (1918): "The face of Russia

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<sup>4</sup> The decade in Fedotov's émigré life from 1925 to 1935, S.S. Bychkov singles out as "the most fruitful in creative terms: "For the first year at St. Sergius Institute, he taught Western Religion. After Bishop Veniamin Fedchenkov, who had taught hagiology, left the Institute, Fedotov took over this subject. The results of his study of ancient Russian holiness were his books — St. Filipp Metropolitan of Moscow (1928) and a masterpiece of hagiology, *The Saints of Ancient Russia* (1931), as well as *And There Is and There Will Be* (Reflections on Russia and the Revolution) (1932), *The Social Meaning of Christianity* (1933), *Spiritual Poems* (1935)" (Bychkov S.S. Georgy Petrovich Fedotov (biographical sketch). In: G.P. Fedotov. *Collected Works in 12 vols*, vol. 1: «Abelard» and Articles 1911—1925. Compiled by S.S. Bychkov, notes by M.G. Galahtin. Moscow: Martis; 1996. P. 32).

<sup>5</sup> The advantages and disadvantages of the Slavic and Russian languages of the Bible in history, for the present, and in the life of the people, Fedotov outlined in his article "Slavic or Russian in Divine Service" (Put'. 1938. No. 57).

cannot be revealed in one generation, modern to us. It is in the living connection of all obsolete genera, like a musical melody alternating dying sounds. Fall, emaciation of one epoch — let our epoch — only grimace, for a moment distorted a beautiful face, if the future will connect with the past in a living chain" [2. P. 107].

As was shown by Fedotov in his 1918 article, such an interest in *The Gospel in History* would play a key role in his later creative biography. However, it may have been closely linked to the thinker's childhood experiences. Thus, in 1935, after completing such works as *St. Filipp Metropolitan of Moscow* (1928), *The Saints of Ancient Russia* (1931), and *Spiritual Poems* (1935), Fedotov spoke of "having the same Christ I knew as a child. I did not invent Him. He was given to me by the whole Orthodox environment in which I lived (not by my mother): the icons, the lubok pictures of the Last Judgment, the liturgics, the dampness, and coldness of Voronezh churches (the terrible Onufriy). From the Gospel came only what went in harmony with this church world (Last Judgment, woe to all)" [3. P. III]. It is also vital to note that the above-mentioned understanding of culture as a "living chain," as a certain holistic phenomenon existing owing to Holy Scripture, can also be found in Fedotov's first major historical work on the 12th-century French scholastic philosopher Pierre Abélard (*Abelard*, Pg, 1924). There different — often antagonistic — approaches to the Bible and Church in Western Europe from the reform of Pope Gregory VII (11<sup>th</sup> century) to Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century) are considered by Fedotov in their integrity defined by the Holy Scriptures and Tradition [4. P. 186—187]. Hence the exceptional importance that biblical exegesis has for Fedotov in a historical retrospective: it is with its help, with the help of understanding *The Gospel in History*, how sacred and church texts have been interpreted and understood by past epochs, that one can understand culture itself both in its past and present. Any culture, according to Fedotov, "is defined by the nature and degree of its religiosity. Concerning Russia, the issue of the origins and roots of the spiritual life of the people has been transformed into studying the peculiarities of Christian principles and values in national culture" [5. C. 251]. However, such *retrospective exegesis* becomes possible only through exceptional knowledge of biblical texts, the history of the church, its tradition, hagiographic and apocryphal literature, which can mainly be seen in the work devoted to the biography and work of Abélard<sup>6</sup>.

We can say with all conviction that Fedotov was distinguished by an excellent knowledge of the Bible and a brilliant erudition in church history and hagiology, and his ability to grasp the meanings of the Old and New Testaments, which he used widely in his historical research. For example, in his first significant book of the émigré period, *St. Filipp Metropolitan of Moscow*, comprehending Ivan the Terrible's views on the nature of tsarist power and its relationship to the clergy and the church, the thinker notes that the Tsar "Ivan sought corroboration of his

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<sup>6</sup> Ref., for instance, Fedotov's reasoning on Abélard's attitude to "courtly" love: G.P. Fedotov. In: G.P. Fedotov. *Collected Works in 12 vol.* Vol. 1: "Abelard" and Articles 1911—1925. P. 237—238.

anti-clerical idea in the Bible as well" [6. P. 97]. The biblical "exegesis" of Ivan the Terrible is recognized by Fedotov as one-sided, lacking integrity; such an approach does not come from the Bible itself, but rather from hypothetical "state considerations" (whereas the sacred texts, as Fedotov argued in his work *The Social Meaning of Christianity* (1933), — and the Gospel itself "must be understood as a whole. Its individual sayings contain only particular truths") [7. P. 296]. For the thinker who aspires to investigate *The Gospel in History* and relies on exegetical interpretation of biblical texts, the absence of "integrity" in Ivan the Terrible's views does not seem accidental. On the contrary, it is a consequence of that spiritual phenomenon described by Fedotov as "the tragedy of Old Russian holiness," that is, the fading of mystical direction in Russian monasticism by the mid-16th century. That take is revealed in detail in his subsequent major work, *The Saints of Ancient Russia* (1931).

The very need for this study is justified by the fact that "the study of Russian holiness in its history and its religious phenomenology is now one of the urgent tasks of our Christian and national rebirth. In Russian saints we honor not only the heavenly patrons of holy and sinful Russia: in them, we seek revelation of our spiritual path. We believe that every nation has its religious vocation and, of course, it is most fully realized by its religious geniuses" [8. P. 5]. As before, Fedotov proceeds from the premise that the present is closely interconnected with the past and that to understand it, one must first comprehend a bygone era. In *The Saints of Ancient Russia*, Fedotov's biblical exegesis and deep knowledge of hagiographic literature are vividly combined with a generalizing, typologizing approach (it is not accidental that some researchers consider Fedotov as the de facto creator of a scientific typology of Russian sainthood [9]). In Fedotov's book, the Old Russian saints are presented to the reader, on the one hand, as continuers of the existing Christian tradition and, on the other hand, as representatives of Russian religiosity, within which the characteristic historical forms of Christianity were developed. The crucial role in Fedotov's comparative method, which is applied in this work, is played not so much by Holy Scripture as by tradition-especially hagiographic literature-which enables the author to consider types of Russian holiness in a broader historical-church and cultural context. Thus, Fedotov managed to identify on the general background of representations about holiness, characteristic primarily for the Eastern tradition, "a special, Russian type of holiness, within which were allocated subtypes, and then personal features of individual saints" [10. P. 19].

However, how are academic, critical studies of *The Gospels in History* and hagiographic literature possible if the latter contains vivid accounts of miracles that are impossible from a secular-scientific point of view? How can we reconcile exegetics of sacred texts, which assume that the Bible is a divinely inspired book, and historical criticism, which by its very nature cannot share such a position, being aimed at comprehending objective historical reality? Or, in Fedotov's own words, "If heaven descends to earth, if the sacred permeates historical flesh, do the lines

between history and legend not become blurred? The earthly life becomes wondrous through and through. Biography becomes hagiography, a portrait becomes an icon. Heroified images of the ascetics of the Kingdom of God displace people of flesh and blood. History becomes impossible" [11. P. 219].

It was to these methodological questions that Fedotov devoted his program article, *Orthodoxy and Historical Criticism* (Put'. 1932. No. 33), published after the appearance of his first two major émigré works about Old Russian holiness. A historian-researcher, as Fedotov points out, must not deny the supernatural fact itself, the miracle which has been recorded in the sources, but which, for one reason or another, does not correspond to his personal experience, or rather his common sense, employing which he can quite confidently construct hypotheses in the field of social and political life. The spiritual life of the past, on the other hand, cannot be grasped by appeal to common sense, but neither can it be ignored because it does not correspond to it. "The question of the miracle," the thinker writes, "is a question of the order of religion. No science — least of all the historical science — can resolve the question of the supernatural or natural character of a fact. The historian can only state a fact, which always permits not one but many scientific or religious explanations. He has no right to eliminate a fact just because the fact is out of the boundaries of his personal or average life experience" [Ibid. P. 223]. Here Fedotov also directly enquires the relationship between historical scientific criticism and biblical exegetics, which deals with texts of Holy Scripture recognized as divinely-inspired<sup>7</sup>. According to the thinker, in Orthodoxy, *the question of criticism in biblical exegetics* has not yet been raised in principle, and Orthodox thought has achieved its greatest successes in the study of church history<sup>8</sup>. In the article, Fedotov postponed the issue of the relationship between biblical exegetics and historical (philological) criticism to the future, pointing out that, obviously, several exegetical schools will emerge, which will strive to solve it [Ibid. P. 230]<sup>9</sup>. However, it seems that in Fedotov's works devoted to various aspects of the existence of Russian

<sup>7</sup> The problem of the relation between "critical" and "exegetical" modes of knowledge was already touched upon by Fedotov in his review of Fr.H. Delehaye's 1928 book. Here it took the form of a correlation between hagiography (a critical study of "literary monuments of the cult") and hagiology ("the martyr himself and his deed — the historical setting and the religious meaning of it"). Ref.: G.P. Fedotov. Hagiology. H. Delehaye. Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires. Bruxelles, 1921. *Orthodox Thought*. Paris, 1928. Issue 1. P. 223—225.

<sup>8</sup> The contemporary Russian biblical scholar A.S. Desnitsky agrees with Fedotov's take, pointing out that "this task remains urgent to this day, not only for Orthodox Christians but for Russia as a whole. In the 20th century, while biblical scholarship as an academic discipline was developing in controversy and doubt in the West, Christians in Russia were concerned with other, more pressing problems. This does not mean that no one dealt with the biblical text, but there was not and could not be an extensive platform for scientific discussions and practical conclusions" (A.S. Desnitsky. Introduction to Biblical Exegetics. Moscow: Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University's Publishing House; 2011. P. 17).

<sup>9</sup> A.V. Kartashev continued to ponder these questions in his report "Old Testament Biblical Criticism" (Paris, 1947) at St. Sergius Theological Academy.

religiosity and holiness in the past, this very problem of correlation is convincingly solved in practice. The spiritual past is reconstructed through the study of *The Gospel in History*, as well as the Sacred Tradition and folk faith associated with it. The interpretation of spiritual phenomena that have found their manifestation in various sources of national culture becomes possible per the preliminary work on the study and understanding of the Holy Scriptures, acting as a kind of foundation from which tradition and partly folk faith derive their origin and the background on which the distinctive features of the historical existence of the religious consciousness of a Christian people become visible.

A striking example of a combination of biblical exegesis and historical, philological, and folkloristic studies of Russian religious consciousness is Fedotov's subsequent major émigré work, published in Paris in 1935, *Spiritual Poems*. Here, as before in his 1918 article *The Face of Russia*, Fedotov, using a musical metaphor, points to the connectedness of different eras (now, instead of "the face of Russia," he uses the expression "soul of the people"): "The musical work is irreversible and not given in existence elements. Such is also the "soul of the people," which is revealed in history and is given only in a certain sequence of historical forms" [12. P. 82]. In this work, Fedotov carries out a hermeneutic religious analysis of the spiritual verses of the Russian people and, with their help, indicates the characteristic features of *Russian religiosity*. This becomes possible due to an elucidation of what exactly was selected by popular culture as the material of spiritual verses, and how the material itself was transformed by the singers (representatives of the "folk semi-intelligentsia" close to the Church, as Fedotov defined their social affiliation [Ibid. P. 85]). Biblical images (Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Last Judgment) were transformed under the influence of folklore, folk "non-Orthodox" worldview with pagan features, and folk orthodoxy. The material of spiritual verses absorbed the songs of storytellers, impressions from icons and frescoes, their eschatological prophecies [13. P. 76—78].

It is vital to stress that the thinker pretends to a holistic description of the religious consciousness of a particular era (Fedotov himself believed that it was the era of pre-Petrine Russia). His work, in principle, became "the first systematic description of folk orthodoxy by spiritual poems, the description not of individual characteristics, though very important and shown in historical development, but an integral worldview of a particular era" [14. P. 140]. Even later, after leaving Europe and moving to the United States, Fedotov in the first volume of his study, *The Russian Religious Mind* (1946, which was a revision of his *The Saints of Ancient Russia*)<sup>10</sup>, emphasizing the universalist character of his position, he wrote that "my interest is focused on human consciousness: the religious man and his relation to God, to the world, to his fellows; this relation is not purely emotional, but also rational and volitional, that is, a manifestation of the entire human being" [15. P. 8].

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<sup>10</sup> Concerning this work, ref.: Antoshchenko A.V. "Byzantism" in G.P. Fedotov's Interpretation. In: Bulletin of Slavic Cultures. 2017. Vol. 44. P. 7—20.

However, the very manifestation and specificity of the human being in the religious sphere, which Fedotov explores in his *Spiritual Poems*, is considered against the background of biblical texts, hagiographic and apocryphal literature, enabling the thinker to grasp the peculiarity of the particular religious *Weltanschauung*, inherent in the Russian folk consciousness. It is thanks to his preliminary work with biblical texts and their exegesis that Fedotov can say in his study of Russian spiritual verses that the image of Christ as savior and redeemer was utterly obscured in folk religiosity by the image of Christ as tsar and formidable judge. The Virgin, in contrast, according to Fedotov's observations, becomes a caricature exclusively, suffering for people in folk faith and, in some cases, merging with the image of the Mother Earth suffering for people. In general, however, his knowledge of the Bible, tradition, and apocryphal texts enables Fedotov to argue that Scripture itself is very rarely a direct source of Russian spiritual verse, "most often it is the hagiographies, prose readings, and apocrypha, which must therefore be recognized as the favorite reading of the people" [12. P. 93]. At the same time, such conclusions of the thinker concerning the place and significance of the Old and New Testament texts in folk faith, besides all else, also indicate that the importance of biblical exegesis for Fedotov himself was undoubtedly extraordinary and the very mechanism of his research work was built on a solid foundation of biblical studies.

Russian religious consciousness in its historical retrospective, the creative legacy of Fedotov and, first of all, monographs devoted to various aspects of Russian religious consciousness in its historical retrospective, reveal the thinker's deep acquaintance with the texts of Holy Scripture and provide every reason to consider Fedotov one of the leading secular biblical scholars of the Russian diaspora. He combined dogmatic biblical exegesis and historical criticism to reconstruct a holistic picture of Russian religious consciousness of past eras. Such a reconstruction was the theoretical foundation for developing the problems of Christian socialism that worried Fedotov, which also found its manifestation in many of his articles published mainly in the 1930s.

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## Библейская тема в исторических монографиях Г.П. Федотова

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**Аннотация.** В статье подчеркнута, что систематическое обращение Г.П. Федотова к Библии позволило ему в своих исторических монографиях («Абеляр», «Св. Филипп, митрополит Московский», «Святые Древней Руси», «Стихи духовные») реконструировать духовную действительность прошлых эпох, символически воспринять настоящее. Федотов был устремлен к познанию «Евангелия в истории», русской религиозности, исследовав ее на материале житий святых, духовных стихов, народной веры, апокрифов, прологов. Саму историю русской культуры он мыслил по образу «живой цепи», целостного феномена, существующего благодаря Священному Писанию и Священному Преданию. Однако «Священное предание Церкви включено в общий поток исторического предания, всего сложного, всегда мутного, человечески сплетающего истину и ложь». Федотов поставил вопрос о соотношении научной критики и библейской экзегетики: как совместить экзегетику священных текстов, подразумевающую, что Библия — богодухновенная книга, и историческую критику, которая по своему существу не может разделять подобную позицию, будучи направленной на постижение объективной исторической действительности? Он убедительно решил его практически — посредством герменевтического религиозного анализа агиографических памятников и духовных стихов. В книге «Стихи духовные» Федотов исследует фольклорный материал в сопоставлении с библейскими текстами, житиями святых и апокрифами для того, чтобы уяснить особенности религиозного «мировидения», народного православия. В духовных стихах произошла трансформация библейских образов (Христос, Богородица, Страшный Суд) под воздействием народной веры с языческими чертами. В фольклорных текстах Федотов обнаруживает как Христос из спасителя и искупителя превращается в царя и грозного судью. Образ Богородицы сливается в народном сознании с образом матери-земли, страдающей от людей. В основе эсхатологических пророчеств — впечатления от икон и фресок, лубка. В целом, в исторических монографиях Федотова освещены различные аспекты русского религиозного сознания с опорой на Священное Писание, с учетом догматической библейской экзегетики и исторической критики. Все это дает право утверждать, что Федотов был ведущим светским библеистом русского зарубежья.

**Ключевые слова:** Священное Писание, библеистика, Г.П. Федотов, экзегеза, агиология, историческая критика, духовные стихи

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