

## BIBLICAL TOPOI, AS MARKERS, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE „BOOK“ OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN KING OF KARTLI

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Biblical topoi carry special significance in the medieval literature. Deriving from their „repute“, they allude to symbolic connections with universal spiritual, moral or eschatological paradigms. Due to this fact, the author's narration in the text, which depicts real events, acquires a somewhat dialogic nature with Biblical tradition. The event conceptualized in such a context creates a specific chronotope of the text, which unites it with the present and the future through re-generation of the past, and through its inclusion in the chronotope of cosmic significance, deepens the hermeneutic interpretation of the narrative. Deriving from this fact, authors often use Biblical topoi, as markers, for expressing cultural and national identities. Hence, this makes the reflection of historic trajectory, ideals or sacral mission of a nation, possible.

It should also be noted that the structural, stylistic and lexical outlook and clarity of Biblical topoi, as well as their correspondence with the overall context, are significant markers for establishing the earliest and most authentic version of any medieval text among a variety of its editions, which in its turn, makes it possible to define the cultural-historical period of the creation of the texts that have survived in the form of manuscripts of later dates. In this respect, we looked into the „Book“ written by Mirian, the first Christened King of Kartli. The „Book“ is included in the early editions of one of the most illustrious text-compendiums of Georgian culture and literary history „The Life of St. Nino“. It narrates the story of spiritual confession of a man who partook Christ's Eucharist through defeating paganism.

Alongside the contemporary „Will“, the King's „Book“, deriving from the overall concept of the text, is based on the Christian imagery in conveying its main message. Accordingly, we encounter ample cases of topoi, that constitute the so-called „common places“ with the Biblical texts and mental models.

*„And it came to pass in those days that the Lord remembered this northern land, darkened with sin and filled with devil's iniquities, we were like the sheep to be slaughtered“* (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 157), – the Christened King's „Book“ from the Shatberdi edition of „The Life of St. Nino“, enters the consciousness of a reader through this phrase. It is not by chance that the text begins with the indication of period and time. The Bible also starts with such an indication: „In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth“ (Genesis, 1.1). This beginning is an absolute starting point of historical time. Any event in the history of the mankind takes place in this historical period and acquires divine value, since it presents various stages of eternal God's intentions, God who is beyond transcendental, historical time, and gives special significance to each of this stage. „*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven*“, – heralds Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes, 3.1). And since there is „a time to be born, and a time to die“ (Ecclesiastes, 3.2), there comes a concrete stage in the life of Kartli during Mirian's reign, the stage of the fulfillment of God's divine prophesy, when 'the time of death“, i.e. pagan past, has to be overcome and the time of spiritual birth of Georgians has to come.

It is noteworthy that in the context of Mirian's „Book“, Kartli is named as „Northern country“ only in the Shatberdi edition among the oldest editions of „The Life of St. Nino“. Obviously, such naming is not conditioned geographically but is based on symbolic conceptualization and is connected with the Biblical topoi of light and darkness, which in relation to the conversion of Kartli is more vividly presented

in the King's „Will“ attached to the Shatberdi edition of the „Book“ – Mirian addresses his heir: „Behold thus, our darkness has changed into light, and our death into life“ (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 162-163).

The „darkness and light“, with which the King starts advising his son, is the main antinomy of the worldview that thoroughly transcends the entire Biblical story. A person's life is also conducted against the background of constant conflict between darkness and light, and the choice made between them conditions life and death. It is exactly the faith in Christ and communion with the light that changed darkness into light for the population of Kartli. It is followed by the antonymous pair with synonymous meaning in the Shatberdi edition of Mirian's „Will“: „death-life“ (the Chelishi edition offers a different pair: „*change our woe into joy forever*“ (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 162). As for the Sinai edition, it appears that the text is not fully conceptually comprehensible. It reads as follows: „*change our praise / honour into life*“ (Aleksidze, 2007: 56)).

One more episode of Mirian's „Book“ stands out for the multiplicity of antonymous pairs, in which the pagan outlook of Kartli is replaced by the indication to spiritual transfiguration of the country's inhabitants in the light of St. Nino's endeavours. A number of scholars have paid attention to this episode:

„And when the time came, and the blessed woman, the apostle of the son of God and the evangelist, St. Nino, appeared first as a captive, as a stranger and as a poor one, unaided, as the one who did not speak or hear, who has now become the queen for us, a stranger – mother, unaided – interceded, prayed for all, and who did not speak – and now a powerful preacher and aware of the hidden words of my heart“ (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 158).

It should be noted that the arrival of Nino in Kartli, as „an equal-to-apostles and good-news bearer / evangelist of the Son of God“, is underscored only in Shatberdi edition. Besides, it is only in this edition that we come across the antonymous pair „stranger-mother“. In Chelishi and Sinai editions the epithet „strange“ is directly linked with following pair and is left without its symbolic antonym. In our opinion, the antonymous pair „stranger – mother“ must have existed in the original text, since without it not only is the episode structure distorted, but literary imagery is blurred as well. In addition, as it is noted in scholarly literature, Nino's literary image is mostly associated with Mary Godmother in the text of „Conversion of Kartli“. Mary is the Mother of Humanized Lord, and, consequently, makes the sacral salvation possible through giving birth to Christ. In this respect, St. Nino is also Godmother's equal-to-apostle in Kartli. As a bearer of Lord's true word in her heart, she imparts her faith to pagan Georgians and makes their spiritual redemption possible. One detail from the Gospel is also noteworthy. Being Crucified, „*When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home*“ (John, 19: 26-27). Theological literature makes a comment on this episode: „Jesus appeals to Her for new Motherhood, which henceforth will become Her mission among God's people“ (Dictionary of Biblical Theology, 1998: 547). We assume that likewise, St. Nino should be conceptualized as „Mother“ for Georgians, who in Her turn, makes them as God's nation. R. Siradze connects Nino's „motherhood“ with the fact that She resembles „the mother of the place“ (Siradze, 1997: 106). In our opinion, one more detail might appear interesting: St. Nino is equal to apostles; she carries apostolic mission in Kartli. In St. Paul's epistles the activities and preaching of apostles are compared with motherly care towards children: „*Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children*“ (1 Thessalonians 2: 6-7). Moreover, St. Paul, as an apostle, compares the conversion of others to the righteous religion with the hard labour of a mother giving birth to children: „*My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you*“ (Galatians, 4: 19); i.e. according to St. Paul the Apostle, apostolic mission is based on motherly instincts. We assume that in this context, St'Nino's imagery can be perceived as that of the „Mother“.

In the poetics of Mirian's „Book“, a fascinating imagery of St. Nino's death attracts particular attention: „...and She besought her pure soul into the hands of her Creator ... and all the people of the north were filled with sorrow, for the sun of righteousness had risen, and the truth had spread, and

the cloud covered holy Saint Nino“ (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 160-161). A cloud bears a symbolic significance in the Bible: it appears as a sign of Lord’s presence, His external cover and glory in the Old Testament, and retains its importance in the New Testament. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day after the Resurrection, having conversed with His disciples, Jesus Christ ascended into clouds „And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight (Acts 1:9). This image has become an archetype of eschatological expectation among believers. St. Paul Apostle writes to Thessalonians: „Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord“ (1 Thessalonians, 4: 17). We hypothesize that based on Biblical sources, „the covering of St. Nino with clouds“ in Mirian’s „Book“, should be conceptualized as her death, transposition from earthly life to Lord’s spiritual paradise, and to eternal abide with God. It is noteworthy that the Chelish and Sinai editions of „The Life“ present a different rendering of Mirian’s interpretation of St. Nino’s death; namely, „cloud“ is used with the modifier „of winter“ (“cloud of winter“), which might be pointing to the seasonal period of Saint’s death, however, we believe that it would not have been used in the original text, since it would have distorted the logic of symbolic picture of St. Nino’s Ascension, and would have dimmed the significance of „covering with cloud“. Hence, it could be attributed to the editor-scribes of the later period.

We could cite a number of passages from Mirian’s „Book“ that present interest for our research, however, their full representation goes beyond the scope of one article. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid analyzing the final episode of the text, where, in line with the Biblical imagery, the King vividly depicts the present benefits gained through overcoming the past and calls his son for spiritual vigilance to retain these benefits in future:

„Behold, our darkness has changed into light, and our death into life. Now, wherever you have found those idols in your land of Kartli, burn them with fire and give their ashes to those who mourn for them, and so tell your children, for I know that they (the idols) cannot be wiped out in the Caucasus. And you do like this: . Amen“ (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 162-163).

We have already discussed above the first phrase of the cited passage. Regarding the rest of the text, the approach to the „enticing/luring“ idols attracts particular attention in the first place. In this respect, the Bible surely provides ample material, but the primary source of this part of King Mirian’s text should be the episode from Exodus in which Moses, having returned from Mount Sinai, and carrying the Commandment Tablets, sees the idol molded by Hebrews – the Calf – burns it, „scatters/strews“ it in the water and offers it as a drink to „the sons of Israel“ (Exodus, 32: 20). It is interesting that neither Chelish nor Sinai editions have preserved this oldest episode. The text is rather blurred in the final part of the Sinai edition, which is apparently, the result of using the flawed original version. And the Chelish edition should be also deriving from the damaged original, since the episode of Mirian’s demand for burning the idols is replaced by a longer, presumably later addition. However, the emotional-stylistic peculiarity of Mirian’s address to his son in the Chelish edition, that distinguishes it from more formal languages of the corresponding passages in Shatberdi and Sinai editions (“but you will be like this”), brings it closer to the Biblical-epistolary discourse. We read the following passage in the Chelish edition: „*And you, my beloved son, be careful, as we have learned from our holy and blessed mother Nino, keep her commandments and beseech yourself to the pillar, to the glorious and honorable Cross, exalted in Heaven, and let your transpose to another world be in the faith of the Holy Trinity, peace be unto you!*“ (Conversion of Kartli, 1964: 163). In spite of the fact that Mirian’s „Book-Will“ emphasizes the Georgian realia of Christianity, the preaching of the blessed mother-St. Nino, life-giving pillar, and many others, through its form and contents of the address remind us of the text of St. Paul’s second epistle to Timothy: „But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry (II Timothy, 4: 5).

It is noteworthy that Mirian gives such advice to his son before „turning to earth“. Apostle Paul is also expecting the end of the earthly life and „transposition“ while writing this epistle. He says: „*I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:*

*Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing“ (II Timothy, 4: 7-8).*

Although Mirian does not talk so eagerly about this in his „Book-Will“, whatever he talks about so humbly is exactly „the act of kindness“, „the fulfillment of God’s will“, is the revelation of „burying“ in the true faith. As a result of all this, like Paul Apostle, the first Christian King of Kartli expects his final day as the blessing from God and as counting him amongst the righteous ones.

The recent studies increasingly prove that „St. Nino’s Life“, included in the compendium of the „Conversion of Kartli“ together with historical chronicles, should have been written in the fourth century. However, the text included in the manuscripts of the later period (10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), has been preserved in a somewhat damaged and altered form due to various factors. The final part of the text – Mirian’s „Book“, together with its contemporary „Will“ – is the most important, and hence, the oldest part of the architectonics of „The Life“ of Georgia’s enlightener. Through the usage of Biblical topoi, as markers, and through lexical-stylistic features, not only does it point to the cultural-historical period of the creation of the text, but it also identifies its older, near-proto-editions among a variety of versions.

This type of approach to the study of the „Book“ by the first Christened King of Kartli, which has not been focus of research till present, has revealed that the text has not preserved its original form in any manuscript. However, according to our observation, in Shatberdi edition it should derive from the more authentic or more approximate source, though in certain cases, later Chelishi edition may reveal more proximity to the original.

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