

MESSIANISM IN F. GORENSHTEIN'S NOVEL "PSALM"

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Abstract

The article analyzes the messianic theme in F. Gorenshtein's novel Psalm (1975) within the context of the artistic and philosophical-religious explorations of literature in the second half of the twentieth century. The novel is examined as a polemical and non-canonical interpretation of the biblical narrative and the figure of the Antichrist. Particular attention is given to comparing Gorenshtein's messianic concept with other national literary models (in particular, W. Hamdam's novel Rebellion and Submission), as well as to analyzing the image of the Antichrist as the savior of the oppressed. The article concludes that Psalm is a synthetic work, combining features of a literary text, spiritual reading, and theological treatise.

Keywords: Messianism, eschatology, Antichrist, biblical narrative, spiritual dystopia, post-apocalypse, F. Gorenshtein, novel Psalm.

Introduction

The messianic idea is one of the key constants of world culture and literature, as it addresses fundamental questions of human existence, historical responsibility, and the prospects for humanity's spiritual development. In twentieth-century literature, messianism acquires an especially tense and contradictory character, shaped by the catastrophic experience of the era—world wars, totalitarian regimes, mass violence, and the loss of stable religious and humanistic reference points. Under these conditions, traditional religious models of salvation undergo profound re-evaluation, while the figure of the Messiah and the very possibility of humanity's salvation become objects of artistic and philosophical reflection.

A special place in this context is occupied by writers' engagement with the biblical narrative as a universal cultural code that allows contemporary reality to be comprehended through the prism of eschatological and apocalyptic motifs.

However, in the literature of the second half of the twentieth century, the biblical text is increasingly not reproduced canonically but is subjected to polemical rethinking, transformation, and deconstruction. The images of Christ, the Antichrist, and the Messiah as a whole move beyond the framework of orthodox religious understanding and begin to function as metaphors for historical choice, moral judgment, and human spiritual responsibility.

In this respect, F. Gorenshstein's novel *Psalm* occupies a special place as one of the most complex and conceptually rich works of Russian literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Written in 1975, the novel became an artistic response to the tragic experience of a "dehumanized" century and an attempt at a philosophical and religious comprehension of humanity's fate under conditions of lost faith in traditional models of salvation. Gorenshstein constructs his own fundamentally non-conventional messianic concept, based on a radical re-evaluation of the Christian idea of salvation and a polemic with it from the standpoint of Judaism.

Thus, turning to F. Gorenshstein's novel *Psalm* makes it possible not only to deepen the understanding of messianic issues in modern literature, but also to reveal the profound spiritual and philosophical contradictions that shape the tragic self-perception of the individual in the culture of the late twentieth century.

Main Part

In contemporary world literature, messianic issues—linked simultaneously to the interpretation of the history of human civilization and to prophecies about a possible future—are extremely relevant. Within various national literary processes, writers draw on ethnocultural specificity in their artistic elaboration of the messianic idea.

Thus, in the novel *Isyon va itoat* (2003), translated into Russian as *Rebellion and Humility*, by the contemporary Uzbek prose writer Ulugbek Khamdam, prophecies concerning humanity's future acquire a distinctly dystopian character. Employing the poetics of a "text within a text," the author weaves into the plot of modern life the Old Testament biblical legend of the tragic story of the appearance of the first people on earth. The emergence of humanity is associated not so much with the gaining of a homeland as with the loss of paradise, the loss of perfection; it is the consequence of deception, the birth of the very notion of sin, and the wrath of God falling not only upon the sinners themselves but also upon their distant

descendants: “Now man will become his own master. From this time on, even the Lord God will no longer intervene in his fate... As a result, you will live forever; man will not die, he will become equal to God. Now man no longer needs God...” [3, p. 109].

The eschatological meaning of these postulates is evident: immediately after these words, the old man protagonist—associated with the archetype of wisdom—dies. His death occurs during prayer, and in the Islamic tradition it is believed that dying during prayer foretells the salvation of the soul. However, U. Khamdam emphasizes an important detail: standing in prayer, the healer bows his head low—he is ashamed to raise his eyes before the Almighty, because he has always prayed for the forgiveness of people, while they, having rejected God’s mercy, continue to sin and blaspheme. Thus, the novel’s messianic concept correlates with the biblical one: humanity can be saved only if it becomes aware of its own sinfulness and is ready for the coming of the Savior.

A different, fundamentally more complex messianic model is proposed by F. Gorenshtein in his reflective novel on the four divine punishments, *Psalm* (1975). The writer constructs a non-conventional, polemically non-canonical understanding of the figure of the Antichrist, while relying on an interpretation of the biblical narrative. Gorenshtein prophesies the future through a re-evaluation of the metaphysical understanding of Christianity in correlation with the “inhumane” ideologies of the twentieth “dehumanized” century [1, p. 89]—Stalinism, fascism, and antisemitism. The punishments by hunger, the sword, lust, and disease prove to be merely a prologue to the principal, fifth punishment—the thirst for the spiritual word.

Results and Discussion

Gorenshtein creates a distinctive metaphysical dystopia, foretelling a post-apocalypse of the universal spiritual world. The novel *Psalm* may be perceived as spiritual reading. At the same time, Gorenshtein’s book enters into an open dispute with Christianity from the standpoint of Judaism, with the degree of polemic intensifying as the narrative approaches its finale. The writer insists that in the self-definition of the Jewish people the ethnic principle is inseparably linked with the confessional one, to the point of complete indistinguishability.³ As a result of its

complex conceptual content and extensive philosophical and religious digressions, the novel is perceived as a synthesis of a literary work and a theological treatise. The novel's system of characters has a continuous, overarching character. The Antichrist—Dan, also known as the Asp, the brother of Christ the Messiah and God's messenger to humanity—brings people their “daily bread,” both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense. However, people reject him because he is persecuted and belongs to a persecuted people. The writer constructs a fundamental antithesis: “Christ is the protector of persecutors and sinners; the Antichrist is the savior of the persecuted and the suffering” [2, p. 47]. The Savior has appeared in the world, but it is not Christ, who forgives the tormentors; it is the anti-Christ, who helps the victims. The tragedy of the situation is intensified by the fact that it is precisely the persecuted who refuse to accept Dan, and with him, the Lord. They reject salvation, while salvation is prepared for the persecutors. Spiritual entropy reaches its limit, and the world moves toward an eschatological end.

The final, fifth punishment of humanity is formulated by Gorenshtein with utmost clarity: it is thirst and hunger for the Word of the Lord. In the novel's finale, the mission of a substitute sacrifice of the catastrophic twentieth century—leading the world toward a spiritual post-apocalypse—is laid upon Dan the Antichrist.

Conclusion

The analysis of F. Gorenshtein's novel *Psalm* makes it possible to conclude that the author's messianic concept is fundamentally non-conventional in nature and was formed within the framework of the philosophical and religious quests of the second half of the twentieth century. Turning to the biblical narrative, the writer does not reproduce it in a canonical form but deliberately enters into polemics with the traditional Christian understanding of salvation, proposing an alternative model for interpreting the history of humanity and its spiritual destiny.

In the novel *Psalm*, messianism is deprived of its consolatory and eschatologically optimistic meaning. The Savior is revealed to the world, yet he is rejected precisely by those for whose sake he is sent. The image of Dan the Antichrist becomes the central figure of this tragic inversion: unlike Christ, he does not forgive the persecutors but seeks to save the persecuted and the humiliated, assuming the function of a substitute sacrifice. In this way, Gorenshtein radically reinterprets the



traditional antithesis of “Christ–Antichrist,” transforming it into a philosophical category that reflects the moral paradox of history.

References

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