

# THE FUNCTIONS OF THE POETIC TEXT ON THE ICON IN THE RUSSIAN AND BALKAN BAROQUE TRADITION: THE EXAMPLE OF THE ‘LIVING CROSS’ CATEGORY

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This contribution focuses to the relationship between the icon and the poetic text within a hagiographical work, especially with regard to the specific hagiographic type of the “Living cross,” a western European tradition of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In Russia, this iconographic type, the first description of which was attributed to Nikolai Pokrovski,<sup>1</sup> a distinguished Russian researcher of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was known as “Плоды страданий Христовых” (The fruits of the passion of Christ) or “Процветшее древо страданий Христовых” (The flowering Cross of the passion of Christ). Although it is undoubtedly of western European origin, it is not a simple copy of the German and French models but rather a different version that sought to incorporate the Orthodox tradition. It thus includes substantive changes to the images depicted as well as to the original Russian text that accompanies them.

The Russian frescoes and icons pertaining to this style were well-recognized and widespread from the seventeenth to early

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<sup>1</sup> N. V. Pokrovski, *Очерки памятников христианского искусства и иконографии* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 289, 388–390.

nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The masterful piece that constitutes the main subject of this particular study even managed to reach Greece and is currently kept at the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens (BXM 10613).<sup>3</sup> According to research conducted on the matter, the entire Russian tradition originates from a copperplate by Vasily Andreev, edited by Dmitri Rovinski.<sup>4</sup> Aleksandr Lavrov,<sup>5</sup> a Russian researcher, discovered in a seventeenth-century handwritten collection by Efthimios Tsudovski (BAN 16.14.24), the texts of the etchings of this copperplate, which he correctly attributed to Silvestre Medvedev (otherwise known as Simeon), a prominent, although somewhat controversial, seventeenth-century figure known for his large and diverse range of activities and his significant contribution to Russian culture.<sup>6</sup> He was an enlightener, scholar, poet, founder of monasteries and educational institutions, proof-reader and an editor of ecclesiastical books, a philosopher and staunch ideologue of the new intellectual and cultural currents. His name is connected with that of his teacher Simeon Polotski, an even greater personality in seventeenth-century Russian culture. For many years, Silvestre was Simeon's<sup>7</sup> student, as well as his private secretary. After the death of his teacher, he became the heir to all positions previously held by the deceased in the tsar's court. He participated in all the ideological, religious, and political conflicts of the era, even though he was always on the losing side. After the false accusations of his

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<sup>2</sup> О. Kuznetsova, *Процветший крест. Плоды страданий Христовых. Иконография* (Moscow, 2008); О. Posternak. “Крест живой” в западноевропейской и русской традиции,” *Альфа и Омега* 1/19 (1999): 284–297.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Boycheva, N. Kastrinakis, and N. Konstantios, *Talking Icons: The Dissemination of Devotional Paintings in Russia and the Balkans, 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century* (Athens, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Rovinski, *Русские народные картинки, vol. 3. Притчи и листы духовные* (St. Petersburg, 1910), 361–363.

<sup>5</sup> A. S. Lavrov, “Травированный лист с виршами Сильвестра Медведева,” *ТОДРЛ* 50 (1997): 519–525.

<sup>6</sup> I. Kozlovski, *Сильвестр Медведев* (Vladimir, 1895), 1–49.

<sup>7</sup> А. Panchenko, *Русская стрихотворная культура 17 века* (Leningrad, 1973), 126; L. Sazonova, “Сильвестр Медведев – редактор Симеона Полоцкого («Вертоград многоцветный»),” in *Теория и история литературы*, ed. N. Krutikova (Kiev, 1985), 87–96.

opponents for heresy and conspiracy against Moscow Patriarch Joachim, he was executed.<sup>8</sup> Even his opponents, however, recognized Silvestre's personality, style, and vast encyclopedic knowledge in their testimonies.

The text on the icon is probably the last original text of the scholar, apart from his confession, which was probably false.<sup>9</sup> The text still holds many secrets. It displays significant differences when compared to his other poems written in hendecasyllabic syllabic verse (вирши), as this poem is characterized by rhyming octosyllabic lyrics. Another remaining secret regarding this text why the lyrics of an executed heretic became so widespread after his death by appearing on a sacred object – an icon. It must be emphasized that, as evidenced by the handwritten text, the lyrics were always intended to be used in combination with copperplate representations.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Medvedev created not only the lyrics, but also the entire set of poetic text and imagery himself, with obvious borrowings from the western European tradition. At the same time, however, his text is also characterized by great originality and conveys an original message, which derives from both his own ideological and cultural opinions and his extended circle of латинствующие (latinophiles), as they are known in the history of Russian intellectual life.<sup>11</sup> The representatives of this intellectual current originated from the western regions of Russia – nowadays Ukraine and Belarus – which, due to their geographical position, maintained a closer relationship with the western European Catholic world, primarily with Poland, a country that influenced them greatly. Oftentimes, the reason behind the conflicts between the latinophiles and their ideological adversaries – Patriarch Joachim and the Greek Lichoudis brothers – was presented in the literature as a juxtaposition of the Latin with the Greek perspective regarding the later Russian development.<sup>12</sup> In essence, however, the

<sup>8</sup> Kozlovski, Сильвестр Медведев, 30–49.

<sup>9</sup> Лавров, Гравировальный лист, 520–521.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 520.

<sup>11</sup> See Panchenko, Русская стихотворная культура, 116; K. Dijanov, “Писательская община” в России во второй половине 17 века. Латинствующие и грекофилы,” Вестник Томского университета. История 4/20 (2012): 172–174.

<sup>12</sup> Kozlovski, Сильвестр Медведев, 17–20, 22–23; Dijanov. “Писательская

latinophiles were attempting to apply the new intellectual currents that appeared not only in western Europe but also in Greece to Russian cultural life, while their opponents were firmly opposed to any novel foreign element. Therefore, the reason behind the political controversies of the era was not the contrast between the West and Greece, but the contradiction between the new and the old.

However, anything that was novel in Europe at the time was evidently connected with the new cultural style of the Baroque. Silvestre and his teacher Simeon were both strong supporters this new movement. Many of the surviving poetic works of both scholars follow the principles of the new aesthetic and are thus characterized by composite images with numerous references to biblical texts as well as complex symbolic meanings, which always include a relevant political innuendo (for example, in Silvestre's «Похвальная рация» (Praise to Princess Sophia).<sup>13</sup> Within this developing culture, a new concept of the sacred icon began to form, that became not only an object of worship, but also a complex catechetical and didactical message with composite, multifaceted symbolic images accompanied by text. During that era, such icons were created not only in western Europe but in Greece as well; a prime example being the “Μέγας εἶ, Κύριε” (“Great Art Thou, O Lord”) by Ioannis Kornaros, which is currently kept in Toplou monastery in Crete, and illustrates the eponymous blessing of Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem<sup>14</sup> via symbolic imagery.

The reason why this symbolic icon was brought to Russia by Silvestre Medvedev and the role that it played with regard to the ideological conflicts of the time can be deduced by analyzing the theoretical works of the followers of the new aesthetic. Above all, one should not forget the importance of his teacher Simeon Polotski's work<sup>15</sup> called «Беседа о почитании святых икон» (“The Talk

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община,” 174.

<sup>13</sup> А. Bogdanov, *Московская публицистика последней четверти 17 века* (Moscow, 2001), 214–224.

<sup>14</sup> А. Kyriakaki-Sfakaki, *Μέγας εἶ, Κύριε* (Heraklion, 2013), 53–54.

<sup>15</sup> See manuscript GIM (State Historical Museum, Moscow) – Sinod. 289. See also V. Bylinin, “К вопросу о полемике вокруг русского иконописания во второй

on the Worship of Sacred Images”), in the composition of which Silvestre participated actively by editing the text. In fact, one of the four surviving copies is written in his own hand.<sup>16</sup> Supporting the principles of the new aesthetic, Simeon writes, inter alia, about the symbolic images, with references to the theory of symbolism as expressed by Dionysius the Areopagite; a great example would be: “и худшая вещь изящнейшую знаменовати может” (even the worst can symbolize the finest).<sup>17</sup> The medieval notion of the symbol thus came to the fore again, although, in the new cultural context and aesthetic, the symbol is transformed into an emblem.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the medieval symbol, the emblem is more tangible and focused on the superficial aspect of the icon, while, at the same time, it is also more complex and has no obvious interpretation.<sup>19</sup> The medieval worship of the icon only requires faith, and its interpretation does not need to be included in the icon itself. On the other hand, in regard to the icon-emblem of the Baroque, both the images and the interpretations become more complex and require that the interpreter be familiar with the specific subject of the icon, while exhibiting a predisposition to “play” a kind of symbolic game along with its creator, which, through complex emblematic imagery, will lead to a symbolic meaning. During this process, the interpreter will need the help of the creator in order to avoid following the wrong path of interpretation that would lead him to heresy. That is the reason for the existence of the written text, which began to play a very important role in hagiography and was thenceforth considered a sort of guarantee of the sanctity of the icon. In other words, “the worst can symbolize the finest” only if it features the appropriate inscription. Once again, many differences

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половине XVII в.: «Беседа о почитании икон святых» Симеона Полоцкого,” ТОДРЛ 38 (1985): 281–289; V. Vyshkov, 2000 лет христианской культуры *sub specie aesthetica*, vol. 2 (Moscow/St. Petersburg, 1999), 222–224.

<sup>16</sup> Vylinin, “К вопросу о полемике,” 282.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>18</sup> A. Morozov and L. Sofronova, Эмблематика и ее место в искусстве барокко. Славянское барокко: историко-культурные проблемы эпохи (Moscow, 1979), 13–38; N. Ivanov, Проблемные аспекты языкового символизма (Minsk, 2002), 123.

<sup>19</sup> A. Mikhailov, Поэтика барокко. Избранное. Завершение риторической эпохи (St. Petersburg, 2007).

are observed when comparing medieval aesthetics, where the painted icon is the symbol, with Baroque aesthetics, where the word becomes a painted image. Therefore, within the context of a hagiographical work, the text and the image are combined “in one body and soul” in order to communicate the message of the icon, which cannot be correctly interpreted without the contribution of both sides.<sup>20</sup> The icon acquires its sacred meaning when interpreted through the scope of the Bible, which acts as a universal metatext for an entire religious culture, and with the help of which the “earthly” images and words acquire sacred significance.<sup>21</sup>

It is no coincidence that in the centre of the icon of the Living Cross there is a passage from the Bible; from Apostle Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians,<sup>22</sup> to be more specific:

НЕ СОУДИХЪ БО ВИДЕТИ ЧТО ВВАСЪ ТОЧИЮ ИСА ХРИСТА  
И СЕГО РАСПЯТА

οὐ γὰρ ἔκρινα τοῦ εἶδέναι τι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, καὶ  
τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον

*(For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus  
Christ and him crucified)*

This passage from the apostolic book was probably selected, inter alia, due to the personal preferences of Silvestre himself, who, for many years, used to serve as an editor for the Printshop of Moscow<sup>23</sup> and whose largest project was the correction of the Apostolic Acts and Epistles for the new edition published in 1679. The revised publication, which was based on Slavic manuscripts and the Greek original text, required an editor with a very deep knowledge of the text and all the complex concepts that had to be communicated properly in the

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Morozov and Sofronova, Эмблематика и ее место, 18.

<sup>21</sup> A. Averintsev, Поэтика ранневизантийской литературы (Moscow, 1977), 141.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Cor. 2:2. New International Version (NIV).

<sup>23</sup> Bogdanov, Московская публицистика, 360–362.

translation.<sup>24</sup> It is no coincidence, therefore, that Silvestre's poetic text is based on references to these scriptural books. This particular reference cited above conveys the concise message of the icon – the equality of the whole world and the entirety of human knowledge with the crucified Christ. Another peculiarity of this passage is that, as dictated by liturgical practice, it is recited during the matins on Holy Saturday, which, according to Alexander Schmemmann,<sup>25</sup> constitutes a link between Good Friday (the day of the passion of Christ on the Cross and his death) and Easter Sunday (the day of his resurrection and the victory of life over death). All the images and texts of the icon are focused on this central idea. The Cross represents the world, as evidenced by the inscriptions:

ШИРОТА ДОЛГОТА ВЫСОТА ГЛУБИНА

(LENGTH BREADTH HEIGHT DEPTH)

These inscriptions can also be interpreted through the Apostolic Epistles, and particularly through Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (3:17–18) “ἐν ἀγάπῃ ἐρριζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι ἵνα ἐξισχύσητε καταλαβέσθαι σὺν πᾶσι τοῖς ἁγίοις τί τὸ πλάτος καὶ μήκος καὶ βάθος καὶ ὕψος” (*you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth*).<sup>26</sup> This comment has been interpreted numerous times in the patristic tradition. The only interpretation to be mentioned here is that of *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* by St. John of Damascus, a work Silvestre was definitely familiar with, since it was translated by a modern scholar, Epiphanius Slavnetsky.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> М. Bobrik, “Представления о правильности текста и языка в истории книжной sprawy в России (от 11 до 18 веков),” *Вопросы языкознания* 4 (1990): 73–75.

<sup>25</sup> А. Schmemmann, “Сия есть благословенная суббота. Об утрени Великой Субботы,” in *Собрание статей. 1947–1983*, ed. E. Dorman (Moscow, 2009), 708–714.

<sup>26</sup> Eph. 3:18. English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>27</sup> О. Posternak. “Крест живой” в западноевропейской и русской традиции,”

ὡσπερ τὰ τέσσαρα ἄκρα τοῦ σταυροῦ  
 διὰ τοῦ μέσου κέντρου κρατοῦνται καὶ συσφίγγονται,  
 οὕτω διὰ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ δυνάμεως τό τε ὕψος καὶ τὸ βάθος,  
 μήκός τε καὶ πλάτος, ἦτοι πᾶσα ὀρατὴ τε καὶ ἀόρατος κτίσις  
 συνέχεται.<sup>28</sup>

*(Just as the four arms of the Cross  
 are made solid and bound together by their central part,  
 so are the height and the depth,  
 the length and the breadth,  
 that is, all creation both visible and invisible, held together by  
 the power of God.)<sup>29</sup>*

The central image of the icon is based on the symbolic identification of the Cross with the tree of life in Eden, which is mentioned in the Book of Genesis: “καὶ ἐξανέτειλεν ὁ Θεὸς ἔτι ἐκ τῆς γῆς πᾶν ξύλον ὠραῖον εἰς ὄρασιν καὶ καλὸν εἰς βρώσιν καὶ τὸ ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ παραδείσου” (*and out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden...*).<sup>30</sup>

This identification between the instrument of death and the source of life frequently appears in the hymnographic and theological tradition. The following words by John Damascene constitute a prime example: “Τοῦτον τὸν τίμιον σταυρὸν προετύπωσε τὸ ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς τὸ ἐν παραδείσῳ ὑπὸ Θεοῦ πεφυτευμένον· ἐπεὶ γὰρ διὰ ξύλου ὁ θάνατος, ἔδει διὰ ξύλου δωρηθῆναι τὴν ζωὴν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν.”<sup>31</sup> (*The tree of life which was planted by God in paradise prefigured this*

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Альфа и Омега 1/19 (1999): 284 – 297.

<sup>28</sup> John of Damascus, *Ἐκδοσις ἀκριβῆς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως*, chap. 84.

<sup>29</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 350.

<sup>30</sup> Gen. 2:9. ESV.

<sup>31</sup> John of Damascus, *Ἐκδοσις ἀκριβῆς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως*, chap. 84.



*honorable Cross, for, since death came by a tree, it was necessary for life and the resurrection to be bestowed by a tree.)*<sup>32</sup>

The same basic message about the contrast between life and death can be found in the symbol of the Holy Cross – from the prophecy of Isaiah: “και ἐξελεύσεται ράβδος ἐκ τῆς ρίζης Ἰεσσαί, και ἄνθος ἐκ τῆς ρίζης ἀναβήσεται” (*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots*).<sup>33</sup>

The symbolic identification of Christ with the fruit as depicted by the poetic text under the cross:

ДРЕВО ИЗРАСТЕ МИРОВИ СПАСЕНО  
И НА КРАНИЕВЕ МЕСТЕ ОУТВЕРЖДЕННО  
НА НЕМЪ ХРИСТОСЪ ПЛОД РАСПЯ(ТЪ)  
(О)УМЕРТВИСЯ С НАРОДОМЪ АДАМЪ  
ΩΝΥΜЪ ΩЖИВИСЯ

*(THE CROSS SPROUTED FOR THE SALVATION OF MAN  
ROOTED IN CALVARY.  
RESEMBLING A FRUIT, OUR LORD JESUS IS CRUCIFIED ON IT  
HE DIED WITH THE PEOPLE TO GIVE LIFE TO ADAM)*

It is again based on the Bible, and also on the prophecy from the Book of Hosea: “Ἀμπελος εὐκληματοῦσα Ἰσραὴλ, ὁ καρπὸς εὐθηνῶν αὐτῆς” (*Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit*).<sup>34</sup>

The same basic idea of equality between the cross and the entire world, the contrast between life and death and their connection through the sacrifice of Christ, is exhibited both in the images and the texts that surround the central theme of the icon. Two of the four hands that spring from the Cross symbolize eternal life: the upper hand holds the key that opens the gates of heaven (the inscription

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<sup>32</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Writings*, 352

<sup>33</sup> Isa. 11:1. ESV.

<sup>34</sup> Hosea 10: 1. ESV.

reads “ДРЕВО ДВЕРИ НЕБА ОТВЕРЗАЕТЪ” (*THE GATES OF HEAVEN ARE OPENED BY THE TREE*) and can be interpreted through the evangelical quote “καὶ δώσω σοι τὰς κλεῖς τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν” (*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*,<sup>35</sup> and the left hand holds a wreath over the Church with the following verse:

ИЗ ДРЕВА КРЕСТЪНА  
 ВЕНЕЦЪ ИЗРАСТАЕТЪ  
 ТЕРПЯЩИМЪ В ЦЕРКВИ  
 ОНЪЙ ПОДАВАЕТЪ  
 И КТО ЗДЕ В СТРАСТИ  
 РАЗМЫШЛПЕТЪ КРЕСТНЕЙ  
 ПРИИМЕТЪ ВЕНЕЦЪ  
 ЖИЗНИ НЕПРЕЛЕСТНЕ

*(A WREATH SPROUTS FROM THE SACRED TREE OF THE CROSS  
 INTENDED FOR ALL PERSONS THAT SUFFER IN THE CHURCH  
 AND WHOEVER WISHES TO FIND DEATH UPON THE CROSS  
 WILL RECEIVE THE WREATH OF ETERNAL LIFE)*

By contrast, the other two hands symbolize the death of death – the right hand holds the sword that kills death, which is symbolically represented by the skeleton on the white horse. The inscription reads:

ГРЕХОВНАЯ СМЕРТЬ  
 НЫНЕ ОУПРАЗДНИСЯ  
 ПРОЗЯБШИМ ДРЕВОМ  
 В КОНЕЦЪ ПОГУБИСЯ  
 ДОБРОДЕТЕЛЯ ТЩИТЕСЯ ТВОРИТИ  
 ЗЛОБНЫ БО ВАМЪ ГРЕХ ВРЕДИТИ

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<sup>35</sup> Matt. 16:19. ESV.

*(THE DEATH IN SIN WAS DEFEATED TODAY  
ITS END CAUSED BY THE FLOWERING TREE  
YOU SHOULD ALWAYS TRY TO BE VIRTUOUS  
LEST THE EVIL OF SIN BRING YOU HARM)*

The fourth hand – pointing down – holds a hammer that seals Hades, closing its jaws. The image is complemented by the form of the devil captured and held by a chain at the base of the cross. The inscription reads:

ОТ ДРЕВА КРЕСТНА ДИАВОЛЪ СВУЗАСУ  
ЛЮТА ЗЛОБА И ПРЕЛЕСТЬ ПОПРАСУ  
ДРЕВОМ ЧЕЛЮСТИ ВЗНУЗДАШАСЯ АДА  
ЧЕЛОВЕКОМ БЫТЬ НЕХИЩНА ОТРАДА

*(THE DEVIL WAS CAPTURED BY THE CROSS TREE  
AND THE EVIL AND DECEPTION WERE DEFEATED  
THE JAWS OF THE HADE WERE CLOSED BY THE TREE  
FOR THE SALVATION OF THE HUMAN)*

According to the Bible, the victory over death constitutes the most important victory of Christ, when “ο ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς καταργεῖται ὁ θάνατος”. (*The last enemy to be destroyed is death*).<sup>36</sup>

To the left of the cross, one can notice an angel that collects the blood of Christ in a vessel. Blood – another symbol of death – simultaneously becomes a symbol of eternal life during the mystery of the Holy Communion, in accordance with the following words from the Gospel of Mark: τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ αἷμά μου τὸ τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυνόμενον (*This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many*).<sup>37</sup> The inscription hanging by the left hand of Christ reads:

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor. 15:26. ESV.

<sup>37</sup> Mark 14:24. 21st Century King James Version.

ИЗЪ РАНЪ ЛИЕТЪСЯ КРОВЬ І ЯКО РЕКИ Т ГРЕХОВЪ МЫЕТЪ  
 ВЕРЪНЫ ЧЛВКИ

*(THE BLOOD FLOWS LIKE A RIVER FROM THE WOUNDS TO  
 CLEANSE THE BELIEVERS OF THEIR SINS)*

The culmination of the idea of life is symbolized on the icon by the most beautiful flower of the flowering Cross – the symbolic image of the church with the figures of the four evangelists among the columns and their personal symbols above them. The inscription praises the church:

БЛАГОВЕСТВУЕТЪ ЦЕРКОВЬ ХРИСТОВА ВЕСЕЛЯСЯ  
 ХРИСТОВА БО КРОВЬ НА НЮ ИЗЛИЯСЯ  
 В НИ СПАСОШАСЯ ПРЕМНОГИ НАРОДЫ  
 ПРИЯША ВСЮДУ БЛАЖЕНЫ СВОБОДЫ

*(THE CHURCH OF CHRIST RELISHES THE WONDERFUL NEWS  
 FOR THE BLOOD OF CHRIST WAS SPILT UPON HER.  
 MANY NATIONS WERE SAVED IN HER  
 THOSE THAT FULLY ACCEPTED THE BLISSFUL LIBERTIES)*

Finally, two poems are written on top of the icon over the symbolic images of the sun and moon.

БОГ ТЦЪ ПРЕМИЛОСЕРЪДН ЗАЛОГЪ  
 ДАДЕ ЛЮДЕМЪ ТВЕРЪДЫ  
 В ЛЮБВИ ПОСЛА В МИР НАМЪ СЫНА  
 ХРИСТА ЗА БЛАГОСТЬ ЕДИНА  
 НА КРЕСТЕ СЫН ТЕРЪПЕ СТРАСТИ  
 СВОБОДИ МИРЪ СЕЙ НАПАСТИ

*(GOD, THE MERCIFUL FATHER, LIKE A FAITHFUL PLEDGE  
SENT HIS SON WITH LOVE,  
JESUS CHRIST UNIQUE IN HIS VIRTUE.  
THE SON ENDURED THE PASSION ON THE CROSS  
AND SAVED THE WORLD FROM TEMPTATION)*

СНЪ ИИСЪ ИСТОЩИСЯ  
БГЪ И ЧЕЛОВЕКЪ НАМЪ ЯВИСЯ  
В ЛЮБВИ ЕГО ВСЯКЪ СПАСЕТЪСЯ  
ВЕРЪНЫ ВНЕБО ВОЗЪНЕСЕТЪСЯ  
ХРИСТОС ОТВЕРЗЪ РАЙ СОБОЮ  
ИДИТЕ ВОНЪ ПРАВОТОЮ

*(JESUS CHRIST EXHAUSTED HIMSELF  
BOTH GOD AND MAN, HE APPEARED BEFORE US.  
WE WILL ALL BE SAVED IN HIS LOVE.  
THE BELIEVERS WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN.  
JESUS HIMSELF OPENED THE GATES OF PARADISE  
WHERE EVERYONE SHOULD GO)*

These poems convey the theological message of the icon which features almost verbatim references to Simeon Polotski's 1670 theological work *Венец веры* (*The crown of faith*), which in turn was another version of the Orthodox theological work *Hortus pastorum* by Jacques Marchant, a theologian from the Low Countries.<sup>38</sup>

Many other symbolic images encircle the Cross. Among them, the traditional Christian symbols can be easily identified – the symbols of the Evangelists on the roof of the church and the walls of the heavenly city, the scale in the hands of the angel as a symbol of the ascent from earth into heaven, etc. These symbols contribute to the composition of the message of the icon but the creator does not

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<sup>38</sup> М. Korzo, "Внешняя традиция как источник вдохновения. К вопросу об авторстве киевских и московских авторов 17 века. Два примера," *Studi Slavistici* 6 (2009): 59–84.

interpret them, as their symbolic significance is already established in Christian tradition and is known to all Christians. In other words, they become signals – “words” of a message that can be read only based on the interpretation of the three symbolic systems: the painted imagery, the poetic text, and the Bible, which constitutes the origin of the first two systems.

The destination of the icon as predicted by its creator and its actual fate often differ radically. This is exactly the case of this piece (Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens (cat. 106-13), which arrived in Greece in the eighteenth century. There, the poetic text of the icon was incomprehensible to the population; the “talking” image was thus rendered “mute,” and since Greek tradition lacked a corresponding iconographic category, achieving the necessary correlations was also rendered impossible. Under such circumstances, did the icon succeed in executing its catechetical mission? What message did it convey to the people? In other words, what did a Greek believer who worshiped this image feel? Did it remain an object of worship for him or did it end up being a strange illustration of an incomprehensible poem with religious content? For the time being, we cannot answer with confidence to the aforementioned questions, but at least we ought to address them, since, unless we take these factors into account, we cannot properly understand how icons of Russian origin were perceived in Greece and the Balkans.