
THE PAINTING OF THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON IN THE NEAMT GOSPEL OF 1821

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Abstract

The first Gospel book illustrated with engravings in Romania, published in Neamt in 1821, depicts 23 of the 40 biblical parables with expressive and summarizing images. The only two engravings inserted in the text of the Neamt Gospel of 1821 summarize the first biblical section (Luke 15.11-20), referring to the monologue of the son in the vicinity of the herd of pigs, and the second section (Luke 15.21-31) focuses on the joy of the return to the father. The woodcuts show orthodox originality in sober simplicity. The text of the Gospels, rendered in Cyrillic characters, identifies the Romanian and Orthodox source of the Bible.

Keywords: prodigal son, engraved book, parable, father, Neamt

1. Introduction

The transition from miniature to book engraving did not happen immediately and it was not a simple abandonment of one genre and its replacement by another. In the decoration of 18th-century illuminated manuscripts were used the wash or pen drawing - the former imitating miniature, the latter - wood engraving. The title pages of books printed in the 19th century are usually composed of a large portal in the centre of which is a text containing information about the period, the rulers who often financed the printing of the book in question, the abbots of the monasteries, the printer, the engravers and the date and place where the book was printed. The school of engravers here established itself with authority throughout Romania, not only through the skill with which they practised woodcuts, but also through the theological message.

In 1821, the first illustrated gospel in Romania came out of the printing presses of monastery Neamt. The Gospel was printed, as it appears from the mention on the title page, during the reign of Mihail Șuțu, with the blessing of Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi, who is probably also the initiator of this book. The abbot of the monastery at that time was Ilarion. The Gospel of 1821 is a large format book (45x31x6) cm, has 680 pages and 216 engravings [1]. Although in 1860 the activity of the engravers from Monastery Neamț ceased, the engraving

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plates they made were certainly used until 1874 and even after that date. The images made by the engravers of the Neamt Monastery were not only intended to embellish the text, but above all to be a commentary on it in images. In terms of technique, the engravers at the Neamt Monastery used the woodcut technique, using pear and boxwood [2].

A remarkable activity in the field of woodcuts was shown by the Protopresbiter Mihail Strilbițchi, who decorated with woodcuts the books printed by him in Iasi, Dubăsari and Movilău [3]. He came from a Russian family with Polish origins and for half a century he embellished with woodcuts religious books such as the Ceaslov (1772), the Catavasier (1778), the Psalter (1782), the Pravilioara (1784) and a Calendar (1785). Between 1792 and 1796, the protopope set up a printing house in Dubăsari, which he later transferred to Movilău, and after 1800 he returned to Iași [4]. The engravings and manuscripts of the books published by Mihail Strelbițchi were made by himself together with his son Policarp. Through their contribution, traditional Moldavian engraving was given a modern character [5]. The images, created with refinement and great artistic sense, are so suggestive that N. Iorga considered that “the whole 18th century lives in their engravings” [6]. His style is also evident in the engravings of the Tetraevangeliary of Neamt (1821), although the typographer had probably passed into eternity in 1807. As the historian N. Iorga says: “he amused himself by illustrating with allegories” the books [6].

Although most of the illustrations are unsigned they are attributed to the famous engravers Ghervasie, Simion Ierei and Mihail Strilbitki.

Gheorghe Racoveanu considers Ghervasie Monah ‘a great engraver’ whose ‘creative power’ is not within everyone’s reach. His ‘art is dynamic’ and his ‘drawing is dense’ [7].

2. The parable of the prodigal son

Among the many illustrations of the Gospel of 1821, we will examine those that signal the parables of Prodigal Son, presented by the Saviour Jesus Christ. Of the three parables of chapter 15 of Luke’s Gospel, the last and longest is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-31).

2.1. Biblical and theological aspects

At the beginning of the parable of the prodigal son, it is spoken about the splitting of the human unity into separate fragments of individuals: “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me’.” (Luke 15.11-12) In many evangelical parables (in particular, about the father and his obedient and disobedient sons (Mathew 21.28-32), about the owner of the vineyard, his son and the evil vinedressers (Mathew 21.33-46) the image of the father appears when it is necessary to mark God. What kind of wealth is this? In the original Greek it is written as οὐσία, which indeed has the meaning of wealth [8]. On the other hand ἐπιβάλλον means ‘overlapping’ - ἐπιβάλλω. That is, the son has the right to that

part of the being, to which he can impose his will, which is master - over his body and soul.

The Vulgate text says: “da mihi portionem substantiae, quae me contigit”. He asks for the being, even though in Latin substantia also means wealth and inheritance. In the Latin translation, it is not quite clear, as what quae me contigit means - which interests me, which refers to me, compared to the Greek text, where it is shown that this being is below the beginning of the will, without respecting a hierarchy: ἐπιβάλλον - top-down direction.

The Father shares βίος - ‘life’. Here it does not refer only to wealth, but to everything that constitutes life: thought, soul, desire. He allowed them to live separately, not apart. In Latin, the meaning of the Greek text is again changed: et divisit illis substantiam - here it is about being, whereas in the Greek text, when the son asks that οὐσία be divided, βίος is divided [9]. Perhaps this is due to the fact that man, as soon as he has claimed his rights, cannot subdue everything at once, but for a while still lives in communion, which often takes place at all levels of the human hierarchy. Separation begins with the isolation of life in its outward manifestations - what in Greek is called βίος [10].

“Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.” (Luke 15.13) Meanwhile, in a few days, this process of possessing reaches a certain level. Although the text says by gathering all things, it is impossible for man to completely gather ‘under himself’ all things, because both love and selfishness have no limit. He left (ἀπεδήμησεν means quit) his country, people, community. The son withdraws from his country and thereby from communion (κοινωνία, comes from κοινωνῶ - to communicate, share). The same word, in turn, has the same root as the word ‘common’ - κοινον).

In symbolic terms, the meaning of sons can be specified. These are two attitudes towards God, two options for perceiving His admonishing word, where one chooses to be with God, not to go anywhere outside his circle, and the other, on the contrary, leaves God, tries to live without his favour. Thus, the son has the right to being and wants to have it individually, not wanting to share it with others out of love. Symbolically, ‘a far country’ can mean a spiritual state in which a person is very far from God. But why did the father allow this? Also because God does not enslave anyone.

He squandered his wealth - διασκορπίζω means disperse. The more the prodigal son wants to gather the being ‘under himself’, the more it ‘scatters’, or, it does not listen to him. The flesh overcomes the spirit. The personality, the hypostasis of man passes into the possession of the being. The mind loses its support - the heart. The hierarchy of human existence twists and turns upside down. The soul begins to be torn by passions, the mind by uncontrolled and uncontrollable thoughts [11].

Living in fornication. The New Testament use Ἀσωτία from fornication in 1 Peter 4:4, Titus 1.6 and Ephesians 5.18. This narrative conflict should be explained in symbolic terms. Promiscuous life is a direct consequence of strong distance from God. A person who is far from God does not have a formed system of moral values, there is no spiritual goal, and therefore there are no internal

limiting levers. Irrational waste, including one's abilities, talents, energy, etc., of course, sooner or later leads to poverty, to ideological hunger - the need to find some incentive for life. Ἀσώτως - is the one who does not save himself. Throughout the New Testament this word is used only in Luke in this sense. Blessed Jerome translated it as luxurious - luxurious, which clearly shows that only in terms of quality is it similar to the Greek ἀσώτως [12].

“And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.” (Luke 15.14) The meanings of the verb κοῦτῶ is ‘to destroy’, ‘to swallow’. Thus this line can be translated as follows: he destroyed everything in himself, in the ontological sense - destroying the foundations of his being. In the parable, between the spending of wealth and hunger, a rather severe causality was established in the country.

This place can be analysed from at least two points of view. First of all, man has a deep and mysterious connection with the whole world. The wealth of the world depends on the wealth of human nature in all its psychosomatic integrity. God created the world with the goal of deification, like man. The deification of the world must be accomplished through man. That is why man must fill the earth with blessings, which represent the uncreated energy of God, thanks to which if man is baptized - he becomes deified. He was set to rule the earth as part of his nature; this dominion can be compared to the dominion of the soul over the body. Ἀρχετε means ‘be your beginning, base’. The Earth does not exist by itself, but its existence depends on the existence of man. Corruption entered Adam's nature and from him it spread further on the Earth. The Earth began to bear thorns because they originally existed in Adam's soul.

Secondly, from the above it appears that when the son spent his wealth, there was famine in the country. If by the country is understood the meaning of the whole world, then the son, depriving himself of the blessing, caused a corruption in him. In the phrase from the parable, about how the prodigal son spent all his wealth and there was famine in the country, there is another meaning. Man's view of the world depends on his inner state. He sees the world in its totality in different ways depending on his inner state. The son closed in on himself, thinks to himself, thus causing a change in his way of existence. After this his vision of the world changed - the world became a grey desert for him: “there was a great famine in that land” [13].

In the Greek text the hunger is not great, but strong - ἰσχυρὰ, meaning unconquerable. Man cannot change his way of being, but only with external help: “An impossible thing for anyone to overcome his nature: and where nature overcomes, then the action of Him Who is above nature is recognized” [9, p. 11]. He began to miss it. Ὑστερῶ means to be deprived of everything, and at the same time not to reach something. The son tries to reach the pleasures before, only he can't. The Son went and made the way from sin to pleasure, which is passion. The very verb to passion is used in the original Greek [14]. The suffering son was self-confident because to suffer means to follow the place that leads nowhere, to trust one's own will. The one who ‘sent him to his fields to guard the pigs’ does not give him what he wants, that is, does not meet his expectations.

“And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.” (Luke 15.16) In the Greek text ‘he desired’ - ἐπεθύμει to fill his womb. Again, filling the belly does not mean ‘eating’, much less ‘tasting’. It is the lowest degree of relationship with food. Figuratively, it means the descent of a man into the most primitive pleasures. Yet, even with these, no one finally allows him to satiate his belly; it is not said: ‘but he could not’, but: *no one gave him*.

Man lives, connecting with the world around him. This connection, in particular, represents knowledge. By knowing, man does not remain a foreign observer, but enters into a living and direct dialogue with the person or thing he knows. For example, man when he is alone with himself and when he knows that someone is watching him. A thing in the depth of which lies a certain meaning - the logos - seems to move towards us, opens up to us, when we want to know it. Knowledge is not self-evaluative; it must grow in love. Man knows to love. Acquaintance must be only the preliminary stage of love. If it doesn't turn into love, then it means it failed. The egoist is capable of neither love nor knowledge [15]. He has no connection with the world, the logos of things does not come forward. That is why it is said, *but no one gave it to him*. The world for man in that state is silent, it becomes ‘an object’.

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!’” (Luke 15.17) Coming to himself reveals the fact that until then he ‘went out of himself’, that is, his attention turned to external things, he did not pay attention to the inner world and the spiritual world in general. Coming to himself, he again turned his gaze to his inner world. To come to one’s self - to remember, is to properly value one’s own actions and one’s own condition. Coming to his senses for his son meant realizing the seriousness of his condition. In general, any evaluation is possible when we compare something with its ideal. The son in the given case compares his present state with that of the past, that is, through thought he returns to what he has lost.

It is characteristic that it is not love for his father that makes his son return to his father, but hunger, that is, not the father himself, but the fact that *his servants are satisfied with bread*. In the same way, a man usually turns to God because he loses either his former health or spiritual ease and joy, but not because of self-centred love for God. Here we must say that there are three different types of man’s relationship to God: the relationship as a slave, the relationship as a servant, and the relationship as a son [16]. Slave relationship - is when man fears the wrath of God and fulfils the commandment out of fear. Servant relationship - is when man fulfils the command with the hope of a reward. He refuses worldly pleasures in order ‘in heaven’ to receive ‘more’, and the main thing - heavenly gratifications. The relationship as a son can be expressed by the words of a saint: Lord, with You and in hell I will be fine, but without You - and in Heaven I will be bad.

The prodigal son is in the state of a servant. He, not having love and not being to love, does not consider that the father loves him. He thinks that because he spent the father’s fortune, it would be right of him not to receive it [9]. Only he

retains the right, like everyone else, to be employed by his father, in which case he will be obliged to support himself with pay.

“I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” (Luke 15.18-19) From the verb ἀνίστημι comes the word ἀνάστασις ‘resurrection’. Man can move towards God without being able to reach Him. As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says, virtue has only one limit - that of having no limits. Love has no limits. You can never say: I love someone so much that it is impossible to love them more [17].

“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15.20) It was not the father who felt pity, but the son who finally felt that the father mourned him. Even if it is written that he saw him from afar - this does not mean that he did not see his son until then; the son simply did not feel it. Now that he was on his way, he began to feel. They say: *he ran*. More precisely, the son goes to meet the father, and the father runs away. This means that the love for the son is greater than the love of the son for the father. This is expressed by the fact that he *fell on his lump*, that is, he hugged him. To embrace someone means to appropriate them in yourself, to make them part of yourself. God takes man in His arms in order to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1.4), as the Holy Apostle Peter writes [18].

“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’.” (Luke 15.21) In the account of the father’s love, it is clearly expressed that the son did not seem to have any feelings. This is because of the hardness of the soul, which happens after man sins. He can now only repent so that later his soul can be resurrected. The father somehow did not hear what his son said, without answering him, and then suddenly he tells his servants to bring him clothes.

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet’.” (Luke 15.22) The father turns the words of the returned one’s prayer into their opposite, treating him not as a hired servant but as a distinguished guest. To this end, he gave him the three badges that Joseph had received from Pharaoh when he called him the greatest over all the land of Egypt (Genesis 41.42): the best robe, the ring, and the shoes (2 Corinthians 5.4, 1 Maccabees 6.15, Exodus 12.11) [19]. In the original - ‘the first coat’ it is the one that the son missed when he left. Δακτύλιον - the ring, is the sign of parentage. When man advances in the spiritual life, he passes from the state of slave and servant to that of a son. Then he, who remains in the love of God, is no longer affected by earthly things, as Saint John the Theologian says: ‘he who loves God does not sin’, that is, his feet are not hurt by what lies or rises from the Earth.

“For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15.24) Existence apart from God brings death to man, but returning brings life. The verb ἀπόλλυμι also has the meaning of losing something completely. The son lost himself. That is why it is said after he found himself: εὐρέθη.

They began to rejoice. There is a beginning to this joy, but there is no end. “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.” (Luke 15.25) *The eldest son was in the country*, that is, in the spiritual field. They say: *he is back*. Only in the Greek text: ὡς ἐρχόμενος, meaning walking, he was on the spiritual path. This dialogue takes place outside the home, where understanding and gaiety reign. The elder son talks to the servant and the father outside the house. He does not participate in this merriment, but stands outside of it. He is filled with envy, which comes from worldly judgment. He demands justice, forgetting the kindness of the father, thus showing himself as a servant, not a son.

“Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.” (Luke 15.27) According to the Greek original, the son was received by the ‘living’ father ὑγιαίνοντα. This is in the verb form because the action is missing. The spiritual health we are talking about - it is not about the one that is received once and cannot be affected. You always have to fight for it. The son leaves the embrace of death and comes into his father’s arms [20].

“But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.” (Luke 15.28) He did not enter, because in the kingdom of love there is no place for legal rights. But the father, like love itself, descends to his weakness, leaves the house and calls him to join their joy. He not only called him, but asked him to enter into the common joy, leaving aside the sorrows. The verb is used in the imperfect, which means that the father always called his son - not just once. The eldest son sees himself correctly: he has never broken the father’s commandments. The joy is not that he stays with the father, but that he can enjoy a calf with his friends. The calf is not the Eucharistic lamb; the joy the son dreams of is outside the Eucharist. He is a hired servant, not a son.

In father and son there are two worldviews: the gracious and the legal. The father removes the assumptions of the son, saying: *all mine are yours*, that is, the father is able to give everything to the eldest son. This he does not understand and does not know and does not want to receive.

“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” (Luke 15.32) And the father goes on to say that he must give up his pretensions and rights, and rejoice and be glad at the gain of a son, for in this fact lies true love [21].

2.2. Representative engravings on the parable of the prodigal son

The development of printing after 1440, as well as the creative freedom promoted by the historic Protestant churches, diversified the expression of biblical engravings. While Albrecht Durer distinguished himself by illustrating the Passion of Jesus Christ, create in 1496 an original representation, engravers such as Hans Sebald Beham (1540), H. Bol (1580) or M. Trau (1541-1543) detail the biblical narrative in engravings detached from the biblical text, as a form of artistic creation autonomous from Western Christianity.

The biblical text of the parable of the prodigal son has been fragmented into 3 to 11 sequences, detailing not only the departure - guarding the pigs and the inner monologue - the return to the father, but the conversion of wealth into money, the debauchery in the foreign land, the moral and social removal, and the father's dispute with the obedient brother. M. Trau is 'profligate' in the details of the 11 engravings, worked between 1541 and 1543.

The mural painting, tributary to a sober hesychast hieraticism, shows a maximum of six scenes, compressing the message of Luke's twenty biblical verses.

The painting of the parable of the prodigal son has various pictorial expressions, being reported the compartmentalization of the mural on 5 or 6 detailed scenes in the exterior painting of the monasteries of Northern Moldavia (Voronet, Humor, Probotă, Arbore and the cathedral of Saint Gheorghe-Suceava), during 16th century [22].

As a principle of image making, the Prodigal Son brings a hitherto unheard-of situation: the syncopated illustration of a commentary, interposing the primary meaning with the secondary one. In this way, a new component is added to the innovative iconographic behaviour - a feature of post-Byzantine tradition [23].

Through the parable of the Prodigal Son, in the iconographic syntax mentioned above, metanoia appears as an instrument of victory and the rediscovery of faith. The soul sees itself empty, hungry, longing for the forgiveness it can receive both from the immortal Judge, who is its own conscience, and from the just and merciful Judge, who is God. Coming to oneself is equivalent to a judgment of the facts by one's own conscience. In this sense, Dionysius of Furna writes in the 23rd parable: "Church and altar, and near the church the elder son praying; and beyond that the younger son [wasting all his wealth] eating and drinking with harlots. And outside the church, Christ embracing and kissing the fornicating son. And again Christ, in the church, imparts communion to the prodigal son, and the apostles anoint him and give him the cross. And all around the altar the angelic bands, with harps and trumpets and other musical instruments, rejoice. And again Christ, on the other side, speaking to him in a paper: 'My son, you are with me at all times and all my...'" [24]

Theophylact of Bulgaria, a commentator from XI-XII century of the Gospels, directly introduces the hidden meaning: "And this parable is like the above. For this also brings forth and calls man God, the truly loving God". The squandering of wealth in fornication, as the text says, has, in the painting, an 'abstract' aspect - "He who has gone away from God and does not have his fearful face before his eyes, is willingly absent, because no divine word works in him... And this wretch lusteth to be filled with sin, and no man giveth him satisfaction therein... until he did evil things beside himself." [25]

The two engravings inserted in the text of the Neamt Gospel of 1821 summarize the first biblical section (Luke 15.11-20), referring to the monologue of the son near of the herd of pigs, and the second section (Luke 15.21-31) focuses on the joy of the return to the father (Figure 1).



Figure 1. (a) Prodigal son feed pigs (Tetraevangheliar, 1821 Neamt); (b) Return of the Prodigal Son (Tetraevangheliar, 1821 Neamt).

3. Final remarks

Through the binomial image - word, Father Dumitru Stăniloae affirms that “Revelation expressed itself essentially and authentically through words and images ... Most acts and words of Revelation take the form of images.” [26] Thus, the first level is that of the practical spiritual life. Then, the second level is that of action based on the divine Revelation that provided the natural knowledge. Saint Irenaeus of Lyon’s famous formula: “The glory of God is the living man, and the life of man is the vision of God” [27] highlights his conception of its overwhelming importance for human beings thirsting for the Absolute [Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.XXXVI.7, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book4.html>]. The third level is that of mystical understanding the level of metacognition, since “the Word through which God communicated Himself in the Old Testament revelation was not a permanent speech of Him within the Prophets, much less within man” [27, p. 184].

The lesson taught by Jesus was meant to reassure his listeners that any return from the path of sin is possible, on the one hand, and on the other, that “in heaven there will be more joy for a sinner who repents” (Luke 15.7). Through prayer and repentance, the only ones capable of dissolving sin, he becomes a son of light, to the joy of God and his angels (Luke 15.10).

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