The Bible as the Basis of Images and the Parables of “The Little Prince” by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Nadezhda G. Bazhenova
Alla A. Kuragina
Natalia V. Rusinova
Mari State University, Yoshkar-Ola, Russia
Email: bng2901@yandex.ru

Mikhail G. Haritono
The Chuvash I. Yakovlev State Pedagogical University, Cheboksary, Russia
Email: mgkhar@mail.ru

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Abstract

The article focuses on the fairy tale and parable “The Little Prince”, the masterpiece of the famous French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900 - 1944), whose literary works are imbued with deep humanism and faith in a human being, search for the truth and meaning in life. The article examines the genre of a parable in terms of the Christian tradition. The parable was one of the main methods of preaching of Jesus Christ. Christian sources indicate such basic features of a parable as teaching and edification through the images and characters from real life; they have deep spiritual meaning of divinely revealed truth. Allegorical stories make words of teaching more expressive, they teach meditation. The article reveals parallels between Saint-Exupéry’s work and biblical images and parables such as a sheep as an image of the evangelical lamb, a baobab as sprouts of sin, the Little Prince’s rule to clean his planet as a call to morning prayer, the theme of the freedom to choose between good and evil, an image of the volcano as the need for purification from passions, the character of the lamplighter as an image of a righteous monk, a heart as the organ of spiritual knowledge. These vivid images of the fairy tale like the biblical parables demonstrate the unity of the spiritual and the physical world, help to understand the hidden wisdom, allow to lodge the truth deep on memory.

Keywords: Parable, the Bible, the allegoric story, fairy tale, wisdom.

1. Introduction

The outstanding work by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry “The Little Prince” is defined as a fairy tale and parable. Everyone knows what a fairy tale is, but what is a parable?

Archbishop Averky Taushev to this question gives such an answer: “The word ‘parable’ comes from the Greek words παραβολή and παροιμίας. Παροιμίας literally means a summary expressing the rule of life (for example, “Book of Proverbs”). Παραβολή is a story that has a profound meaning and through images, taken from the everyday life of people, expresses the highest spiritual values. Gospel parable is παραβολή”. (Taushev, 1995)

A parable, as described in the Gospels, is one of the key methods of preaching of Jesus Christ. “All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable,” Evangelist Matthew points out. (Matthew 13, 34).

In the Bible Encyclopedia there can be found the following definition, “the parables of Christ are instructions, borrowed from the surrounding, the nature or the examples taken from everyday human life that the Lord often suggested to His disciples and the people in teaching and edification” (Bazhenov, 2006).

In the Complete Church Slavonic Dictionary by archpriest G. Dyachenko another definition is given, “The parable is a mystery, an enigmatic, wise saying, proverb, an instructive saying, an image” (Dyachenko, 1993).

Archpriest Victor Potapov also points out that at the basis of the Greek word παραβολή there is an idea of comparison. “The parable,” he writes, “is a kind of ‘expanded metaphor’, a comparison; an illustration of the spiritual
based on an example from the everyday. It is characteristic of the eastern cast of mind to speak and teach in the form of comparison; it is characteristic of it to express itself by means of riddles, which stimulate inquisitiveness and dispose one toward reflection. It is necessary to understand a parable as a kind of utilization of symbols, that is, images, taken from earthly realities, in order to designate by them realities divinely revealed and in need of a profound explanation in the majority of cases. In His parables, Christ not infrequently took examples from nature or from social, economic and religious life contemporary to Him” (Potapov, 1995).

St. John Chrysostom explains it in the following way, “The Lord spoke in parables to make His words more expressive, to clothe truth in the living image, to capture it in a deeper memory, and to present the deeds themselves.” (Ganago, 2010).

Thus, from the time of the early Church a parable is defined as a story told by Jesus Christ as an illustration of his teaching.

2. Methods and Materials

According to Bishop Alexander Mileant, Jesus expounded His teachings in the form of allegorical stories for several reasons. “First, he talked about the deep spiritual truths that have been difficult for his listeners to grasp. A concrete and vivid story drawn from life could long be remembered, and a man, trying to understand the meaning of this story, could reflect on it, delve deeply into its content and, in this manner, gradually understand the wisdom concealed in it. Second, people who did not fully understand the teachings of the Savior could have their own way to reinterpret it, spreading it in a distorted way. Proverbs preserved the purity of Christ's teaching by clothing its content in the form of a specific narrative. Third, the parables have an advantage over direct instruction, they not only contain the general Divine law, but they demonstrate its applicability in both private and public life. Gospel parables are also remarkable in that they have not in the least lost their clarity, actuality and charming beauty, despite the passed centuries. The parables are living witnesses of the close unity which exists between the spiritual and the physical worlds, between the inner cause and its manifestation in life.” (Mileant, 1996).

Deacon Andrei Kuraev believes that “parables are an allegory, in which a listener should know himself. Gospel parable is not an everyday illustration of some moral truths, but an appeal to the conscience: do you understand what's going on with you? The heroes of the parable do not have well-defined characters. They are not described, and the narrator of the parable does not give their psychological portraits. The character of the parable is a pure subject of a moral and religious choice. This is one of the main principles of the biblical text, it appeals to the personal identity, to the choice”. (Kuraev, 1997).

It is important to note that some of the parables were explained by Jesus Christ to His disciples in private, and the largest portion was left without explanation to draw the listeners’ attention and to get them used to thinking so that they “by the sensual, earthly could explain to themselves the above-sensual and heavenly in details.” (Bazhenov, 2006).

Thus, the directing tasks which are recommended by pedagogics psychology when the listener is given a series of similar tasks, built on the same principle, which prompts their solution were used by Jesus Christ in his teaching almost two thousand years ago.

“The great pianist Sviatoslav Richter,” B.A. Ganago wrote, “once revealed one of his secrets, “The most important thing is a surprise. The surprise makes an impression.” If the topic of the conversation and its main idea are announced in advance, what is left for the listener to solve, to think over? The problem itself may seem useless and boring for the audiences. It requires involvement. It is probably best to start with some intrigue, puzzle, with some action or event. That is how Christ did, saying “A sower went out to sow ...” (Mark. 4: 3). Being intrigued by the unexplained parable, the listener subconsciously compares imaginary pictures in his mind and, God willing, will come to the discovery of meaning. It will be his guess and his discovery. That is why the idea should not be obvious. It should not be declared, memorised without experience. As a director pointed out the idea wears an “invisibility cloak.” Later, in a moment of insight, it will penetrate into consciousness, in the heart of the listener, and will be his lifestyle, his world outlook.

The properties of the parable are diverse. Sometimes it is a hint aiming at the other, missing. And since there is no direct aiming, there is no protective, defensive reaction. So, this hint gets into the soul of the listener and causes reflections, associations which give seedlings.

Parables can be used as a topic of conversation, as an excuse for joint discussion. Images of parables can be role models” (Ganago, 2010).

Thus, Christ revealed us not only eternal truths, but, according to B.A. Ganago, “showed the methodology of evangelical preaching ... taught associative, creative thinking. A parable invests truth at image, and the image brings to life countless individual associations. Let us remember how the little prince of Saint-Exupery met a distressed pilot in the
desert and asked him to draw a sheep. Whatever the pilot painted, the boy was not happy, it was a wrong sheep. Finally, to get rid of pesky requests, the annoyed pilot drew a box with holes and offered the child to put there such a lamb which would suit him. To the greatest pilot’s surprise he saw joy on the face of the little prince. The crate with an imaginative lamb offered scope for imagination, called for creation. The box turned out to be a push, seed, and the child was glad to have the opportunity to think for himself, to envision, to imagine.” (Ganago, 2010).

3. Results

Why did Saint-Exupéry choose a parable genre to implement his reflections on the essence of human existence? The primary reason for this is his Christian upbringing and education.

“The writer’s mother,” Olga Novikova writes, “was a deeply religious woman, and her faith expressed itself not only in words and obligatory church attendance on Sundays, but it was the basis of the family life. The children lived in an atmosphere of love and care. After the death of the family man, despite financial difficulties, the Countess de Saint-Exupery sent Antoine and his younger brother François to one of the best Jesuit colleges where they felt quite free as the monks did not impose rules of behavior on children, they preferred to appeal to their conscience, that is God’s voice in person”. (Novikova, 2008).

This fact suggests that it is necessary to know the basis of Christianity and the book of all books the Bible, especially the Gospel, i.e. the book of the New Testament describing the life and teachings of the God-man Jesus Christ, to properly understand the parables of “The Little Prince”.

In the fourth chapter of “The Little Prince”, the author warns us that he would not want his book to be read for fun, therefore insisting on the serious, thoughtful reading of his work. Let us follow his advice.

First of all one should pay attention to the title of the book. Where does the main character come from? Certainly, from a fairy tale.

The fairy tale as well as a parable is an ancient genre of folklore. It teaches people how to live, gives them optimism, takes faith in the triumph of goodness and justice. Behind the whimsicality of the plot and fiction the real human relationships are hidden. Like in theparable, a moral and social justice is constantly revealed in the tale. Behind the seemingly simple and uncomplicated plot and mockery a deep meaning is hidden. By means of abstract forms through parables, metaphors and symbols the author touches upon the cosmic themes of good and evil, life and death, human being, true love, moral beauty, friendship, continuous loneliness, the relationship of the individual and the mass, and many others.

The tale “The Little Prince” was written not so much for children as for adults, “who have not completely lost a children’s impressionability, childlike view of the world and ability to dream. The author himself possessed such an acute eyesight” (The little prince, 2009). “Somewhere along the way we have gone astray. The human anthill is richer than ever before. We have more wealth and more leisure, and yet we lack something essential, which we find it difficult to describe. We feel less human; somewhere we have lost our mysterious prerogatives.” (The little prince, 2009).

4. Discussion

So let us go back to our main character. He embodies, in our opinion, several images. The first is the image of the author, for example in relation to the rose, the second is the image of the celestial man or an angel, as the little prince says in the third chapter to the pilot: “So you, too, come from the sky!”. To some extent it represents the image of Jesus Christ who was wise beyond his 12 years of age explaining the Old Testament prophecies to the high priests. Let us look at the examples.

In chapters 25 and 26 the little prince confesses that he really fell from the sky and his star will show the spot. In this connection one can remember the star of Bethlehem, which led the Magi to the birthplace of the divine infant Jesus who also came from Heaven. «And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven» (John 3,13).

In the next chapter, the author is comforted by the fact that the little prince came back to his planet, because, at dawn, he did not find his body. This situation reminds us of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose body also was not found in the tomb early in the morning. «And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of this sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white
garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him” (Mark 16, 1-6).

Let us consider the problem stated in the title of this article in order of chapters of “The Little Prince”.

In the first chapter, the author makes his readers think about the stories of the Old Testament of the Bible. So, the primeval forest seems to us the Garden of Eden, where the first Fall from Grace took place. Saint-Exupery’ drawing which depicts a boa constrictor swallowing a predator, reminds us of the ancient serpent which by deceit deprived Eve of the Garden of Eden and heavenly life having persuaded her to eat the forbidden fruit.

The second drawing of the author, the so-called hat, is probably a result of reading the Old Testament story of the prophet Jonah, who was sent by God to Nineveh (Johan 1, 2), however, he did not listen to Him, and he was enlightened in the belly of the whale (Johan 2 1-11).

In the second chapter the little prince asks the author to draw a sheep. “Why draw a sheep?” a thoughtful reader may ask. In our opinion Saint-Exupery’s sheep is nothing but the Lamb of God that hears the voice of the shepherd and goes to him (John 10, 27). This image is often found in the Bible and embodies the image of the Christian who hears the voice of God in his soul and tries to listen.

The little prince does not need a patient (sinful) or old (unrepentant) or horned (stubborn, proud, angry) lamb, i.e. sheep. He needs a lamb, living for a long time, because sin kills the soul.

In the third chapter, the author speaks of human freedom to choose the way of life. God created man free to choose between good and evil, He need not slaves but sons. And the little prince follows Him, he is not going to tie his lamb because the lamb can only go straight, as the path to God is narrow and it is impossible to get lost following the evangelical commandments and teachings of the holy fathers who have gone this way.

Chapter five tells us the parable of the baobab. Many people associate it with the environmental problems, some do with fascism, seeing swastika in drawings of this chapter. However, in our view, this parable should not be understood tenuously as it happened, for example, to the disciples of Jesus Christ. When he said to them: «Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees» (Mat. 16: 6), they thought they had not taken bread, but Jesus told them about the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

So in the parable of the baobab Saint-Exupery says about the spiritual rather than the material. Environmental problems and fascism are only a result of the spiritual problems of humanity, related to the multiplied evil.

We agree with Anna Lelik (Lelik, 2007) that the baobab is a sin. Invisible baobab seeds are thoughts, words, feelings that get into the soul from outside. They can be good or bad. It is necessary to cultivate the good seeds and weed out the evil ones accordingly.

The author tells us how a little tender sprout - a sin, which was not pulled out in time, grows and strengthens, hardens and breaks the heart into pieces, depriving it of the possibility to grow something alive. Holy Fathers managed to snatch seeds of the baobab-sin from their souls. We should conduct daily inspection of our souls and pull out the baobab sprouts by the Sacrament of Penance. Otherwise the consequents will be disastrous. The spurt not pulled out in time turns into a monolithic tree of sin, which shields the light and condemns the soul (the planet) to perdition.

It is very important for the little prince to feed the sheep with the baobab, as the sheep, as mentioned above, is the true image of a believer who struggles with sins and in his highest feat takes upon himself the sins of another person, as Jesus Christ did taking the sins of the world (John 1, 29).

Further Saint-Exupery says that even a herd of elephants can not cope with a baobab tree. Due to the fact that man was created with a free will, if he allows some passion to grow on the field of his soul and later he wants to get rid of it, it will be a very difficult task which can not be done without God, for Jesus Christ said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15, 5), meaning the good.

In the fifth chapter, the author of “The Little Prince” calls us to the morning prayer, the queen of all virtues. “It is a question of discipline,” the little prince said to me later on. “When you’ve finished your own toilet in the morning, then it is time to attend to the toilet of your planet, just so, with the greatest care.” (Vikulova, 1996). He describes it as a boring, but easy task reminding us of the words of the Gospel “My burden is light” (Mat. 11, 30), but in order to reach the Kingdom of God, it is necessary to work on oneself (Luke 16, 16).

Moreover, Saint-Exupery emphasises that one knows little about the baobabs threat. This accords with the words of the Gospel that there are few people who understand the danger of multiplication of sin and struggle with it. (Luke 12, 32).

In the ninth chapter the author goes on with the theme of purification from passions. We consider volcanoes to represent passions. Active volcanoes are like human passions, such as anger, which, if not suppressed, will constantly erupt from the depths of the soul. An extinct volcano is a defeated passion, but it can restate its existence at any time, so the little prince also cleans it just in case, because “one never knows” and “we are obviously much too small to clean out
our volcanoes” (Vikulova, 1996).

Thus, Saint-Exupery makes us believe that the person is not able to rid himself of passions, he needs the help of God, because as it was cited above: “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15: 5). Therefore cleaning of volcanoes implies, in our view, turning to God in prayer, repentance, and all that leads to getting rid of passions. Here is how the same idea is expressed by Archpriest Artemy Vladimirov in his conversation with children, “Let him pray in the morning, before every argument of the adults, for the Lord will not allow the volcano to grumble and fiery lava of irritation and anger to pour out externally” (Vladimirov, 2009).

The fourteenth chapter is devoted to the lamplighter who, in our opinion, reflects the image of the life of a righteous man, or even a true monk, because:

1. the lamplighter constantly works and the righteous man has no time to rest;
2. the lamplighter like a monk dutifully carries out obedience, which corresponds the words of the Gospel “You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things”. (Mat. 25, 21);
3. the author's characteristics of the lamplighter as a ridiculous man, despised by everyone is in league with the words of the Gospel, “and ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake” (Mat. 10, 22). In fact, as people do not understand the work of Saint-Exupery's lamplighter so they blaspheme the life of a monk, a righteous man.
4. to our mind, the profession of the lamplighter which is connected with light is chosen by the author on purpose as it accords with the following Gospel statements: “Ye are the light of the world» (Mat. 5, 14) и «Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Mat. 5, 16).
5. Finally, the author calls the planet of the lamplighter blessed, that requires no comment, because the blessing belongs only to God and the people bless each other only in the name of God.

It should also be noted that “one can be both faithful and lazy” (Vikulova, 1996), because no man is sinless, for “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mat. 26, 41). The little prince likes the lamplighter, he could have called him his friend, as the similar strives to the similar. However, the planet of the lamplighter is very small, there is no room for two, as the word monk derives from the ancient Greek μοναχός ‘single’ from μόνος ‘one’. That is why, we tend to see the lamplighter, as a righteous monk. All the more, Saint-Exupery used to say: “If I were religious I would become a monk ...” (Novikova, 2008).

Number seven which appears in the sixteenth chapter is also not accidental, since this number is sacramental. A week has seven days, the number of which dates back to the story of God's creation of the world. There are seven notes in music, seven colors in the rainbow. The Orthodox Church has seven sacraments, seven deadly sins and seven virtues, seven Ecumenical Councils, etc. In our opinion, the main idea of this chapter is the idea of a continual prayer that is being constantly given in the world, because when some people have a night and rest, others have the opportunity to pray and bring the bloodless sacrifice of the liturgy that is the divine service, which takes place usually in the morning.

In the seventeenth chapter the serpent says that it sends back to the earth whomever it touches. These words directly resonate with the funeral prayer for the deceased person, “for you are dust and to dust you shall return”, as the first man, Adam, was created by God from the earth and after death, as we know, returns there. But it was not so before. Adam was created for eternity. He was not supposed to be touched by death, if he had properly used his God-given freedom. However, the old serpent, the devil, through Eve brought death to the man, first it was spiritual then, as a consequence, corporeal one.

Saint-Exupery’s snake is distinguished by wisdom, even in the Gospel it is said: “be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Mat. 10, 16).

In the eighteenth chapter Saint-Exupery reminds us of our roots, that is, loved ones and ancestors, the history of our family, our country, our world. After all, if we forget about them, it really bothers us.

In the twenty-third chapter, the author expresses the idea that people spend money and time on earth medication but they refuse to simply go to a water spring which is the source of eternal life, that is, the sacrament of the Eucharist which cures the soul of the believer of all diseases. This thought is confirmed in the next chapter, chapter 24, where Saint-Exupery says about the necessity of water for a human heart. In Paul’s letter to the Hebrews we read: “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised:)” (Heb. 10, 19-23).

According to not only religious beliefs, but the latest scientific data, the heart is not only the main “sensory organ”,
but also the organ of spiritual knowledge. “But the eyes are blind. One must look with the heart,” the little prince advises us in the twenty-fifth chapter, because “He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.” (John 12, 40).

People do not know what they are looking for, because few people think about the meaning of life, and even fewer find the true meaning of life. The author of “The Little Prince” confesses in chapter 25 that he realized that he was looking for the source of living water which flows into everlasting life, because “This water was indeed a different thing from ordinary nourishment. Its sweetness was born of the walk under the stars, the song of the pulley, the effort of my arms. It was good for the heart, like a present. When I was a little boy, the lights of the Christmas tree, the music of the Midnight Mass, the tenderness of smiling faces, used to make up, so, the radiance of the gifts I received.”

It is interesting to note that the water was in the village well, which is not usual for a desert, and there was no village nearby, as the author points out. All of this resonates with the following Gospel passage: “Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour. There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink. (For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.) Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans. Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knowest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water? Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle? Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4, 6-14).

5. Conclusion

In this article we set forward our opinions on the understanding of the great works of Saint-Exupery. Besides the fact that it is interesting to reread the book and find new ideas, we do not deny the fact that everyone looks at things from their own angle, so one can comment on and interpret the characters’ sayings of the analysed work in a different way. Therefore, we urge our readers to a thoughtful reading of “The Little Prince” for the benefit of their soul and we do not claim the final solution of problems stated in this paper.

References
