

The Biblical Thought of Hryhorii Skovoroda in “The Israelite Snake”

Stephen P. Scherer

Abstract

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Few efforts have been made to analyze Skovoroda's individual works; “The Israelite Snake” is especially suitable for such analysis because its topic is the most important theme of all Skovoroda's writing, namely, the Bible. This text is analyzed section by section to illuminate the author's understanding of the Bible. In the text, Skovoroda insists that human happiness depends on the search for truth, which is in fact the struggle to find God and avoid superstition. His approach to the apprehension of God is fundamentally apophatic; he believes that, insofar as one can approach God, one can do so only as God is manifested in nature and symbolized in the Biblical texts, which must be read allegorically and not literally; he sees the Bible as a collection of symbols intended to convey to humans the reality of God. Genesis 2:1-2, according to his reading, shows that the Biblical account of creation is not about literal creation, but about the relationship of the created order to the divine, and ultimate return to its creator. Skovoroda discusses a variety of Biblical figures which recall the creation tale. This analysis of “The Israelite Snake” shows that the work is marked by a systematic and logical presentation; that it manifests a consistent and full view of reality; and that this work (as, indeed, Skovoroda's entire body of work) represents the first East Slavic attempt to create a genuine religious philosophy.



Introduction

The Ukrainian religious philosopher, Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722–94), created a significant body of poems, fables and philosophical treatises during the last half of the eighteenth century.¹ In the two centuries since his death, a large bibliography of books and articles devoted to these works has emerged.² Despite the volume of this secondary literature, there have been few efforts to analyze Skovoroda's individual works, particularly his longer ones.³ One can, therefore, justify the analysis of any of Skovoroda's individual works. But "The Israelite Snake" [Izrail'skij Zmij] is especially suitable for this sort of analysis because the topic of this treatise, as well as the most important theme of Skovoroda's entire body of work, is the Bible.⁴ Skovoroda himself calls the Bible "the most

¹For a listing of the titles and dates of these works, see: George Y. Shevelov, "Prolegomena to Studies of Skovoroda's Language and Style," in Richard H. Marshall Jr. and Thomas E. Bird, eds., *Hryhorij Savyč Skovoroda: An Anthology of Critical Articles* (Edmonton, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1994), 132.

Note that in the present article all titles have been transliterated using the international system rather than the modified Library of Congress system usually employed in *Logos*.

²To gauge the size and nature of this secondary literature, see: D.I. Bahalij, *Ukrains'kyj Mandrovanyj Filosof Hr. Sav. Skovoroda* (Kharkiv: DVU, 1926), 377–93; E.S. Berkovych et al., *Hryhorij Skovoroda: Biobibliografija*, 2nd ed. (Kharkiv: Kharkiv University, 1972); Richard Hantula, "A Bibliography of Skovorodiana," in Marshall and Bird, eds., *Hryhorij Savyč Skovoroda*, 285–310; O. Myshanych, *Hryhorij Skovoroda* (Kyiv: Oberehy, 1994), 35–45; V.I. Shynkaruk et al., eds., *Hryhorij Skovoroda 250* (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1975), 245–53; *Ukrains'ki pys'menyky: Biobibliografichnyj slovnyk*, vol. 1 (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1960–65), 520–36.

³There has been some change in this situation in the last decade. See: Natalia Pylypiuk, "The Primary Door: At the Threshold of Skovoroda's Theology and Poetics," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 14 (1990): 551–83; idem, "Skovoroda's Divine Narcissism," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 22 (nos. 1–2, 1997): 13–50; Stephen Scherer, "'The Narcissus': Skovoroda's 'First-Born Son,'" *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1997): 51–64; and idem, "Structure, Symbol and Style in Hryhorii Skovoroda's 'Potop Zmiin,'" *East European Quarterly* 32 (no. 3, 1998): 409–28.

⁴The full title of this work is: "Knizhechka, Nazyvaemaja *Silenus Alciabiadis*, Syrich' Ikona Alkiviadskaja [Izrail'skij Zmij]," in Hryhorij

magnificent book," and his friend and biographer, M.I. Kovalinskij (1751–1807), wrote that of all the influences on his work, "the leader of them all is the Bible."⁵ Skovoroda's dependence on the Bible is further demonstrated by the fact that he not only quotes frequently from the Bible in all of his works, but even devotes three of his longer treatises exclusively to the subject of the Bible. "The Israelite Snake," 1775–76, is the first of these three works; the other two are "Lot's Wife" [*Zhena Lotova*], 1780–88, and "The Snake's Deluge" [*Potop Zmiin*], 1790–91.

Analysis of "The Israelite Snake"

Skovoroda's Introduction

Skovoroda begins the "Israelite Snake" with an introduction dedicated to Stephen Tevjashev – a landowner and former provincial administrator in Kharkiv – in which Skovoroda

Skovoroda, *Povne Zibrannja Tvoriv*, vol. 2, ed. V.I. Shynkaruk, et al. (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1973), 6; hereafter cited as "Izrail'skij Zmij." The crucial importance of the Bible to Skovoroda's thought has been noted by numerous authors. See, for instance: Petro B.T. Bilaniuk, "An Introduction to the Theological Thought of Hryhorij Skovoroda," in Marshall and Bird, eds., *Hryhorij Savyč Skovoroda*, 254–55; James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 239; Count Peter Bobrinskij, *Starchik Grigorij Skovoroda: Zhizn' i Uchenie* (Paris: 1929), 57–64; Daniel B. Chopyk, *Gregory S. Skovoroda: Fables and Aphorisms* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 56–59; Dmytrij Chyzhevskij, "Filosofija H.S. Skovorody (1722–94)," *Put'* 19 (1929): 26–27; James Edie, et al., eds., *Russian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 16; Joseph T. Furhman, "The First Russian Philosopher's Search for the Kingdom of God," in Leon Borden Blair, ed., *Essays on Russian Intellectual History* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971), 46–47, 57–58; I.I. Garin, *Proroki i Poety* (Moscow: Terra, 1994), 445–52; F. Kudrinskij, "Filosof Bez Sistyemy," *Kievskaja Starina* 60 (no. 2, 1898): 277–82; N.O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International Universities Press, 1951), p. 10; F.A. Zelenogorskij, "Filosofija G.S. Skovorody," *Voprosy filosofii i psixologii*, vol. xxvi (no. 3, 1894), 199–200; V.V. Zenkovskij, *Istorija Russkoj Filosofii*, vol. 1 (Paris: YMCA Press, 1948–50), 72, 80.

⁵M.I. Kovalinskij, "Zhizn' Hryhorija Skovorody," in Shynkaruk et al., eds., *Povne Zibrannja Tvoriv*, vol. 2, 450; Skovoroda, "Razgovor Pjati Putnikov o Istinnom Shchastii v Zhizni," in Shynkaruk et al., eds., *Povne Zibrannja Tvoriv*, vol. 1, 35.