

A Comparison of Swedenborg and Skovoroda's Biblical Thought

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Abstract

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By means of an apposite and microscopic analysis of two leading figures of the intellectual history of eighteenth century Europe, viz., Emanuel Swedenborg and Hryhorij Skovoroda, the author is able to bring into macroscopic relief some of the emerging issues of the day, including especially the increasing debate between “rationalism” and “religion” then taking place. Arguing that Swedenborg and Skovoroda were quite likely the leading thinkers of Sweden and Ukraine respectively in this period, the author demonstrates the considerable learning and accomplishments of both by focusing on the similarities and differences each took to the question of biblical interpretation. After a biographical sketch of Swedenborg and Skovoroda, and then a look at their dualistic world-views, the author focuses in particular on how each regarded the Bible in general and, in particular, how each handled such stories as the creation account in Genesis, the story of Lot and his wife, the flood, Abraham's sacrifice, and the woman clothed with the sun in the book of the Apocalypse. Swedenborg's “symbolic-historical” approach to the Bible is compared and contrasted with Skovoroda's “symbolic-mystical” approach.



Introduction

While it is customary to think of the eighteenth century in Europe as the time when scientific thought and the rationalism it had spawned began to predominate in educated society, it is important to remember that the religious mentality associated with Christian belief still had great power. Given this situation, it is not surprising that some thinkers emerged who tried to reconcile these competing systems of thought. One effort in this regard was that undertaken by the subjects of this essay, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and Hryhorij Skovoroda (1722–94). Although Swedenborg was a working scientist and Skovoroda recognized the accomplishments of science, they rejected the idea of an impersonal God and believed that knowledge of the divine was a higher knowledge which could not be achieved by scientific investigation. Such knowledge could only be acquired by a proper reading of the Bible. Because they were familiar with the allegorical tradition of biblical exegesis dating back to Philo of Alexandria in the first century A.D., but also because they recognized that the literal Bible was at variance with the findings of science, they counseled, each in his own way, a symbolic interpretation of the Bible. The purpose of this essay is to analyze and compare the biblical thought of these two writers and so to appreciate their efforts to make sense of the Bible in the midst of an increasingly scientific and secular society.

Emanuel Swedenborg

Emanuel Swedenborg was born in Stockholm, Sweden on January 29, 1688 (o.s.) to a clerical family.¹ His father, Jesper,

¹ The sources for this brief biographical sketch are: Ernst Benz, *Visiary Savant in the Age of Reason*, trans. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (West Chester, Pennsylvania: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2002) (originally published as *Swedenborg: Naturforscher und Seher* [Munich: Hermann Rinn, 1948]); Martin Lamm, *Emanuel Swedenborg: The Development of His Thought*, trans. Tomas Spiers and Anders Hallengren (West Chester, Pennsylvania: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2000) (originally published as *Swedenborg: En Studie Över Hans Utveckling Till Mystiker Och Andeskå-*

became professor of theology at the University of Upsala in 1693 and a bishop of the Swedish Lutheran Church in 1703, after which the family was ennobled. In this religiously oriented family atmosphere, Swedenborg became deeply interested in spiritual matters at an early age. He later wrote that, “from my fourth to my tenth year I was constantly engaged in thought upon God, salvation and the spiritual diseases of men; and several times I revealed things at which my father and mother wondered.”² Nonetheless, when Swedenborg matriculated at the University of Upsala at age eleven in 1699, he entered the faculty of philosophy and studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, philosophy, the natural sciences, and mathematics. He completed his studies in 1709 and one year later embarked on his first of many trips to western Europe, in this case to England, France, and the Netherlands.

In the years following his return from this journey in 1715, Swedenborg labored in fields as disparate as astronomy, anatomy, chemistry, engineering, geology, geometry, metallurgy, monetary policy, philosophy, physics, and psychology. But while he worked in these fields he also served a twenty-four-year term as a regular member of the government body which oversaw Swedish mining and metallurgy. His youthful spiritual impulses might seem at odds with the secular and scientific endeavors of his early adulthood, but in fact they were not. Swedenborg lived at a time when science was beginning to have a great impact on educated opinion, but it is necessary to remember that for many, including Swedenborg, science and the rationalism to which it gave birth complemented religious understanding rather than contradicted it.

That this was the case for Swedenborg is suggested by the fact that even as he wrote and published his scientific efforts he continually sought to put his scientific work in the service of his spiritual understanding. This intense undertaking ultimately brought him to a spiritual crisis which culminated in

dare [Stockholm: Hugo Gebers Förlag, 1915]); Cyriel Odhner Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic* (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1981).

² *Documents Concerning the Life and Character of Emanuel Swedenborg*, ed. and trans. R.L. Tafel, 2 vols. (London: 1875, 1877), II: 279–80. Cited in Sigstedt, *The Swedenborg Epic*, 5.