Michael Weisskopf

The Bible and the Jewish Tradition in Babel

Was Babel a Jewish or a Russian writer? The question still remains actual in Russia where there is no monument to him nor a street named after him. Babel's biographer Sergei Povartsov would quote writer Vsevolod Ivanov's who had said of Babel, in the spirit of compromise: "a Jew with a Russian soul."[1] Both must have meant it as a compliment. It is hard to say anything definite about a soul, but if one calls Babel a Russian writer, one should necessarily add a correction from his short story "The Road" where a peasant says: "Russian indeed…So Russian one can appoint him a Rabbi". In the early Soviet epoch when national identification was not so touchy a theme, Viacheslav Polonsky wrote in his diary about Babel whose enigmatic personality intrigued him: "And his coldness repels me. What does the man live by? But internally he is very rich – old deep Jewish culture".[2]

Under "old culture" the critic obviously meant the Jewish religious tradition that Babel studied until he was 16.

Its presence is signaled by Babel's allusions that pulsate in passages that seem far removed from the Scripture, for instance, an erotic passage in 1930 novella "The Kiss". Its hero, a Red cavalry soldier, brings the widow Tomilina a live goatling. In doing so he is but following the precedent of forefather Yehuda sending a goatling to the widowed Tamar (whom he takes for a whore). In Babel's early story "Eli Isaakovich and Margarita Prokof'evna" the good-willing Russian prostitute stands for the Jericho's prostitute Rahav who hid at her place the Jewish spies from the guards of Jericho in Exodus. In Babel's script after Sholom Aleichem's "Wandering Stars" to an elderly Jew during a police raid "two prostitutes run up, each pulls him to herself. The Jew, occupied by sad thoughts, takes both by the arm and leads them like daughters for a walk". One can see here a simple act of mutual aid of two discriminated social groups; but an ironic allusion is also discernible here at Isaiah's vision (4:1): "And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread and wear our own apparel; only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach".

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[1] S.Povartsov. *Byt' Babelem.* Krasnodar, 2012 . p.29.
[2] *Vospominaniia o Babele.* M., 1989. p.196.

Biblical and Talmudic quotations come in Babel from any, usually most unfit lips: in "The End of an Alms-House" a Soviet boss threatens a rebellious old man: "You are sowing nuisances, Arie-Leib, and you will reap a mess". Thus he expresses in his own dialect the famous verse about wind and storm from prophet Hosea (8:7). Iakov Liberman showed that the drama "Sunset" uses fragments of *Pirkei Avot*: sentences from the same treatise are transparent also in bandits' dialogues in *Tales of Odessa*. In "How It Was Done in Odessa" Froim Grach asks Benia Krik: "Who are you, where do you come from and what do you breathe?" This formula comes from *Pirkei Avot* Chapter 3:[3] "Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an account and a reckoning". We do not know for sure if such sayings were taken straight from rabbinical literature or from oral Jewish usage oversaturated with them.

The examples are only occasional pointers at the theme present in Babel on many layers of meaning and in many forms. Sometimes he correlates or combines the Jewish Bible with the New Testament. Thus, in his surviving texts on the collectivization the writer includes allusions both at the Apocalypse (as was shown by Bar-Sella) and the Psalms that inspired piety in generations of Russian Christian readers. In the short story "Gapa Guzhva" an Orthodox peasant pilgrim Rahivna prophecies apocalyptic cataclysms – and it is said that "the light of the icon lamp stood in the hollows of her feet". This scene is in all probability an allusion at Psalm 119 begging for salvation: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Ps 119: 105).

It is in Biblical, Judaic chronology that Babel measures his mental age, that is, from the Creation of Adam, the first exile, whose soul, in a Kabbalistic opinion, contained souls of all his future progeny. In June 1929 writing to his editor Polonsky, he says he feels like working were it not for a feeling of being worn out: "Eh, if only my nerves ***were not five and a half thousand years old but some four thousand years younger***, we would have done business then!" It was year 5689 in Jewish calendar. Images of the biblical Exodus are so deeply ingrained in him that sometimes shrink to an occasional metaphor like in a story "Konkin" from "Red Cavalry" where it occurs in a situation of a verbal duel in the face of death: "***The Red sea opened before me***" ("Krasnoe more peredo mnoi otkrylos"; it was translated as "A red sea opened before me" by Walter Morison in 1953 which is hardly a correct rendering of Babel's inversion). In the Odessa cycle this exile and Exodus theme does not connect to the fabula at all, but is nevertheless stably present there, as a sympthom throwing light at nostalgic depths of Babel's conscience. Thus, in the novella "How It Was Done in Odessa" travestied allusions are inserted at key moments of the Sinai revelation – more exactly, at those scenes that frame the story of Jews passing through the desert on the way

[3] Ia. L. Liberman. *Isaak Babel' glazami evreia*. Ekaterinburg. 1996. p.82.

from Egypt to the Promised Land. Let me remind that the Exodus was preceded by the Almighty's voice that spoke to Moses from a burning bush and sent him to Pharaoh to free the Jews of Egyptian slavery. To the question of Moses who He is God answers: "I am who I am" (Ex 3: 13–14). In Babel this title belongs to Froim Grach who in the words of the all-knowing Arye-Leib "***then was already… what he is***"; in another story the same Froim says to Liubka the Cossak: "***And here I am alone (***odin***,*** one***) as is God in Heaven***"- cf. the First Commandment. Beside him, God's functions are usurped by Arye-Leib who starts the story of how Benia Krik became the king of criminal Odessa with the words:" ***And here I shall speak like the Lord spoke on the Mount of Sinai from a burning bush***". The Almighty's powers may be given over to the King himself; i in the novella "The King", as in the script "Benia Krik" that hero was quick to overpower "His Majesty the Emperor" and his policemen who were in jargon called "***Pharaohs***"(cops). At the funeral that becomes his criminal triumph the King proclaims: "On my behalf and ***on behalf of those who are not present here*** I thank you". Cf. the words Moses says after the Exodus before Israel entering the Promised Land: "neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; But with *him* that standeth here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also ***with him that is not here with us this day***". (De 29:14-15). Any dire straits Babel's personages get into are associated with Egyptian slavery or exile: when in the story "The End of the Alms House" old men are denied their daily bread, their doyen, the same Arye-Leib, says to them: "We are dead people, ***we are in Pharaoh's hands***…". The motif of Galut is brought in by a phrase of Rabbi Ben Zharia who is placed at a table near a tall guest: "***Why should I sit by this Jew long as our exile?***" ("The Sunset").

The author also has more complex, indirect (although still jocular) associations with the Exodus that require a minimal knowledge of rabbinical exegesis. In "Liubka the Cossak" the little broker Tsudechkis is imprisoned in a room by the caretaker Evzel (who is also the owner of a dove-cot) until their boss Liubka is back. The little pious prisoner scolds his jailer referring to the Biblical precedents: "You galley slave…You don't know a thing, you galley slave, except about pigeons. But I still believe in God Who will lead me out from here ***as He has led all Jews out – first from Egypt, and then from the wilderness***." There follows the phrase that will later appear in "The End of an Alms House": "Yes", the little broker then said to himself, "***you are in the hands of the Pharaoh,*** my old Tsudechkis." In fact, the two motifs, Exodus and pigeons, are put together not to produce some humorous contrast, but simply by contiguity. In national allegory pigeons always denoted the people of Israel longing for the Promised Land (*Shabbat* 49a,130a; *Gitin* 45a; *Bereshit Rabba* 33:6; *Yalkut Shimoni* 1; *Zohar* 2:120b; *Zohar* 3:61a; *Tikkunei Zohar* 58b). The messenger of their liberation also was a pigeon, the one that flew out of Noah's ark to freedom and did not return

(in Jewish exegesis, it flew to the Holy Land). Thanks to the story about the Flood pigeon became a universal, rather than only Jewish, symbol of liberation and will for renewal of life.[4] We shall return to this ornithological allegory when discussing "The Story of my Dovecot" – keeping in mind that the author adored not only horses, but also pigeons, like his personage.

Recurrent in Babel is an explicit or implicit motif of the fatal date - the 9th of month Av (or Ab). On that same day, with the interval of many centuries, the First Temple (in 586 B.C.) and the Second Temple (in 70 A.C.), that symbolized a National Home, were captured by enemies and razed to the ground. This date, according to Efraim Sicher (Beer-Sheva), has become a key symbol in the war diary the writer wrote during the 1920 Polish campaign.[5]

Do his heroes envisage a new, living national home? Certainly not, because Babel was not a Zionist, although, as the French scholar Stora-Sandor wrote quoting his sister, he had been close to a Zionist circle in Odessa.[6] According to Akiva Govrin's who met Babel during Civil War the writer spoke about Zionism with interest and sympathy.[7] Be it as it may, in his writing he described different stations of Galut, surrogates of Zion – but they always preserve some links to images of lost homeland.

Religiously colored dreams of the native hearth appear in "Red Cavalry' in the novella "My First Goose" where the narrator strives to feel as one of the Cossaks saying that the pork in their cauldron gave out a steam that was "***like the far-off smoke of native home in a village***, and it mingled hunger with desperate loneliness in my head." The homes are mingled too: the secret meaning of the passage as it goes on empties the international idyll it seems to declare. The cavalry soldiers agree to accept the newcomer in their shed, but it certainly not a native home. True, in the shed they all sleep like brothers under a roof full of holes letting stars through, the narrator's happiness being

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[4] In the novella "The Sunset" the heroine is named Tabl, "dove"; she is a daughter of Liubka the Cossak who symbolizes a criminal version of "emancipaton". Love for Tabl makes Levka Krik to leave home and wander for three days. It is a parody of the Biblical motif and also of the familiar Biblical metaphor of the beloved. When Levka tells father of his "dove" the father attests her quite boldly: "You set your eye on a piece of garbage," Papa Krik said, "and her mother is a madam in a brothel"; the offended son is about to attack the father. It could be a paraphrase of an anecdotal quarrel from Talmud: After learning three years away from home Rabbi Yosef wanted to visit his wife but was stopped by his angry father who called the daughter–in–law a whore, "zona". The commentary suggest he really meant "yona", dove. (*Yerushalmi, Ktubot* 63a).

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[5] Cf. E.Sicher's commentary to the book he published: Isaak Babel, *Detstvo and Other Stories*. Ierusalim. 1989. p.363.

[6] *Stora-Sandor J.* Isaak Babel': *L'homme et l'oeuvre.* Paris, 1968. p. 19.

[7] Akiva Govrin. Pegishot im Yitskhak Babel(Meetings with Isaac Babel, in Hebrew)//*Moznaim*, 1973-1974/ Vol.38.#1-2. pp. 44-46. This memoir was introduced into Babel studies by Sicher, who laconically referred to it in his 'Afterword' to Babel's Complete Works in Hebrew: Babel I. *Kol ha-ktavim*. Vol.3. Jerushalaim. 2009. p. 232. Cf. also: *Sicher E.* The cultural identity of Babel // *Around the Point: Studies in Jewish Literature and Culture in Multiple Languages* / Ed. H. Weiss, R. Katsman and B. Kotlerman. Cambridge, 2014. p. 510.

only marred by thoughts of the killed bird. This happy-end is only a slightly masked symbol of Galut because "***the roof that lets through the stars***" is an obligatory attribute of the ritual succah, a shed that Jews ought to build for the holiday of Sukkot to commemorate their temporary abodes on the way to the Promised Land. The war brotherhood on the way to a Communist Utopia is but a surrogate of Exodus.

Babel's story "The Road" is a most impressive surrogate of such a quest in search of the Promised Land: its hero arrives instead at the capital of Bolshevism, the red Petrograd. The story contains deep links with the Jewish tradition, in particular with Jewish mysticism. The hero enters the city and looks for a place to stay and for reliable comrades. After a series of various trials he finds all this in the former Tsar's Anichkov palace and in the work for the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police. Iakov Liberman, in spite of the paragon servility of this finale, discerns in it relicts of Babel's "former Zionist interests." Ephraim Zicher and Vladimir Khazan have connected "The Road" through the name of Yehuda Halevi who, in the legend, died at the threshold of Jerusalem, with Lord Balfour's Declaration that reached Russia during the same days when the action of "The Road" begins.[8] On the surface it is a story about a triumphal installation of the hungry, frozen hero at a wonderful shining home that sounds much like an officious early Soviet narrative. But Babel installs in it multiple ties with Jewish symbolism: they may be typological likenesses inspired by Hassidic tradition. His knowledge of this tradition and possible dependence on it, the subject of many arguments, has not yet been discussed with sufficient competence.

The correlation itself of the royal palace with the palace of the Lord is a constant in the Jewish tradition, including Jewish mysticism. A special genre of literature is devoted to that theme, the so-called literature of the Merkava (the Chariot) or Hechalot (Palaces); the writer might have come into contact with it directly or indirectly in the Hassidic environment of Galicia and Volynia where such subjects were extremely popular. These writings described the experience of a visionary who has risen to heaven: his progress through an enfilade of cosmic chambers, or Sephirot, where terrible angels rule, headed in the last chamber by the mighty Metatron (formerly Enoch), who is a servant and doorman of the Lord himself, fenced by a curtain (pargod). [9]

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[8] Ia. L.Liberman. *Op.cit*. pp. 20-21. Cf . V.Khazan. *Osobennyi evreisko-russkii vozduh: k problematike i poetike russko-evreiskogo literaturnogo dialoga v XX veke.* M., 2001. pp. 228-232. Both Liberman and Khazan underline the symbolic tie of the Tsar's palace where the Jewish newcomer stays with the mention of the Turkish Sultan Abu-Hamid, the former ruler of Palestine.

[9] *Sefer Hechalot… Mihatannah Rabbi Ishmael, cohen gadol.* L'vov 1850. A Russian translation: *Kniga Enocha, napisannaia rabbi Ishmaelom Ben-Elishei, pervosviaschennikom, ili Tret'ia kniga Enocha. // Tantlevsky I.R. Knigi Enocha.* M.-Ierusalim, 2000. pp.175-240.

In “The Road” the motifs of an astral elevation are secularized and localized in the metaphors of movement: “The Nevsky was flowing into the distance ***like a Milky Way***. Horse carcasses measured it like versta poles*”;* “The horses with their raised legs ***supported the sky that had fallen low***”. The motif of the heavenly fire chariot may be hidden here too: the granite pedestal of Baron Klodt’s horses “singed” the hero and “threw him forth to the palace.” In the manuscript of the story it is said that precisely before this last leg of the journey the exhausted traveler faints; he dreams then that there is before him, “on the palace’s roof” the parlour of Mukovnin, attorney of Saratov Chamber of Justice” shining with the yellow and hot light (obviously solar). In the past, the hero wonders, the man “did not let him near because of his daughter Lida” – but now the attorney is benevolently talking to him having seated the guest into his own “armchair as big as a chapel.” Lida wearing a white dress is sitting near, at the piano, looking at the guest sternly. The key detail here is the position of the luminous parlour on top of the palace. It is an symbolic apotheosis of ascension. The huge armchair occupied by the visionary is an adequate of throne. At the same time it looks like a chapel - all this together combines into a substitute of a mystic palace. The white dress of the host’s daughter has to do with a prospect of marriage also related in the Jewish tradition to the allegory of royal palace. (In the final version of “The Road” all erotic themes are removed). The deep memory of religious genre transpires on the lexical level: the Justice Chamber (palata) is the same word as “palace” (palaty) in Russian (both are translated into Hebrew as “hechal”). The amiable former attorney from the prophetic dream will be substituted for by his Bolshevik heir, the friendly Cheka investigator. The palace’s description includes the motif of blue (the blue gas lamp, lighting the entrance). It may have an analogue in the Sapphire Chamber which occurs at an early stage of progress along the Hechalot. In the story, after going through a sequence of rooms, Babel’s newcomer meets an astral Chekist in a kind of golden halo, lit by shining light, like the attorney in the dream: “At the end of the enfilade, ***lit like on stage***, there sat at a table, ***in a circle of straw-like peasant hair,*** Kalugin”; over him shone “***a sun inserted in the ceiling;***” “in the crystal walls of glasses ***stars were melting***”. The two drink tea and eat, obviously, these same melting stars because the next phrase goes: “my zaedali ih,” that is, “we jammed them” by sausage of horse meat. The celestial dinner is concluded by a bath for the relaxed guest. It may allude to a mikveh, a Jewish ritual bath that ought to precede a mystical ascension. The Tsar’s dressing gown which the guest is putting on after the bath functionally corresponds to a visionary’s symbolic changing of clothes.

In the Chariot mysticism the angels who rule the Hechalot have awful eyes of fire. This scorching look Babel gives to Kalugin’s boss, Moisei Uritsky, Petrograd’s chief hangman, when he comes out from behind some kind of curtain (pargod) that is called here “drapirovka”, a drapery, which

strenghthens the theatrical quality of the picture: “Behind the glasses of a pince-nez eyelids burnt by sleeplessness, doughy, swollen, were falling out”. This must be Metatron, who in Hechalot literature is a substitute of the Lord himself. He is omniscient, cf. in the Third book of Enoch: “And I watched intently to behold the secrets of the depth and the wonderful mystery. ***Before a man did think in secret, I saw (it) and before a man made a thing I beheld it. And there was nothing on high or in the deep hidden from me***.”[10]

“The Road” with its ordeals among the scorching ice on the excruciating way from the Galut solitude to true “comrades” may have been an echo of yet another heavenly palace, the one from a story by the then popular Jewish writer I.L.Peretz “Between Two Mountains”. This text was included in the authoritative study by Meir Pines, a historical review of literature in Yiddish, that appeared in Paris in 1911 (it is known that Kafka read it with enthusiasm), and two years later was published in Solomon Vermel’s Russian translation.[11]

In it the border between the earthly and the heavenly worlds is blurred but their connection is explained differently. Peretz illustrates the superiority of soulful Hassidic humanity over the dead, aloof rationalism of Misnagdim, the foes of Hassids. Noah, a would–be tzaddik, dreams of his Misnaged tutor, the most learned and strict Rabbi of Brisk (Brest); in the dream he takes Noah to a lower Paradise, the luminous palace of Tora, the Jewish Law, through beautiful and empty halls of icy walls. On all the way the newcomer has nowhere to sit. Noah is worn out by fatigue and numbing cold, he longs for living people, “for comrades, for all Israel<…> - Do not long for anybody, says the Rabbi of Brisk, this palace is only for you and for me…”[12] As far as I know, the scholars have not noticed the influence of this story upon Kafka with the shining and unaccessible Gates of Law whose guard says to the dying peasant: “These gates were meant for you only”. Like the Hassid in Peretz, Babel’s hero is from the start drawn not to law but to human warmth that, after many hardships, he will find with the Chekists.

Real-life frost that replaced the symbolic cold In “The Road” still retains some allegoric overtones. In Peretz the melancholic hero taken by grief “caught on a wall so as not to fall”, but got burned “by its terrible cold”; likewise in Babel’s story the cold granite “singed” the hero on the way to Anichkov palace. The despairing Noah is saved by a simple man, some mysterious coachman; Babel’s newcomer is helped by a former non-commissioned officer Kalugin.

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[10] Enoch 3 XI: 2,3.

[11] M. Ia. Pines. *Istoriia evreiskoi literatury (na evreisko-nemetskom dialekte)*//Per s frants. s predisloviem I dopolneniiami S.S. Vermelia. M.1913.

[12] Ibid. pp.345-346

In the Jewish, especially Hassidic tradition the interpenetration of the earthly and heavenly elements easily accepts trivial everyday forms. This friendly confidence in Creation, the service to God in material forms (avoda be-gashmiut) is reminiscent of St. Francis of Assisi, to whom zaddiks are so often compared and who is mentioned in "Pan Apolek" with such warmth. It is in the ancient appreciation of solarity and fertility where Babel sometimes brings together the two covenants, in spite of their insurmountable dogmatic differences – somewhat like Vasilii Rozanov. In his buoyant vitality pan Apolek is akin to Hassids and all those lively streaks of Judaism Babel showed lovingly in his prose. "Village Marys with knees apart, who have given birth many times" could be painted by Apolek from Bas'ka Grach dreaming of marriage, with her "straddled mighty knees" or from "the pregnant women filling up with all sorts of liquids as a cow's udder fills on the pasture with the pink milk of spring." "The puffy babe Jesus" in the cathedral of St. Valent is indistinguishable from "shining fatty babies" of Moldavanka. These frescoes of Babel's maestro in "Pan Apolek" are filled with Renaissance joy: "The new church was filled with the bleating of flocks, the dusty gold of sunsets, and pale colors of cow udders. Buffaloes with worn-down hides plodded in yoke, dogs with pink snouts ran before the flock, and fat babes swung in cradles that hang from straight trunks of palm trees".

At first the priest's reaction to the wall paintings is ecstatic: "Santa Maria, - he said, - the welcome pan Apolek, from what wonderful regions has so joyful grace descended upon us?" Now these "regions" can be defined with sufficient exactitude. The grace must have descended upon pan Apolek, according to our source, straight from the ceiling of a tzaddik who lived at a shtetl in Bratzlav (Breslau) region. It is stated in the memories of Akiva Govrin, written in Hebrew and published in 1974. The famous Israeli statesman who was then a young boy enraptured with the Zionist idea, met Babel in 1920 when the writer was stationed near his native shtetl. Among other things, Babel told Akiva about his visit to a certain Hassidic court where he was shown the painting in the room of the late rebbetzin:

"On the ceiling I saw a curious picture: the road along which peasants are marching with camels, donkeys and horses, laden with baskets of figs, dates and grapes. In the front comes a bull with gilt horns wearing a wreath of olive twigs. In front of the bull there comes a lad playing the flute. On the roadsides there stand people dressed in beautiful long gowns like Greek togas but bordered with tzitzit, kind of city fathers".[13]

[13] Akiva Govrin. Op. cit. p. 44.

The work of an unknown naïve painter fascinated Babel; the subject was perfectly clear to both interlocutors: it was the Jewish people's triumphant ascension on the mount of Zion to the Temple of Jerusalem in the holiday of Shavuot when firstfruits are brought to the Temple. This is how the feast was described in the Talmudic treatise *Bikkurim.* Every detail in Govrin's account of Babel's words corresponds to this text, the kinds of fruit, the bull with gilt horns and an olive wreath, playing the flute and the procession itself welcomed at the gates of Jerusalem by the city authorities.

The motif of mass ascension towards a temple occurs in Babel once more, in the story "The end of St. Hypatius," where a pilgrimage procession to the sanctuary is shown which in fact is its capture. The monastery of St. Hypatius is to become a workers' living quarters. It is put in a milder form than a confiscation: a living block for the workers has been built instead of one of service buildings destroyed by a fire. Working women with babies and livestock walking uphill echo, on a small scale, the festive procession in Akiva Govrin's account and in Babel's earlier story: "Old women were carrying their burden on the high mountain, the mount of St. Hypatius, babies asleep in their sledges, white goats led by old women on a string." The end of this story has a telling detail linking the mount of Hypatius with mount Zion which the original Jewish pilgrims were ascending. In winter cold the new inhabitants are heating the monastery, and the smoke starts rising from the chimneys: at that moment "an unfamiliar cockerel flew up to the tombstone of Father Superior Sionii and started yelling". St. Sionius was a Bulgarian saint. As far as I could find out the name Sionii was rare in Russian everyday onomastics and in monasteries. Its occurrence here is a syncretic feature bringing together the two faiths. More exactly, the Jewish tradition is put here in parallel with the Communist surrogate of Christianity (cockerel heralding a new life from an old tomb; babies in a monastery as a symbol of a Bolshevik Nativity in a former kingdom of infertility). The action takes place in terrible winter cold, which may also carry a possible reference to Christmas that in Christian allegory was often treated as a victory of Christian warmth over pagan cold. Here we are once more dealing with a many-layered system of codes and substitutions that play on the Jewish component of Babel's narrative. In addition to being the feast of firstfruits (bikkurim), Shavuot was commemorated as the day when Tora was given on Sinai. Besides, it was the birthday (and also the day of death) of David, King of Israel. The Messiah was supposed to come from David's progeny. If one remembers that, it becomes clear that in Jewish tradition Shavuot also received messianic overtones, further strengthened in the 20th century. The Gospel adapted these Jewish beliefs to its own uses, proclaiming Jesus the Messiah to be David's offspring. In "Pan Apolek" Babel concocted a synthesis of the two religions: he substituted a newborn Christ for David, and a new revelation for the giving of Tora: "… fate threw at my feet ***a gospel that had***

lain concealed from the world". As we have seen, the merry heretic Apolek has glorified in his wall paintings a true riot of fertility, in the taste of Shavuot: hence the unexpected setting of his Nativity in summer, and the multiplication of "the fatty babes" under the palms in the picture instead of one and only Babe.[14]

The agricultural semantic of the Shavuot had obviously so endeared Babel that he inserted this motif, together with Hassidic ones, also in the story "Liubka The Cossak" that seems very far from Messianic themes. The heroine is a smuggler and a madam in a brothel; she neglects her baby Davidka. The little parodic "'tzaddik" Tzudechkis denounces her as a "lousy mother." It is the feast of Shavuot that he has in mind when reproaching her: "You want to grab everything to yourself, you greedy Liubka… You want the first wheat and the first grapes, you want to bake white loaves where the sun is hottest, but your little child, a child like a star, has to mope milkless." Thus Tzudechkis with a comic solemnity typical for him accuses Liubka of an assault at the Almighty's prerogatives: it is to the Lord that that firstfruits and the first wheat loaves were brought (Lev 23:17). The motif of milk and dairy products that is a central and obligatory ritual food at Shavuot is present in "Liubka the Cossack" in the scenes of Davidka's successful weaning from the large but empty mother's breast and getting him used to cow's milk instead; Babel replaces the breast with archaic fertility symbols like the heavenly cow, or the moon: "Davidka lay in the cradle, sucking the bottle and blowing blissful bubbles. Liubka woke up, opened her eyes and closed them again. She had seen her son, and ***the moon breaking in at her window. The moon was skipping in black clouds like a stray calf***." (cf. the symbolic bull heading the festive procession in "Pan Apolek"). The whole story is a bacchanalia of solar colors, a smugglers' paradise of abundance on a background of ancient fertility symbol**s**.

The impact of Hassidic literature on plots of Babel has not yet been studied, with one obvious exception of "Shabbos Nehamu." In this connection one should take a wider view, including, beside Hassidic heritage, also that of Haskala (Enlightnment), a movement that was pointedly anti-Hassidic and anti-traditional, aimed against the age-old ways of life. Paradoxically, Haskala did retain a genetic link with old religious didactic: it was in the very zeal of its denunciation of that tradition. An example of Babel's appropriation of an important Haskala literary plot can be found it the story "The Remount Officer." Red cavalry was changing horses in the village: "In exchange for their tired hacks, the troopers were confiscating working horses" of the peasants depriving them of their "breadwinners". One of these "hacks", "a bedraggled jade," handed in to a peasant, falls on the

[14] Cf. Carden P. *The Art of Isaac Babel.* Cornell, 1972. pp. 138–139.

ground from exhaustion right near the remount officer D'iakov, a former circus athlete. The peasant is in despair; "How's the poor orphan to get up? She'll go and die, the poor orphan!" But the dashing D'iakov makes a miracle: he brings the dying beast back to life by his indomitable will alone, with the help of the "impatient and imperious flicking of the whip on its belly"; as a result she gets back on her feet looking lovingly at her savior.

The plot of this novella has at least two sources in the Jewish literature. The first is the instant miracle that Rabbi Yechiel-Michel, a Maggid of Zlochov (1721-1786), made to another dumb "breadwinner". He was still very poor then, the family depended on a sole cow for their living: the wife sold the milk. Once the cow "lay on the ground and did not move. The wife tried to bring her back to life, but all her labors were in vain." The Rabbi came home, "knocked softly on her with his cane and said: 'Hey, come up, you must feed us'. At once did the cow rise and stand on her feet." [15]

I am citing this story from Martin Buber's book *The Hidden Light* made up of Hassidic texts he had already published earlier as well as of oral legends that he had written down and published in Galicia. Buber had passed his early years in Lemberg (now Lviv), that is, the same region where Yechiel-Michel had been famous and where Babel sojourned during the Polish campaign. Babel, as earlier Buber, might have either found this story in local Hassidic books or heard it from one of his many Jewish interlocutors.

The second source of "The Remount Officer" seems to be the 1873 Yiddish story by Mendele Moicher-Sforim "The Hack" ("Kliacha" in Slavic languages and in Yiddish)[16] that enjoyed unprecedented popularity with the Jews. Like many literary compositions of the Haskala, "The Hack" is schematic and luckluster. The central allegory upon which the story is built harks back to Heine's "Hebrew Melodies," cherished by the Jewish reader, namely, to "Prinzessin Sabbath" (1851) – his sad allegory of the fate of his people in exile. The national tradition going back many centuries saw the people of Israel as the Almighty's firstborn; it preserved Rabbi Akiva's maxim: "Every Jew is a King's son" (cf. also: *Shabbat* 67a, 128a). In Heine's poem Israel is depicted as a prince but a humiliated and impoverished one, who had lost human likeness in exile; evil magic had turned him into a dirty tortured dog, and only on Sabbath he returns to his former glory when,

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[15] Martin Buber, *Das verborgene Licht*, Leipzig, 1924. Buber M. *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, / Per. s nem. Ierusalim. 1979 p.114-115.

[16] Abramovich Sh.-L. (Mendele Moicher-Sforim) Kliacha /*Izbr.soch*. T.1. M., 1913, p. 20, 93, 208–209 (during the Soviet period this story, as it seems, was not republished).Cf. Pines, op. cit. p. 124.

entering his father's hall, the prince meets his royal bride Sabbath. The poem got famous in Russian after 1863 when it was translated by Apollon Maikov.[17]

Moicher-Sforim preferred another allegory. Once, travelling in the country, the hero sees "an exhausted hack" baited by boys; later he finds it lying powerless in the ditch. "Were it not moving its sides and breathing one might have thought that it was a corpse, so gaunt, meager it was, skin and bones". When a compassionate personage addresses it with kind words and gives her some hay the jade comes to its senses. "Have you been so bad for a long time? – it is asked.- Oh, for as long as our 'golus'." It turns out that it was once "a prince, a King's son" but when still in Egypt the Pharaoh's sorcerers bewitched him, transformed into a hack and made a slave. The great liberator Moses freed him when he led the Jews out of Egypt; but later, in exile around the world, the humiliating magic returned. Since then "the nickname 'an eternal hack' has been fitting the poor prince"; the jade is an eternal traveler and has gone around the whole world: "- I weep looking at you, the downtrodden, persecuted prince! – the hero exclaims, - Oh, how long will you suffer, wander and endure pain from everybody? When will you no longer be a hack, eternal hack of the world?" However, in the finale the jade assures him: "- It's nothing! <…> When I fall then I rise again".[18] Moicher-Sforim translated "The Hack" into Hebrew in 1893 calling it "Susati" – having in mind "The Song of Songs": "I liken you, my darling, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariot horses" (1: 9). Generally speaking, the comparison of a woman to a horse and vice versa is a cultural universal that Babel used plentifully, even in the same story "The Remount Officer".

In Mendele, the quote used in his Hebrew title for "The Hack" is based on a multi-layered allusion. According to age-old tradition, fixed in the midrash *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* and in the classic Rashi's commentary, the beloved in "The Song of Songs" symbolized the community of Israel - the Jewish people - as the Almighty's bride (although in liturgy it also stood for Torah and Shabbat – cf. below on the story "The Rabbi's Son"). The allegory realized in Moicher-Sforim's story refers to the sad deterioration of this collective "beloved" in exile. In the end the image of "the hack" became a personal emblem of Mendele's writing. After his death this image turned into a universally recognized icon of the dying shtetl and, wider, of the whole Russian Jewry, in the works of "The Cultural League" artists: A Manevich, I. Chaikov, I.-B. Rybak, Sh. Kotkis, G. Inger. Babel in his 1922 sketch "At a Rest Home" (the newspaper "Zaria Vostoka") describes a group of old working men gathered at tea-table, including himself in their society: "And also myself, a downtrodden,

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[17] "Printsessa Shabash"// Maikov A.N. *Poln.sobr.soch.* V 4 t T.1. SPb. 1914 pp. 259-253. About the enthusiastic reception of Maikov's translation from Heine by Russia's Jewish intelligentsia cf.: *Dubnov S.M. Kniga zhuzni. Materialy dlia istorii moego vremeni. Vospominaniia I razmyshleniia.* Ierusalim - M. 2004. P. 68.

[18] Abramovich, op. cit. p. 20, 93, 208–209.

ecstatic ***hack***." In his drama "The Sunset" Mendel Krik, about to run away from home with the young and tempting Marussia Kholodenko, scolds his old wife angrily "***the hack***" that "the Jews have given him": "Oh, you ***hack*** on my head!"

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The very Jewish communication with the Creator wonderfully combines endless piety with almost familiar confidence. But this is precisely the way a non-Jewish personage of Babel's story "Gapa Guzhva" is behaving. She is an elderly peasant woman Rahivna, a Ukrainian Orthodox pilgrim: settling for the night she "was whispering with her God as one whispers with her old man who is lying right here on the oven." A pattern of such communication might have been suggested by the description of Jewish female prayers in the above-mentioned book by Meir Pines *The History of Jewish Literature*: "These prayers are in most cases ***a kind of intimate conversation of woman to God when the woman is trying to pour her soul before God and opening to him her needs, sorrows and sufferings.***[19]

In Babel one easily finds a less delicate version of such dialogue. In stage instructions to the 5th scene of "The Sunset" set in a synagogue it is said: "The congregation, red-faced cabmen, ***are conversing with God deafeningly.***"

Any contact, particularly, a Biblical treaty or covenant with God is unthinkable in principle without a parity of relationships. Such parity suggests by definition a possibility of differences or even a conflict between the sides. According to Haggada, it is angels that always argue with the Lord. They often demand from Him all sorts of guarantees and omens, or remind Him that He, as a Father, ought to care for His children (*Taanit*, *Tosefta*). Job loses his dispute with the Lord, but Talmud also gives examples when the human side wins: thus, in a polemic about Torah wise scholars take over God who admits defeat with a smile: "They have won over me, my sons did" (Nitshuni banai, nitshuni*).* This theme was highly popular in the Hassidic movement. One of most adored tzaddiks, Levi-Itshak from Berdichev, altercated with the Lord passionately, trying to defend his people from persecutions. One story about him that I found in Pinkhas Sade's wonderful collection of Jewish legends tells of a Day of Judgement (Yom Kippur)'s eve – time to forgive one's offenders, when a dignified and virtuous man who had suffered from a sad fate like Job's, refused to forgive the Almighty – until the tzaddik could bring some relief to the sufferer.[20]

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[19] Pines, op. cit. p. 30 (Translator's note).

[20] Ha-ish she salakh le-elohim (The Man Who Forgave God) // Sadeh P. Sefer ha-dimionot shel ha-iehudim. (A Book of Jewish fantasies, in Hebrew) Jerushalaim-Tel Aviv, 1983. pp. 351–352.

It is on these Jewish models that Babel's novella "The Sin of Jesus" is projected where "glorious sinner, maiden Arina" is blaming God for all her life of sexual torture, declaring: "There is no forgiveness for you, Jesus Christ", "no forgiveness, and never will be." From any Christian viewpoint all this plot looks like a sacrilegious piece of nonsense. But the farce in Babel masks over a deep theological discussion. The controversies of the plot reflect Christianity's (especially, the Orthodoxy's) own internal conflicts, or unresolved ambiguities, in everything referring to sexuality and fertility; what is coitus as such at all: a good deed, a sin, or simply a strenuous necessity? When Babel's Jesus advises to the "maiden Arina" to live in purity for four years the pregnant "maiden" decisively rejects the virtue of chastity: "To hear you talk, all people should deny their animal nature. That's just your old ways all over again. And where the increase will come from? No, you'd better do something sensible to alleviate me." For an "alleviation" Jesus offers Arina a compromise: a hybrid of the heavenly and the earthly elements, Alfred the angel, frail, delicate, and endearing, who is, of course, a substitute of the Heavenly Bridegroom himself.: "He'll be your prayer, he'll be your protection, and he'll be your beau." The problem is that he is unfit in principle for the role that is most important to the heroine, namely, that of a "beau". Beyond a seemingly comical plot one can discern paradoxes and aporias of Incarnation. In the finale the lusty Arina after too much vodka smothered the subtle angel to death with her huge pregnant belly. The angry Jesus damns her, but the woman answers him back with a reproach of her own: "Was it I who made my body heavy, was it I who brewed vodka on earth, was it I who created a woman's soul, stupid ad lonely?" From the Jewish viewpoint, however, her diatribe is misdirected: it is the Creator who "made" life while she is rebuking the Savior (although in Christian dogma they are "consubstantial"). No wonder she will not have any explanations here.

In the novella's last lines the heroine "raised her monstrous belly to the <…> sky, and said stupidly: 'Oh, Lord, what a belly! ***They hammer at it like threshing peas***. And what sense there's in it I just cannot see. But I've had enough, oh Lord…"

The unbridgeable difference between the two faiths must have deeply concerned the author. To see it one has only to compare the phrase about a huge belly they keep "hammering at" for no reason with the exhortations in the novella "Karl-Yankel" of Naftula, an all too cheerful Jewish circumciser: "Fat mommas, <…> print boys for Naftula, ***thresh wheat on your bellies.***" The conclusive verdict of the novella, "There is no forgiveness for you, Jesus Christ", "no forgiveness, and never will be" is closest to the invectives of late Vasilii Rozanov whose book "Fallen Leaves" Babel quoted respectfully in a letter. Both in the "Fallen Leaves" and in "The Apocalypse of Our Time" Rozanov contrasts the blessed "seedfulness of Judaism" and the old Testament with the

Evangelic dogma of seedlessness and death : “Oh, there is no need for Christianity. No need, no need… Horrors, horrors. / Lord Jesus. Why have you come to confuse the earth? To confuse and to make it despair?”[21]

But Jewish life is portrayed in Babel as no better. Judging by the story “The Son of a Rabbi,” “The Sunset” and some other writings, since the Polish campaign his belief into the Jewish tradition’s vitality in Russia has been permanently waning, and the tradition itself is more often described mockingly, or in an alienated tone. However, even departing from one religious pole, his heroes are not attracted to the other. The polemics with Christianity does not disappear, it only varies. “The Sunset” pictures the farewell night of revelry of Mendel Krik, an old drayman who is about to run away from his family with a Russian girl and to get away from his Jewishness at all. It is dark in the restaurant, and by Mendel’s request Mitia the waiter carries in a lamp. He is followed with four sleepy fat girls with greasy bosoms each carrying a lit lamp. The restaurant is washed in bright light:

Mitia: “So, congratulations with Easter!” (literally: “with Christ’s bright resurrection!”)

One can easily see this as a biting parody at the parable about Christ and the wise maidens from the Gospel (Matthew 25:6-7): “And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those maidens arose and trimmed their lamps.” “Christ’s resurrection” shining in the pub is reminiscent of the festive pogrom from the story “The First Love” (cf. below). The Christian liturgy, like all other Christian themes in Babel, is ambivalent. In “Pan Apolek” and the Diary he paints the Catholic cathedral with admiration. In other works, like “The Church in Novograd,” the description of a Gothic church awakes the Jew’s age-old fear of his permanent tormentor. The narrator flees the church that is a house of the dead. It contains “silver sculls, gleaming on the lid of a broken coffin,” “Vatican’s fragrant fury,” and “aromatic poison” imbuing the mouldy basements.

Similar pictures of a cult of the dead are presented in the scenes of the pogrom icon-bearing procession in “The Story of my Dovecot” hark back to images from “St. Hypatius;” and to the motif of ‘painted coffins’ from the Gospel: “Old men with dyed beards carried in their hands a portrait of the Tsar with hair parted in the middle, banners with graveyard saints swayed over the cross procession, inflamed old women flew forth.” A few lines below the graveyard saints will be replaced with the hero’s great-uncle Shoyl who has been tormented to death. The relations between the two religions are symbolically focused in Babel around a few paradigmatic figures centering,

[21]Rozanov V. *Izbrannoe*. Muenchen. 1970.pp.. 201, 512.

naturally, round the personality of Jesus, in its various transformations. In many Jewish artists (Lilien, Chagall[22]) and poets (U.Tz. Grinberg) Jesus was taken out from the Christian context and treated as a national martyr, and his execution, as a prototypic pogrom.

At the same time allusions to the New Testament easily combined in Babel with anti-Semitic rhetoric. In the traumatized Jewish memory of persecutions, Jesus might be perceived as a specific deity of pogroms, while the evangelical mercy could be counterweighed by their historical ferocity. In "The Sunset" counterman Fomin is threatening the old woman Potapovna: "I swear to you by Lord Jesus Christ, our Almighty Lord, you old woman, when we come home I'll cut belts out of your back!" This bi-polar Christology will become the writer's patent motif. In "The Story of my Dovecot" the narrator tells of a pogrom that burst out when he was ten; his great-uncle Shoyl was murdered in it. The key infernal figure in the story is peddler Makarenko, a footless cripple loved by children to whom he sells single cigarettes. His wife counts aloud cheap goods – bonnets – she has managed to steal. The squalid list makes the cripple furious. Embittered, he holds "liudi" (men, people) as an example to his luckless wife: "People are carting off whole lots of cloth, people are the way people should be, and we are stuck with bonnets!" Cf. also: "Where have the people run to?" <…> All the people are on Cathedral square (Sobornaia [ploshad']) - <…> all the people are there, my dear soul…" By mentioning Sobornaia Babel stresses the all-human nature of the pogrom, its catholicity (as the Russian term religious-philosophical term "sobornost" is translated), the unanimity of the urge for looting and violence. By repeating the word 'liudi' (men, people) Babel suggests the cripple is a travesty of The Son of Man. The personage feels that he, like Christ, is doomed to sufferings; he also had suffered from the Jews failing to steal their goods: " - Bonnets! – Makarenko cried, suffocated and made a sobbing sound, - it looks, Catherina, like God has picked on me, that I must answer for all…" At that moment the cripple notices a Jewish boy near him with the pigeons he had just bought: "God has picked on me, I reckon, - he said lifelessly, - I am a son of man for you, I reckon?"

The cripple kills the pigeon beating the stunned hero on the face with it. Rising to his feet, the boy is going home among the jubilance of the pogrom; he walks crying, "wearing an attire of bloodied feathers." The beating itself, as well as the bloody headpiece is pointing to the crown of thorns of the Calvary. In Babel's earlier prose, Jesus had humane substitutes, like pan Apolek or Sashka the Christ. Now He had split in two: into a tormenter and a martyr. At the same moment, as an

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[22] On similariries of Babel and Chagall in treatment of Jesus cf *Sicher E. Babel in Context: A Study in Cultural Identity.* Boston, 2012. P. 140.

apotheosis of the pogrom, an icon-bearing procession appears in the street, and "banners with graveyard saints" are raised.

Babel's text is polemical in opposing the two Testaments, and the sequence of allusions is coordinated with the movement of the plot. The cripple hand, spotted with leprosy, reminded to Ephraim Zicher of doves being an old remedy for it.[23] True, according to the Bible (Lev 14:22) to be completely cured from leprosy one had to sacrifice "a nest," that is, a pair, of pigeons or turtledoves; it is two pigeons that Makarenko killed. But the nest of pigeons was in its turn associated with Noah's Ark (Midrash Rabba 31:9). In the Bible (Lev 1:14; 12:6-8), Jewish women also brought pigeons to the Temple as a cleansing sacrifice after childbirth. In this wide context the phrase of Catherina, the cripple's wife: "Their seed should be destroyed," echoing sympathetically to the killing of the birds and the beating of the boy, sounds as a pogrom alternative to the biblical importance of having children. While pigeons denoted the people of Israel in the Jewish tradition, the pigeon was also a symbol of their deliverance. The starting moment of the new exile for two thousand years was the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple (literally, House (bait). In the New Testament the destruction is preceded by a kind of rehearsal: Jesus beat and drove away the merchants, also knocking down the benches of those selling pigeons (Matthew 21: 12). In Babel the crippled substitute of "The Son of Man" beats and knocks down the boy who has bought them. Somewhat further In Matthew Jesus turns to Jerusalem: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, yet you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37). A gloomy parody of this verse is that episode in Babel where an anonymous woman "with a flying body" is dashing along the street laden with trophies, "yelling in a voice of joyful despair for her children who had been lost, calling them together." It is in envy for her trophies that the cripple attacks the Jewish boy and kills his birds. The hero's return home is marked by a new illustration to the Gospel that symbolically frames the whole story of the beloved dovecot. After the quoted diatribe to Jerusalem Jesus proclaims His verdict to her: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." (Matthew 23: 38). In Russian, the traditional wording of this passage is: "Se, ostavliaetsia vam dom vash pust" (*empty*). This is the textual reference for the final scene of desolation that the little hero sees at home: "***It was empty***, ***our house*** <…> The grass round the dovecot has been trampled down". Having these verbal coincidences in mind, let us examine the chronological background of Babel's story. Its hero sets off to purchase pigeons allegedly "on Sunday" (voskresen'e, literally, 'resurrection') - when the subjects decided to celebrate with a pogrom the freedom Manifesto of 17 October 1905: "Then Tsar Nicolas gave Russian people a constitution."

[23] *Sicher E.* Babel in Context. P. 51.

However, as Elena Pogorel'skaia noted, the pogrom in Nikolaev that the boy Babel saw burst out on Wednesday 19 October and not on Sunday the 17 October.[24] In my opinion, it is due to this intended inexactitude the day of the week chosen by the author ceased to be an impersonal calendar reference and acquires an evil symbolic meaning. The beaten boy walks home along the sidewalks "sweeped cleanly *like on Sunday*": the day is supposed to be Sunday but it is also likened to a Sunday in a wider meaning of a "festive day."

An even wider meaning is suggested by an above-mentioned play on the Russian religious term for Easter which is literally: "Christ's bright resurrection." This play is stressed by repetition in Babel's story "The First Love" in the second part. The Tsar's Manifesto that unleashed the pogroms was published in the newspapers; in its text its bestowal itself was likened pompously with Easter: "Citizens of the free Russia, congratulations with Christ's bright resurrection!" This link to Easter became an omen of catastrophe for Russian Jews: for it was precisely on the first day of the Orthodox Easter of 1903 that the famous Kishinev pogrom broke out, that became a precedent and a pattern for the whole pogrom movement of the 20 century.

The newspaper with the inflated address to "the free Russia" is read aloud at the table by an old *shammes,* "that awful Jew Aba," with strange accentuation that gives it a parodic sound. Now Aba is asked to read a different text – psalms - over the murdered member of the family. Aba is a form of the name *Avraam*, Abraham, that of the biblical Patriarch. However, it means more in Babel than a shortened name. Babel's use of it reminds of national tragedies that fell on the 9th of Av (deviatoe ***Aba*** in Russian) that was a prelude to the historical triumph of Christianity. The subtext of the scene is clear: "Chist's Bright Resurrection", Easter, for Jews turns into the 9th of Av. It is the same idea that Babel noted down in the Diary during the Polish campaign: here too the Bolshevik liberation turned for Jews into their destruction: "Everything is like when they were destroying the Temple" (24 July 1920); cf. another note made a month later: "The cobbler has been waiting for the Soviet power – he sees Jew-biters and burglars <…> he is in a shock." The mourning of the 9th of Av is traditionally equaled to a mourning of a person. These are the hidden layers of meaning Babel activated with the evangelical allusions in the two stories.

The religious controversy was made in Babel even more complex when Communism was added to the interaction of the two Testaments, being a system of thought that also claimed possession of an absolute truth and strove to abolish earlier faiths. In relation to Judaism, Bolshevik rhetoric is known to copy Christian missionary clichés polished with long use. They are paraded in Babel's diptych:

[24] Commentary to the collection: Babel I. *Rasskazy*. SPb., 2014. p. 574.

"The Rabbi" and "The Rabby's Son." In the former story the little antiquary Gedali, about to go to a synagogue for a Shabbat prayer, proclaims "with gravity": "The passionate edifice of Hassidism ***has had its doors and windows burst open***, but it is as immortal as the soul of the mother. ***With oozing orbits*** Hassidism still stands at the crossroads of the turbulent winds of history." Then he brings the narrator to "the last Rabbi" – to his house "***with a broken frontal***" and to his room, "***stony and empty, like a morgue***, where the exhausted Rabbi with ***closed eyes***" was sitting at a table surrounded by the liars and the possessed." The allegory of ruin and blindness referring to Hassidism is realized in this description of an old man and his house.

I see here a modernized version of the old Christion allegory going back to St. Paul (2 Cor 3:15) that since the 13th century has been a popular motif for painting and sculpture in catholic churches. This is an old stereotype, the dichotomy of the rigid "Judaic blindness" versus Christ's bright truth, madness versus reason, the Old Testament's "death" versus the "eternal life" announced by the New Testament. The figures of the possessed and the liars surrounding the rabbi have been drawn by Babel from the same standard set. In church emblems the defeated Synagogue was traditionally symbolized, as is known, by figures of the perplexed blind (sometimes blindfolded), and madmen (staggering, as if drunken), against the background of a ruined edifice; while the victorious Church was presented as a new shining temple surrounded by the pious Gospel personages. In the finale of "The Rabbi" the function of "the new shining temple" is allotted to the Red Army propaganda train that is the narrator's temporary home. He returns to the train from the empty, depressive house of the tzaddik: "At the railway station, in the First Horse Army propaganda train, there awaited me ***the flare of innumerable lights, the magic glare of the radio station***, <…> and my unfinished article for the "Red Trooper."

The resulting, quite officious-sounding antithesis of the two worlds, the new, Communist, and the old, Jewish has originated from several notes in the Diary. On July 3, after a visit to "old Jews, Babel wrote: "And then night, the train, painted Communist slogans / <…> The clatter of the machines, own electric station, own newspapers, a cinema séance, the train is shining, rumbling…" In the beginning of the same note the Communist alternative was still drawn in humbler colors: "The dirt of the carriages… <…> All editorial board are unimaginably dirty humans." Three months later he writes down: "It is dirty and cold in the train. Everybody has gone emaciated, lousy, hating each other." Now the "dazzling light" at night has become a nuisance.

The second novella of this diptych, "The Rabbi's Son," is imbued with Christian-erotic symbolism that is linked to the revolution, like in many other texts of the Bolshevik literature,

including Babel's own drama "Mary." The Judaic exegesis has been transformed here almost out of recognition. The original heroine of both stories about the Bratslavsky family seems to be the personified Sabbath, or, as Sicher put it, "the queen Sabbath;"[25] she is also the bride of Israel, as well as of the Almighty Lord Himself. She is traditionally identified with the beloved in "The Song of Songs."[26] In liturgy, according to the 16th century Kabbalist canon, Sabbath is honored by the nuptial hymn "Lecha dodi likrat kala…" – "Go, my friend, to meet the bride." In the story "Gedali" that immediately preceded "The Rabbi" in "Red Cavalry" it was said about "the young Sabbath" that she "ascended to her armchair of blue darkness." Therefore, in Babel Sabbath becomes a substitute of the Lord Whose pedestal, according to Torah, looks as made of sapphire, pure as heaven itself (Ex 24: 10) - hence the sapphire chamber in Jewish visionary literature. But in the last but one story of the cycle, "The Rabbi's Son," the same "young Sabbath" is "creeping along the sunset, crushing the stars with her red heel."

In this conclusive text one can also discern a liturgical scene with a religious-nuptial subtext that usually escapes a reader unfamiliar with the Jewish tradition. The narrator remembers his last visit to the Rabbi but draws here a totally different picture from the novella "The Rabbi" devoted to that very visit. One must actually combine the two diverging versions while analyzing the diptych to avoid ambivalences. From the start, in "The Rabbi" the tsaddik's son and heir, the Hassidic "prince" Il'ia Bratslavsky was pictured as a rebel and a blasphemer who smokes tobacco on Sabbath. Now, in "The Rabbi's Son" the reader postfactum learns that that other time Il'ia had, on the contrary, behaved quite piously (although he was secretly dreaming of joining the Revolution): "Then the curtain of the Ark was drawn aside, and we saw in the funereal candle-light the Torah rolls sheathed in gowns of purple velvet and sky-blue silk, and, bowed above the Torahs, lifeless and resigned, the beautiful face of Il'ia, the Rabbi's son, last prince of the dynasty..."

Sicher in his comments points to a writer's ritual mistake: "The Ark with the Torah scrolls is not opened on Sabbath eve."[27] But obviously the writer wanted to underline the matrimonial motif, strangely combining with the general aura of Judaic deadliness. That motif is hidden in the "prince's" meeting with the royal bride Torah (that is the Lord's daughter, according to a midrash and in this case identic with Sabbath itself). She is dressed in luxurious "gowns" (Babel uses the Russian word "rubashki"). Il'ia here is "a prince" in a double sense, general, as a son of Israel meeting the Sabbath, and specific, as the Rabbi's only son and heir (a Rabbi's court corresponds in

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[25] Cf. his commentary to the book: Babel I. *Detstvo I drugie rasskazy*. P.370.

[26] It is read in Pesach on Shabbat after Shaharit, and, in Sephardi communities, also before the night prayer on Shabbat.

[27] Sicher, op. cit. p. 390.

Hassidic symbolism to a King's court, a tzaddik himself, to a monarch). One should remember Heine's unfortunate prince, who is a symbol of the Jewry in exile; it is only with the coming of Sabbath that he becomes human again, "in his father's palace" for a while. Then the nuptial hymn "Lecha dodi…" is sounded before the Ark of Covenant, and the bridegroom is met by a divine bride who "allows all to her beloved prince but smoking; smoking on Sabbath is forbidden by the law." It is that prohibition that the apostate son broke demonstratively in "The Rabbi" where he "was smoking one cigarette after another among silence and prayer" thus breaking the nuptial union with Sabbath – but not in "The Rabbi's Son"!

On Babel's ever-moving hierarchical scale it is not so easy to discern between true sanctity and its ironic imitation: one can suspect the former of being the latter. Doubts arise even as to the first appearance of "the young Sabbath" coming to her throne in the first story - when one remembers it reading in the second story about the young Sabbath creeping along the sunset on her "red little heels." It surely is a metaphor of sunset in tune with the overall bloody coloring of the book; but there are additional levels of meaning here.

Red color in combination with women's feet has had a bad reputation for thousands of years, since ancient Rome times. There are well-known reminders of the initial curse on red footwear in classical 19 century, that is, in Christian literature: H.C. Andersen's "Red shoes" where the devilish footwear chosen by the heroine symbolizes odious light-mindedness pregnant with harlotry and ruin. In Babel red footwear is also always linked with aggressive female sexuality, or with sedition: cf. Galina Apollonovna's red stockings in "The First Love." In "Maupassant" Celeste who makes love with the coachman wears red stockings (while in the original French story they used to be blue), red are the stockings of Raisa Benderskaia who merrily cheats her husband with the hero. Gapa Guzhva, a village whore also wears boots with red turn-ups; in the story of the same title she asks the judge about her further fate: "What will be done with whores?"

Are the "red little heels" of the queen Sabbath creeping around but an allusion to this underground motive of harlotry and ruin inherent in red footwear? Is it meant to compromise the Sabbath mixed up in the "red" Revolution? We have no answer; but it is clear that the erotic symbolism is carried over, as Sabbath is somehow transformed into a personified, feminized Revolution. In the past Gedali addressed it in the 2nd person as a lady, "pani"; in the third person he connected and opposed the two notions, both sacral and feminine: "The Revolution – we will say 'yes' to it? But are we to say 'no' to the Sabbath?" The rebellious son of the Rabbi at last decided to say 'no' to the Sabbath, or Torah, preferring the Revolution. There is an erotic hint as well: they find in the agonizing Il'ia

Bratslavsky's coffer, among Bolshevik and Judaic relics, alongside with Hebrew poetry, "a lock of woman's hair" and pages of "The Song of Songs," – that is, a paradigmatic text for both Judaic as well as Christian themes of mystic love.

On the whole the sad fate of Babel's prince, dying on his lunatic quest of world Socialism, looks almost a direct illustration to" The Hack" by Mendele Moicher-Sforim: "I weep looking at you, the downtrodden, persecuted prince!" But pity is mixed in Babel with a shade of squeamish bewilderment. His portrait of the Jewish Red Army soldier is echoing the sad rhetoric of Reuven Brainin's important article that appeared as far back as the first Russian revolution's eve in the Zionist journal "Evreiskaia zhizn'": "My brother in the lot and in the grief, I frankly admit that I feel awe towards you as to a prince taken captive to a strange land, to the milieu of strange nations; but often you evoke in me a loathing…"[28] Indeed, the image of Il'ia on death's eve is tainted with the absurd mockery of suffering:

"It was so heartrending to see a prince who has lost his pants, broken in two by his soldier's pack, that we defied the regulations and pulled him up into our coach. His bare knees, inefficient as an old woman's, knocked against the rusty iron of the steps; two full-bosomed typists in sailor blouses trailed the long, bashful body of the dying man along the floor. We laid him in the corner of the editorial office, on the floor. Cossacks in loose red trousers set straight the clothes that were falling off him. The girls planted their banded legs – legs of unforward females – on the floor, and stared dryly at his sexual organs, the withered, curly–covered virility of a wasted Semite."

The story, and with it the whole "Red Cavalry" (until 1932 when another novella, "Argamak" was added as the final one) was summed up with the sentence: "And I, who can scarce contain the tempests of imagination within this age-old ***body*** of mine, I was there beside my ***brother*** when he breathed his last." It is the same old, collective body of the people whose soul, as Babel wrote to Polonsky, is "five and a half thousand years old" – the body that is going to pieces under the onslaught of history. The narrator's farewell phrase about the common "flesh" ((the Russian 'telo' is both "body' and 'flesh') and the dying "brother" again echoes the above-quoted essay by Brainin: "The young wanderer, ***my brother, flesh of my flesh*****,** where are you going?"[29]

The same question, only with less compassion, will be put by a paramedic and an anti-Semite to the hero of Babel's much later story "The Road" (1932): "Where to? Where the hell are you going? Why are you travelling, that nation of yours?...Why are they making trouble, fussing round?"

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[28] Brainin, op.cit. p.33.
[29] Ibid. p. 32.

It is perfectly certain that both Brainin and Babel, as well as Mendele, had the same common source – Heine’s famous poem about Princess Shabbat and the unfortunate Jewish prince. On the other side, the portrait of Il’ia Bratslavsky is enriched by travestied allusions on the Christianized figure of “The King of Jews” – first of all, to the traditional subjects of the deposition from the Cross and to the Pieta. Instead of St. Mary and Mary of Magdala there are the two fat maidens with crooked legs studying shamelessly the body of “the wasted Semite;”[30] the collective Judas of this revolutionary Jesus is the class enemy – the kulaks who “opened the front,” defeating his regiment, as Il’ia says before dying. The Rabbi’s son dies in the same train whose miraculous glare, like that of a new temple, had been contrasted to the dying synagogue. “The last breath” of the ill-fortunate “prince” became Babel’s prophetic epitaph to Jewish Bolshevism.

[30] Like always in Babel, time is inverted here: the scene goes in inverse order: first the Cossacks set straight Il’ia’s clothes, i.e. cover his private parts, and then the typists observe them.