**Dostoevsky's New Testament**

*The Significance of Random Reading*

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The Bible was a lifelong companion for Dostoevsky, who often read it and sometimes annotated it. But what meaning lies in the marking of a text? The first critic to examine the markings in Dostoevsky’s Bible was the Norwegian professor in Russian literary history, Geir Kjetsaa. He did so in the early 1980s and wrote a book on the subject. This essay will discuss Kjetsaa’s method of reading Dostoevsky on the basis of the annotations. Kjetsaa’s analyses are intriguing but not immune to criticism, as too much focus on the markings tends to neglect the significance of the randomly read passages. After a short introduction (1) I will closely examine Kjetsaa’s analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels (2), and then add my own critical remarks (3). Finally I will compare Kjetsaa’s reading of Dostoevsky with theological readings of him (Romano Guardini and Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen).

Unlike Kjetsaa, the theologians were unaware of the markings in Dostoevsky’s Bible. The overall question of the essay is, then: how do we approach Dostoevsky’s use of the Bible in the light of his annotations to the New Testament, and when numerous voices clamour to inform us how they should be read?

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1. **THE DIRTY COPY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In 1982, the Norwegian Dostoevsky scholar Geir Kjetsaa (1937-2008) was invited by the Gorkii Institute of World Literature to study Dostoevsky’s version of the New Testament kept in the Manuscript Division of the Russian State Lenin Library, in front of which a huge monument of Dostoevsky is erected. Kjetsaa was the first to examine the “dirty copy of the New Testament” as he calls it.¹ Kjetsaa wrote a small book of 81 pages on the subject. The first part is an introductory chapter (1-17) presenting the idea that the markings "give us an opportunity to investigate how passages from the Bible influenced the author" (Kjetsaa 1984, 7). The second part (18-79) contains all the passages on which Dostoevsky placed emphasis. Kjetsaa arranges the marked passages in Russian followed by an English translation, and he gives a description of how the text is marked, i.e. with a pencil, an underlining, a *nota bene* or a comment.

The New Testament that Dostoevsky had was published by the Russian Bible Society, which was founded in 1813 in St. Petersburg. It was the first Russian translation of the Bible from Church Slavonic and it was launched in 1818. The initiator and patron of the founding of the Bible Society and what later became known as The Synodal Bible, was emperor Alexander I (1777-1825). In 1818, a donation from him made it possible to begin the translation, and later the same year the first edition, containing the gospels, was published. In 1822 a full version of the New Testament and the Psalms followed. It was, however, not until 1876 that a complete Bible translation was available.²
The 1822 edition that Dostoevsky owned was presumably the same from which Sonya read in *Crime and Punishment*. It was given to him by one of the Decembrist’s wives in 1850 on his way to a prison camp in Siberia. One of the wives was Natalja Fonvizina, to whom he wrote his famous Credo.³ Years later Dostoevsky recalls the meeting in *A Writer’s Diary* (1873):

“The meeting lasted an hour. They blessed us as we entered on a new life, made the sign of the cross, and gave us a New Testament – the only book allowed in prison. It lay under my pillow for four years during penal servitude. I read it sometimes, and read it to others. With it, I taught one convict to read”. Each copy of the holy book contained, in its binding, ten rubles in bank notes (Frank 1983, 73).

The years in Siberia became the notorious turning point in Dostoevsky's life and authorship. The New Testament followed the writer for the rest of his life (Kjetsaa 1984, 6).

It was not only the Synodal Bible edition with which Dostoevsky was acquainted; he had also read the Church Slavonic Bible and a French one.⁴ Moreover, from his upbringing Dostoevsky was familiar with various Bible stories. In fact his mother taught him and his siblings to read from a book entitled *One Hundred and Four Sacred Stories from the Old and New Testaments* (Frank 1976, 43). Thus, Dostoevsky knew the Bible and Bible stories before he received the copy of the New Testament in 1850. Today, however, this is the only Bible to which we have some sort of access through Kjetsaa’s work.

### 1.2 The markings - a theological task?

Geir Kjetsaa examines Dostoevsky's New Testament by counting slightly fewer than 200 markings, which supposedly were made by the author in 21 of the 27 New Testament texts. The markings show what Kjetsaa calls a clear preference for the writings of John. The following diagram shows how the markings are distributed over the four gospels and in the Johannine texts.

![Diagram of Bible markings distribution](image)

The first problem of studying Dostoevsky's markings is that he, according to Kjetsaa, sometimes read the New Testament at random, which suggests that all the verses were of great importance to him (Kjetsaa 1984, 7). Kjetsaa explains that when one studies the individual markings one is also struck by what Dostoevsky omitted to mark (ibid.). The marked passages obviously attract our attention but they also draw attention to what they exclude, and if all passages are important the question is why some of them are marked while others are not.

Kjetsaa, admitting that the omitted markings also have significance, prefers to investigate the markings. He writes that as a Bible commentator Dostoevsky is a man of "extremely few words" (Kjetsaa 1984, 7). Further critical consideration is in fact omitted. Kjetsaa's task is to show how the markings display a preference for the writings of John, which he believes is "in full accordance with the view of Christianity reflected in the works of Dostoevsky" (Kjetsaa 1984, 9). At the core Dostoevsky's Christian belief is, Kjetsaa argues, (a) an understanding of Jesus as one in whom the...
revelation of God is complete; (b) an understanding of sin as the rejection of Jesus (ibid.). Kjetsaa shows how this is reflected in *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*. In the former, compassion is incarnated in prince Myshkin, in the latter an attack on *hubris* is launched (Kjetsaa 1984, 12).

Kjetsaa limits his analysis to these two novels. The job is to be continued, he writes, by "scholars with training in theology":

A more thorough analysis of the marked passages in the Bible and their impact in the works of Dostoevsky should be left to Dostoevsky scholars with training in theology (Kjetsaa 1984, 17).

It is curious why training in theology is recommended as a preferable skill. Is the task to render probable a specific (Johannine) theological framework in Dostoevsky's works?

Before taking a closer look at Kjetsaa's analysis it is worth mentioning that scholars with training in theology actually have continued Kjetsaa's work. Irina Kirillova, Fellow and Reader Emerita of Newnham College in Cambridge, studied Dostoevsky's copy of the New Testament. In fact she drew attention to indentations which Dostoevsky set with his fingernail and which Kjetsaa overlooked (Kirillova 2001, 50 note 2). Kirillova agrees with Kjetsaa on the point about Dostoevsky's preference for the writings of John and, with great precision, she groups the markings according to themes compatible with Johannine theology. She argues that the markings not only show the Bible's impact on Dostoevsky, but also clearly reflect a genuine Orthodox theology. Like Kjetsaa, she too accords the marked passages more importance than the unmarked and randomly read ones. However convincing the results of this method of analysis, there is something curious about the persistent focus on the marked rather than the unmarked and randomly read passages. I will suggest that the omitted markings and what we do not know for sure about Dostoevsky's use of the Bible actually are important for our understanding of Dostoevsky's use of the Bible. Too much focus on Dostoevsky's annotations tends to view Dostoevsky as a protestant Bible exegete rather than a Russian literary author. I shall return to this after a closer look at Kjetsaa's analysis of *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*.

### 2. KJETSAA'S ANALYSIS

John is often called the apostle of love, and Dostoevsky's markings show that he was aware of the fact that love is a main theme in the Johannine text corpus. Several key passages are emphasized: John 13:34, 15:12, 1 John 2:10, 4:7, 4:12, 4:19-21. These verses are concerned with the love of God and the mutual love of one another, epitomized in the commandment in John 13:34: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another".

In Kjetsaa's analysis Dostoevsky's markings are an important argument (but apparently not the only one) for the claim that the Incarnation, the metaphysical understanding of Christ and a particular understanding of love, influenced the author and are therefore present in his work. Kjetsaa quotes the famous words from the letter, which Dostoevsky wrote in 1868 to his 19-year-old niece Sonja Ivanovna, while writing *The Idiot*. The letter has often been a key to the understanding of prince Myshkin as a Christ-like figure:

> The main idea of the novel is to portray a positively beautiful man. There is nothing more difficult in the world, and this is especially true today. All writers, not only ours but Europeans as well, who have ever attempted to portray the positively beautiful have always given up. Because the task is an infinite one. The beautiful is an ideal, and this ideal, whether it is ours or that of civilized Europe, is still far from having been worked out. There is only one positively beautiful figure in the world – Christ – so that the phenomenon of that boundlessly, infinitely good figure is already in itself an infinite miracle. (The whole of
the Gospel of St. John is a statement to that effect; he finds the whole miracle in the Incarnation alone, in the manifestation of the beautiful alone.) (Frank, 1995, 274)

In the letter Dostoevsky brings the Gospel of John and The Idiot together and his point of interest is the Incarnation, which obviously is an important theme to the prologue in John. In fact, this letter seems to be most relevant for the conjunction of Johannine texts and The Idiot and it is much more explicit on the matter than the markings.

Kjetsaa also sees in the novel a reflection of a Johannine understanding of love as compassion in the sense that attitude is accorded more importance than deeds. This, he claims, has consequences for the notion of sin (Kjetsaa 1984, 11). Thus, in The Idiot sin is understood as the act of forgetting and neglecting the commandment to love God and one another mutually. Kjetsaa supports this argument with reference to markings in 2 Peter 2:21-22; 1 Thess. 2:9-10; 1 Cor. 13:1-2 and 1 Cor. 16:22. The common denominator for these, which obviously are not restricted to the Johannine texts, is the negative consequences of ignoring the love of God. It is epitomized in the marked verse in 1 Cor 16:22: "Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come!"

The idea that action is accorded less importance than attitude is seen to be crystallized in Myshkin's fate at the end of the novel. He ends as a fiasco, a failed Christ unable to save others from doing evil: Nastasya Filippovna from self-hatred and Rogozhin from murdering Nastasya. What is decisive, however, is not what he did or did not do, but how he pointed to a vertical dimension, a "making of the divine", as Kjetsaa states:

True enough, the prince was unable to change the world, but through his attitude he pointed to the vertical dimension, the making of the divine. The ideal itself is unattainable, but to strive for something less is not worth the effort. (Kjetsaa 1984, 12)

This interpretation of Myshkin is interesting and the effort to place the character within a Johannine theological context is tantalizing. However, it is worth questioning just how closely tied it actually is to the writings of John. Importantly, Kjetsaa draws on markings from other New Testament texts as well, not only from John.

We should be careful if the argument for the Bible's impact on Dostoevsky is sought in how he marked his New Testament, because in doing so we thereby ignore the significance of the unmarked passages and of random reading. Perhaps we should take Kjetsaa's own words seriously, that Dostoevsky, as a Bible commentator, is a man of extremely few words. The stronger argument for combining The Idiot and the Gospel of John is found in the above quoted letter to Sonja Ivanovna, because Dostoevsky finds the Incarnation to be rendered particularly clear in this gospel.

In another context the Gospel of John and prince Myshkin have been compared, and some sort of affinity between them has been claimed, without reference to the letter to Sonja Ivanon or Dostoevsky's markings in the New Testament. This claim is based on theological interpretation of the novels (and to some extent from the hermeneutical standpoint viewing Dostoevsky as a prophet) rather than on autobiographical material. I shall return to this at the end of this essay.

2.1 Tandem evil: Beast and Antichrist

As The Idiot accounts for compassion, The Possessed is seen to be an attack on hubris. In Kjetsaa's interpretation the novel shows a negative progression starting at a political level with social utopianism finally leading to nihilism and an antichristian distortion of values. Three characters embody the political and religious downward progress: Stepan Trofimovitch, Nikolai Stavrogin and Pjotr Verkhovensky (Kjetsaa 1984, 13). The first belongs to the generation of the 1840s; he is Pjotr's biological father and, as a teacher, Stavrogin's ideological father.
Kjetsaa draws on autobiographical material in his analysis; passages from Dostoevsky's notebooks and letters are compared to markings in the New Testament, particularly the Book of Revelation. Thus, according to Kjetsaa, the political and religious dimensions in The Possessed are closely connected to a personal development in Dostoevsky's life. He writes:

From the mid 1860's one can observe in Dostoevsky an increasingly strong urge to see human beings and their actions in the divine perspective of the Bible. Every single "natural" thought seems to have its special spiritual and divine counterparts. (Kjetsaa, 1984, 13)

Kjetsaa links this spiritual urge to Dostoevsky's flirtation with mysticism and the views of the Swedish theosophist Emanuel Swedenborg (Kjetsaa 1984, 13, 81). The double-sided perspective is in fact evident in the novel (Swedenborg or not): political riots and provocations are somewhat dependent on a sort of demonic activity – hence the title The Possessed or Devils. I might add that Rowan Williams recently has made an effort to show the role of devils in Dostoevsky's novels and how the writer understood the demonic as an objective reality dependent on human agents. This applies to Kjetsaa's reading of The Possessed and to his "Swedenborgian" analysis: demonic and human agents are intertwined and political activity is seen to have an eschatological significance.

Together Pjotr and Stavrogin form an apocalyptic tandem. The unequal relationship between them is, according to Kjetsaa's analysis, analogous to that of the first and the second beasts in the Book of Revelation. In chapter 13:1 the first beast appears: it has ten horns and seven heads and on its horns ten diadems. The second beast, introduced in 13:11, has two horns like a lamb but it speaks like a dragon. The second beast acts in the service of the first and more powerful one. One scene, in particular, tells us about Pjotr and Stavrogin; the passage is worth quoting at greater length:

"Stavrogin, you are beautiful", cried Pyotr Stepanovitch, almost ecstatically. "Do you know that you are beautiful! What's the most precious thing about you is that you sometimes don't know it. Oh, I've studied you! I often watch you on the sly! There's a lot of simple-heartedness and naiveté about you still. Do you know that? There still is, there is! You must be suffering and suffering genuinely from that simple-heartedness. I love beauty. I am a nihilist, but I love beauty. Are nihilists incapable of loving beauty? It's only idols they dislike, but I love an idol. You are my idol! You injure no one, and every one hates you. You treat every one as an equal, and yet every one is afraid of you—that's good. Nobody would slap you on the shoulder. You are an awful aristocrat. An aristocrat is irresistible when he goes in for democracy! To sacrifice life, your own or another's is nothing to you. You are just the man that's needed. It's just such a man as you that I need. I know no one but you. You are the leader, you are the sun and I am your worm". (The Possessed, II, chap. 8)

At this point, the annotations to the New Testament become more profitable to the analysis. Kjetsaa informs us that Dostoevsky wrote "social" – an abbreviation of socialism – in the margin to The Book of Revelation 13:17 – the verse introducing the second beast (Kjetsaa 1984, 74). Applying this to the novel, Pjotr is seen as the anti-Christian socialist, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Beneath his meek appearance is the mind of a dragon (Kjetsaa 1984, 15). Pjotr is the troublemaker and the provocateur; he does not spare anyone from his vicious intrigues and lies. However, Stavrogin is the battery to the possessed, political ideology. He does not do or say much, he is apathetic and "his indifference is neither open to faith nor atheism", as Kjetsaa writes (Kjetsaa 1984, 15). Nevertheless, it is around him that the action evolves; he affects the fate of others.

In the novel, a political system called Shigalovisme (after it's inventor Shigalov) appears. It is a political ideology based on utilitarian socialism and rational thought, but at the same time fuelled by something else. Shigalovisme is antireligious in the sense of anti meaning instead of rather than against. Thus, the political system is eschatological in the sense that historical and political events ultimately are interpreted as signs loaded with a higher, hidden meaning to be revealed.
The argument in Kjetsaa's analysis, that Pjotr and Stavrogin are modelled on the two beasts in the Book of Revelation, is interesting and convincing; similar dialectical descriptions of evil are often found in literature and in films. To me it seems reasonable to claim that the Book of Revelation is a meta-text for the characteristic of apocalyptic evil performing in tandem: one agent distracts or attracts the masses by performing magical, occult wonders, while the other agitates and systematically ignites political riots. This fits very well with Pjotr and Stavrogin and it can be equated with the abbreviation of socialism in the margin of The Book of Revelation 13:17; namely socialism understood apocalyptically. This is a clear example of how the markings can be rewarding to the analysis of the novel. It also applies to the claim that the markings show Dostoevsky's preference for the writing of John, despite the fact that apocalypticism is by no means exclusively Johannine. The weakness in Kjetsaa's interpretation is his attempt to equate the characters' and Dostoevsky's personal points of view.

2.2 Demons as contaminating mindsets

Further, in his analysis Kjetsaa dwells on Dostoevsky's marking of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and the notion of apostasy. Paul warns against the mystery of lawlessness, and he gives an apocalyptic account of how those who don't believe, or are mislead, will be condemned. Kjetsaa suggests that the warning also applies to The Possessed. Beneath apparent harmlessness, seductive and possessed mindsets exist. The promotion of anti-religious civilization becomes a shelter for demons. Naive and unreflecting people are unable to see this and this leads to the "growth of false civilisation on holy Russian soil" (Kjetsaa 1984, 16). Kjetsaa explains this by another of Dostoevsky's laconic comments: a small cross is added above the word "mountains" in the Book of Revelation 17:9a: "This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated", and in the margin he wrote "of civilisation". Thus Babylon, the great mother of whores, sits on mountains of civilisation (Kjetsaa 1984, 77).

Kjetsaa's analysis tends to explain the use of apocalyptic Bible verses and the doubled sided view in The Possessed from the standpoint of the author instead of showing how it evolves in the novel. Perhaps this seems obvious since, in a letter to Apollon Maikov (October 1870), Dostoevsky gave a similar analysis of the Russian intellectual society as that of Stepan Trofimovitch, the pathetic aesthetician. It is in the novel, however, and not in the letter, that the more rewarding use of the Bible is found. The analysis of Luke 8:31-35 belongs both to Dostoevsky and to Stepan Trofimovitch, but it is the latter who connects it to the Book of Revelation. Unfortunately, Kjetsaa is too focused on the author and does not comment on this connection.

2.3 The lake and the abyss

Let us consider how the two Bible passages are connected in the novel. At the end of the novel, Sofja, the Bible-seller, reads Revelation 3:14-17 aloud to Stepan Trofimovitch, who gives an interpretation of it. The passage is about the consequence of not being cold nor warm but lukewarm. Besides being a prelude to Stepan's interpretation of the novel's epigraph (Luke 8:31-35), it also contributes to an incisive description of Stavrogin, who is apathetic, void of the freedom to choose his own life, or to be either cold or warm. Consider how Stepan reacts to the passage (Rev 3:14-17):

"That too ... and that's in your book too!" he exclaimed, with flashing eyes and raising his head from the pillow. "I never knew that grand passage! You hear, better be cold, better be cold than lukewarm, than only lukewarm. Oh, I'll prove it! Only don't leave me, don't leave me alone! We'll prove it, we'll prove it!" (The Possessed, III, chap. 7)

Shortly hereafter Stepan wants to hear more and he particularly asks for the passage in Luke 8:31-35:

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Shortly hereafter Stepan wants to hear more and he particularly asks for the passage in Luke 8:31-35:
“Now read me another passage.... About the pigs”, he said suddenly.

“What?” asked Sofya Matveyevna, very much alarmed.

“About the pigs... that’s there too... ces cochons. I remember the devils entered into swine and they all were drowned. You must read me that; I’ll tell you why afterwards. I want to remember it word for word. I want it word for word" (ibid.).

Stepan Trofimovitch gives an analysis of this passage, "une comparaison", as he calls it. He compares historical and political events and sees in them an eschatological meaning. He sees the possessed man as a symbol of Russia and in order to be freed from demons (that is the contaminating mindset of political nihilism and metaphysical lukewarmth) all this must be driven out and drowned:

"My friend", said Stepan Trofimovitch in great excitement "savez-vous, that wonderful and ... extraordinary passage has been a stumbling-block to me all my life ... dans ce livre ... so much so that I remembered those verses from childhood. Now an idea has occurred to me; une comparaison. A great number of ideas keep coming into my mind now. You see, that's exactly like our Russia, those devils that come out of the sick man and enter into the swine. They are all the sores, all the foul contagions, all the impurities, all the devils great and small that have multiplied in that great invalid, our beloved Russia, in the course of ages and ages. Oui, cette Russie que j’aimais toujours. But a great idea and a great will encompass it from on high, as with that lunatic possessed of devils ... and all those devils will come forth, all the impurity, all the rottenness that was putrefying on the surface ... and they will beg of themselves to enter into swine; and indeed maybe they have entered into them already! They are we, we and those ... and Petrusha and les autres avec lui ... and I perhaps at the head of them, and we shall cast ourselves down, possessed and raving, from the rocks into the sea, and we shall all be drowned—and a good thing too, for that is all we are fit for. But the sick man will be healed and ‘will sit at the feet of Jesus’, and all will look upon him with astonishment .... My dear, vous comprendrez après, but now it excites me very much .... Vous comprendrez après. Nous comprendrons ensemble”.

(ibid.)

One eventually doesn’t have to go to Swedenborg to find support for the idea of a spiritual and eschatological dimension at this point. The word abyss (ἄβυσσος), which occurs in Luke 8:31, has eschatological connotations. In early Judaic apocalyptic thought, abyss was thought to be the place of the fallen angels and the imprisoned watchers, known from 1 Enoch and the Book of Jubilees. This place is the prison for those who seduced and taught forbidden knowledge and magic to humans. The demons are afraid of the abyss and prefer the herd of swine and to drown in the lake (εις την λιμνην), which is not as deep a chasm as the abyss. If one were to compare Stepan Trofimovitch’s analysis of the passage from Luke to a more exegetical one, the word abyss, and its eschatological connotations, could be a place to start. In both cases demons are seen as seductive forces that possess and contaminate human agents with a destructive mindset or with forbidden knowledge. This eventually leads to a confusion of a particular (divine) order because demons appear to be parasitic mindsets that evoke evil, and evil performs through a confusion of signs, which eventually blur the distinction of good and evil, cold and warm.

3. CRITICAL REMARKS

It is easy to state that Dostoevsky had a Bible and used it in his work. More intriguing is the meaning of the various contexts in which he used it. The biblical epigraphs show how a passage from the Bible turns out to be a comment on the events in the novels. This is most clear in The Possessed and its use of Luke 8:32-36, and in The Brothers Karamazov’s use of John 12:24 with the account of the grain of wheat perishing in order to bear fruit manifold. Furthermore, the epigraphs often shed light
on other Bible quotes. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, in the chapter entitled *Cana of Galilee*, the miracle of turning water into wine (John 2:1-10) seems to foreshadow the transfiguration of Alyosha.\textsuperscript{10}

In *The Idiot*, several passages are quoted from the Book of Revelation to convince the reader of the parasite Lebedyev’s skills as an expounder of the Book of Revelation (*The Idiot*, part II, chapter 1). This suggests that Dostoevsky’s markings are also the characters’ markings. But who knows if the markings in his New Testament were set while seeking inspiration for his fictional characters? It is indeed through Stepan Trofimovitch that we encounter a genuine interest in – and a fairly original interpretation of – the passage from Luke and The Book of Revelation. Even though it bears resemblance to Dostoevsky’s own interpretation, it is still through the characters that it is intentionally and elaborately expressed.

Eventually, one is confronted with the problem of intentional fallacy when exploring the impact of the Bible on Dostoevsky. Is the characters’ use of the Bible consistent with the author’s point of view? What does it mean to have passages from the Bible quoted by fictional characters? Do Bible quotations have a meaning of their own, and if so, can it be compromised by the person propounding it? As a matter of fact, the long passage from the Gospel of John 11:1-45, about Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus, which Sonia reads aloud to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, was initially rejected by the editors. They were afraid that a prostitute reading aloud from the Bible would be regarded as immoral, even nihilistic.\textsuperscript{11}

Dostoevsky’s authorship consists of a broad variety of texts and genres, and so does the Bible and its tradition. In attempting to determine the Bible’s impact on the author’s work, the question is: to what degree do possible affinities between the two text corpora seem legitimate, relevant, obvious or farfetched? There is, of course, less problem when it comes to actual Bible quotes in the novels (or as epigraphs of the novels), because they unambiguously show the Bible in use. But the question still stands as to whether the meaning of Dostoevsky’s use of the Bible in general should be understood on the specific basis of the markings or on the more vague standpoint of the omitted and the randomly read Bible passages. The latter are of course impossible to list and examine in any way similar to Kjetsaa’s handling of the marked passages, but this may be an advantage. Dostoevsky was in fact a writer and not a Bible exegete.

The question is therefore: where does one start investigating the role of the Bible to Dostoevsky? Is it by reading and interpreting his novels or is it by investigating the markings he left in the New Testament? It is probably both, as the two eventually support one another. However, one should not, as in the case of Kjetsaa and Kirillova, place too much emphasis on what Dostoevsky marked.

### 3.1 Further implications

My critical response to Kjetsaa’s analysis of Dostoevsky has two concerns. First of all, if we are too focused on the markings, we neglect how the whole New Testament inspired Dostoevsky; that all the passages, marked, unmarked and randomly read ones were important to him. We also neglect how other things, besides the New Testament, inspired him: Bible stories, The Book of Job,\textsuperscript{12} Church liturgy and Slavophil thought, with its various historical, political, ideological, religious aspects. He “breathed the atmosphere of Orthodoxy”, as Henri de Lubac wrote, a point which has recently found an echo in Rowan William’s work on Dostoevsky.\textsuperscript{13} How the Bible inspired the author should not be limited to the number of New Testament markings.

This brings me to my second concern: A metaphysical understanding of Christ, the Incarnation, compassion and “a vertical dimension” does not exclusively belong to a Johannine theology but to Christian theology in general. In fact, one will find support for the idea of Christ’s pre-existence and Incarnation in Paul’s letters: Rom 8:3; Phil 2:6; 1 Cor 8:6; 10:4; 2 Cor 8:9; Gal 2:20; 4:4-5 (Byrne 1996, 243); but also in the Gospel of Mark (1.2-3 et passim) (Schenke 2000, 45-71). I suggest that it is more
rewarding to talk about the Bible’s impact on Dostoevsky’s work in a broader sense, as an inspiration with theological, ideological and political dimensions, rather than in a manner restricted to exegesis. The latter eventually leaves us with too narrow an approach; it forces Dostoevsky to be something else than a literary author.

The markings can reasonably be ascribed to Dostoevsky and here, perhaps, is the temptation: to see in them a path to a privileged interpretation. When we try to make sense of the markings our analysis tends to eavesdrop on the characters, because they often say something similar or something "more" than the author. But if we reduce this to a question how Dostoevsky read and understood the Bible, we do not only limit the Bible’s impact to specific markings, we also speculate too much on the author’s intention with his work. We forget how the characters are “capable of standing alongside with their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him”, as Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out (Bakhtin 1984, 6).

3.2 A Pauline Myshkin

It is worth questioning how dependent Myshkin actually is on a Johannine context, as Kjetsaa and Kirillova claim. Kjetsaa wondered why Dostoevsky omitted to mark "the important words about atonement" in Paul's letter to the Romans (Kjetsaa 1984, 7). I am wondering why Kjetsaa didn’t consider the markings of the two words "от скорби" in 5:3 to be relevant for the atonement motif. In fact, one could say that the underlined words "even in suffering" (in Russian скорбь means grief rather than suffering) form the centre between a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Let’s take a look at the context of Rom 5:3. The first 11 verses 5:1-11 are known as the passage on atonement. The near context for 5:3 are the following:

5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 5:2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 5:3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 5:4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (...).

Hope (ἐλπίς) occurs on both sides of "in our suffering" (ἐν ταῖς θλιψίν), first in an eschatological, vertical dimension – the hope of God’s glory (5:2b) – and then in a present, horizontal dimension – hope as the result of suffering, endurance and character (5:3-5). This could be claimed to be consistent with the interpretation of Myshkin as one who points towards a vertical dimension and at the same time – in suffering – connects the eschatological hope with the present and character-producing hope.

Surely, this is an important theological point (more Pauline than Johannine) and prince Myshkin could presumably be seen as its embodiment. Despite the fact that Dostoevsky marked the text, and Kjetsaa attests that he did so, neither of them explain what this means. My point is that the attempt to find a meaning with a marking rests completely on the interpreter’s ability to render an analysis possible. The markings offer no short cut to an insight into the Bible’s impact on Dostoevsky's work, but being based on our interpretation of their meaning, they can, however, be used in a creative way.

4. READING DOSTOEVSKY RELIGIOUSLY

Kjetsaa’s analysis of Myshkin has precursors in theological readings of Dostoevsky. Here the same point of analysis is reached without drawing on autobiographical material, let alone the markings in the New Testament.
In 1933, the Catholic theologian Romano Guardini (1885-1968) published a book on Dostoevsky based on lectures he had given at the University in Berlin. His main interest was to enter into a dialogue with Dostoevsky on the matter of religious being and its problems (religiösen Dasein und seiner Problematik) (Guardini 1947, 9). In Guardini's interpretation of The Idiot one scene in particular caught his attention, namely when Gania and his sister Varia quarrel, and prince Myshkin gets in between:

Gania lost his head. Forgetful of everything he aimed a blow at Varia, which would inevitably have laid her low, but suddenly another hand caught his. Between him and Varia stood the prince.

– "Enough—enough!" said the latter, with insistence, but all of a tremble with excitement.

– "Are you going to cross my path for ever, damn you!" cried Gania; and, loosening his hold on Varia, he slapped the prince's face with all his force.

Exclamations of horror arose on all sides. The prince grew pale as death; he gazed into Gania's eyes with a strange, wild, reproachful look; his lips trembled and vainly endeavoured to form some words; then his mouth twisted into an incongruous smile. (The Idiot, part 1, Chap 10, emphasis added)

Guardini gives his reader a personal account on how, for a long time, the gospel of John had been incomprehensible to him; he couldn't understand its logic but prince Myshkin's incongruous and enigmatic smile helped him. Guardini takes this smile as an experience of incommensurability between an eternal and a local position, the God-willed and the accidental, the reasonable and the foolish.

This is, in a fairly elaborate way, still in line with Kjetsaa's analysis, but Guardini's argument is derived from a personal reading of the novel rather than an insight into what Dostoevsky marked in his New Testament or wrote in letters. To Guardini, Dostoevsky's writings are a vehicle for the understanding of a religious being and its problems. It helps him understand and produce religious thought—and consequently it is fruitful to the reading of biblical texts. In this sense, the focus is different compared to Kjetsaa's. Kjetsaa did not dismiss this aspect though. He was aware that Dostoevsky "... made the words of the Gospel his own through his art as a novelist" (Kjetsaa 1984, 7), but still he was more interested in Dostoevsky from the standpoint of the markings. Guardini's way of reading Dostoevsky, as one whose texts enrich religious thought and Bible reading, has been the more preferred one among theologians. More recently, George Pattison has reiterated this approach in the following manner:

Reading Dostoevsky religiously is more interesting and more rewarding than it ever was. This situation is not only fruitful for the understanding of Dostoevsky, however: it is also fruitful for growing, through the study of Dostoevsky, towards a fuller and deeper understanding of religion itself (Pattison and Thompson 2001, 23).

In 1921, twelve years before Guardini’s book, one of the most famous conjunctions of Dostoevsky and Bible interpretation was taking shape in Safenwill in Switzerland. Karl Barth’s and Eduard Thurneysen’s interest in Dostoevsky lead to a completely rewritten comment on Paul’s Letter to the Romans and to Thurneysen’s book entitled Dostojewski. Their Dostoevsky reception was supportive to the idea that Dostoevsky's novels, as well as Kierkegaard's writings, were useful to biblical exegesis—particularly Paul's letter to the Romans. In Barth's rewritten edition from 1922, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Overbeck and other modern thinkers played an important role. In the first edition, Dostoevsky was not mentioned at all, but thanks to his friend and colleague, Eduard Thurneysen, the second edition has almost 20 references to Dostoevsky—or rather to "Dostojewski" (Barth 2005, xiii-xiv).
Barth re-edited his commentary six times, the last time was in 1928. The English translation of the book is based on the sixth edition and in this the references to Dostoevsky have exceeded the reference to Calvin and Luther by far, as shown in the diagram below.

At the end of Barth's commentary, it seems as if the writings of Dostoevsky are of equal importance as Paul's letter to the Romans. Thus, at the end both take the reader back to the beginning.\footnote{17}

Barth and Thurneysen's interpretation of Dostoevsky is unmistakably situated in a dialectical theological context. Their handling of Dostoevsky is quite the opposite of Kjetsaa's; they had no biographical insights to Dostoevsky what-so-ever, but saw in him a prophet whose message was (suspiciously) close to their own neo-orthodoxy. This is, by the way, noticed and criticized in passing by Romano Guardini (Guardini 1947, 137-138).

Kjetsaa's point about Myshkin, that even as a failed Christ he succeeds in embodying the idea of a positively good man, is shared by Guardini (Guardini 1947, 275pp). Kjetsaa's other point, about Myshkin pointing toward a vertical dimension, is in fact the motor in Barth and Thurneysen's reading of Dostoevsky.\footnote{18} My point, in mentioning this, is to show that Kjetsaa's interpretation of The Idiot and prince Myshkin's religious and "Johannine" significance has been carried out before and without any reference to the markings in the New Testament.

5. CONCLUSION

Kjetsaa's method is different to that of Guardini. The latter relates the Gospel of John and prince Myshkin through associative reading of The Idiot, while Kjetsaa reads it from the standpoint of the New Testament markings and other autobiographical material. The problem of this latter method is that it reduces the Bible's impact on Dostoevsky to specific markings, which are perhaps less specific than they seem. Too much focus on the markings tends to ignore the significance of the omitted markings and the randomly read ones.

Kjetsaa wrote, "we should not place too much emphasis on what Dostoevsky omitted to mark" (Kjetsaa 1984, 7). I suggest that it is indeed the omitted markings and the supposedly randomly read passages that give us a prolific and authentic idea of Dostoevsky's use of the Bible. Dostoevsky's use of the Bible, along with his theological relevance, should be rendered clear through (not at the expense of) his work. It is through our (theological) reading of the novels that the markings in Dostoevsky's New Testament become significant. They offer no short cut to the author's intention with his work; neither do they solidly show a qualified biblical preference. The preference for the writings of John is tied to a particular interest in the Incarnation and a metaphysical understanding of the Good, but this is a theological preference not a Johannine one. Dostoevsky is eventually more interesting and rewarding for theological thought than for biblical exegesis. In both cases, however, one is better off pursuing what Dostoevsky wrote rather than what he marked.
ENDNOTES

1 Kjetsaa (1984, 1). An almost identical version (the Bible verses are here quoted in Russian) of the first part of the book was published in Dostoevsky Studies 4 (1983) and is available online: http://www.utoronto.ca/tsg/DS/04/095.shtml (accessed January, 2012).
3 “I will tell you that I am a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt, I am that today and (I know it) will remain so until the grave ... Even more, if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth” (Frank 1983, 160). In The Possessed, the Credo is repeated in a conversation between Shatov and Stavrogin: “But didn’t you tell me that if it were mathematically proved to you that the truth excludes Christ, you’d prefer to stick to Christ rather than to the truth? Did you say that? Did you?” (The Possessed, part II, 6).
4 In 1849, Dostoevsky wrote a letter to his brother asking for both testaments in Church Slavonic and in French (Frank 1983, 23).
5 All Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
6 “We must bear in mind that, while Dostoevsky emphatically believed in the objective reality of the demonic, it is an objective reality that cannot be separated from actual human agents” (Williams 2008, 99).
7 This idea has many trajectories in literature and in film. Consider these sporadic examples: In the film Werckmeister Harmonies, by the Hungarian instructor Béla Tarr, a "prince" and a whale work in tandem and agitate for political upheaval. In Mikhail Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, the devil operates not in tandem but in a satanic trinity that nevertheless still in tandem executes wonders and political disturbance. Finally, in Vladimir Soloviev’s A Tale of the AntiChrist the Emperor and the magician Apollonius most clearly embody apocalyptic evil in tandem. The overall object for tandem evil is a confusion of signs. Those who confuse a particular order of signs are, by the way, more severely punished in Dante’s Inferno than the carnal transgressors: murderers and fornicators.
8 Kjetsaa’s analysis of The Possessed is elaborated in his later work Dostojevskij et dikterliv from 1985. In this work, Kjetsaa more explicitly talks about "socialismens apokalyptiske tidsalder" — “the apocalyptic era of socialism” (Kjetsaa 1986, 302).
9 “Exactly the same thing happened in our country: the devils went out of the Russian man and entered into a heard of swine, that is into the Nechaevs and Serno-Solovieviches et al. [the Radicals] These are drowned or will be drowned, and the healed man, from whom the devils have departed, sits at the feet of Jesus” (Frank 1995, 412).
10 This is the theological interpretation of Paul Evdokimov (Evdokimov 1942, 104ff) and Henri de Lubac (de Lubac 1995, 386ff).
11 In a letter to AP Milyukov (July 1866) Dostoevsky explains: “I wrote [this chapter in Crime and Punishment] with genuine inspiration, but perhaps it’s no good; but for them [the editors] the question is not its literary worth, they are worried about its morality. Here I was in the right — nothing was against morality, and even quite the contrary, but they saw otherwise and, what’s more, saw traces of nihilism” (Frank 1995, 94).
12 In a letter to his wife (July 1875), Dostoevsky described what it meant to him: “I am reading Job and it puts me into a state of painful ecstasy; I leave off reading and I walk about the room almost crying ... This book, dear Anna, it’s strange, it was the first to impress me in my life. I was still practically an infant” (Frank 2002, 429). Dostoevsky has Starets Zosima repeat these words in The Brothers Karamasov (VI, chap. 1, 321).
13 “Theologians of his own country may not have been wholly satisfied as to the correctness of his beliefs. But it would be risking a grave mistake in the interpretation of his work to forget that he breathed the atmosphere of Orthodoxy and profoundly assimilated its spirit” (Henri de Lubac 1995 [1944], 380).
14 The general environment is one in which, when Christian practice is mentioned, it is obviously Orthodox, and the scene setting in the monasteries is clear and credible. But anyone looking in the novels for any hint of exotic ritual, for mysticism or mystique, will be disappointed. Yet ... the background against which his characters move and develop is extensively and deeply shaped by motifs in Orthodox Christianity” (Williams 2008, 7).

Man könnte das ganze Problem des Menschen in der Frage aufrollen, was das Lächeln bedeute ... Hier offenbart es die: Inkommensurabilitätserfahrung eines Menschen, der aus ewigem Ort in das kleine Hier dieses Zimmers hineinhandelt; aus der erhabenen Gültigkeit des Gotteswillens in die Zufälligkeit und Verworrenheit dieses Kreises; aus dem reinen Sinn in das türchige Sich-Ernstnehmen dieser kleinen Leute – und dabei sich selbst nicht begreift, sondern nur weiß, dass es so sein muss (Guardini 1947, 264).

[Drittens:] das vermehrte Aufmerken auf das, was aus Kierkegaard und Dostojewski für das Verständnis des neuen Testamentes zu gewinnn ist, wobei mir besonders die Winke von Eduard Thurneysen erleuchtend gewesen sind (Barth 2005, Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage, xiii-xiv).

Er ist Zeuge nicht Messias, er ist Gleichnis, nicht die Sache selber. Gerade darum ist er auch Zeuge, und wird gehört werden, ist er voll Hinweis, voll Gleichnis, voll Bedeutung! (Thurneysen 1948, 61). It must be noticed that “he” (Er) refers to Dostoevsky in general and not Myshkin in particular. However Thurneysen’s and Barth’s way of arguing is embedded in a specific understanding of Dostojevsky: what applies to the author also applies to his characters (Mejrup 2009, 43-44, 77, 106).

REFERENCES


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