Spreading the Word: Oral Transmission of the Bogomil Teachings, its Symbolism, and Biblical Exegesis

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Spreading the Word: Oral Transmission of the Bogomil Teachings, its Symbolism, and Biblical Exegesis*

Abstract. The oral biblical exegesis and oral transmission, or the unwritten tradition, represent pillars in the circulation of texts and ideas since the very dawn of Christianity, both in orthodox and heterodox circles. Namely, this vast topic encompasses the concepts related to the concepts of the written sources and the spoken word, and their interrelation, and, furthermore, to the symbolism of the ear, Logos, and secret teachings (arcana). The role and impact of the oral transmission will be examined on the example of the Bogomils, and this paper will re-assess the importance and function of the oral transmission of the Bogomil doctrine. Therefore, the Biblical exegesis will also be analyzed in that key, and the question of the Bogomil preachers will be addressed. More broadly, the oral transmission of the Bogomil teachings can be observed as one of the modi operandi that the Bogomils resorted to in the aim of propagating their ideas, as well as possibly their interpretative manner to approach the Scriptural material and parables.

Keywords: the Bogomils, oral transmission, Biblical exegesis, preaching, symbolism

The oral transmission played a prominent role in Bogomil praxis and exegesis, including the symbolism and the wider implications of the oral transmission and its branching. Thus, the sway and scope of this topic can be structured in a three-fold scheme: the importance of the oral transmission, its social mirroring, symbolism and representation of the aural conception.

In the Bogomil Christology, the incarnation of Jesus was believed to have occurred through the right ear of the Virgin Mary:

He sent forth from His heart the Logos, that is, the son who is God. For it is written: ‘My heart has uttered a good word.’ They claim that this Logos and Son is the Archangel Michael: ‘For his name’, they say, ‘shall be the Angel of Good Counsel’. They call him Archangel because he is more divine than all other angels, Jesus because He cures all illnesses and diseases, and Christ because he is anointed with flesh.

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He descended from above and crept through the right ear of the Virgin and put on a body that appears to be physical like a human body, but is, in reality, immaterial and divine. He went out in the same way as He had entered, while the Virgin perceived neither entrance nor exit, but simply found Him lying swaddled in the cave. He accomplished the incarnate plan and acted and taught as explained in the Gospels, except that He only appeared to undergo human suffering.1

In Dimitri Obolensky’s view, mythological account on Christ’s birth, as conveyed by Euthymius Zygabenus and attested to have circulated among the Bogomils and in the Interrogatio Iohannis2, refers to the hearing of the word of God and of the preaching3. The Bogomils may have embraced this idea of Christ’s incarnation due to their docetic point of view whilst denying the fact that Christ took human flesh and interpreted it in a literal sense, as it was put forward by Bernard Hamilton4. Also Yuri Stoyanov points to the importance of the oral transmission of the canonical as well as extra-canonical textual elements in course of their diffusion among the Slavonic communities, in vernacular:

significantly, such a combination of scriptural exegesis and parabiblical narratives could be preached and disseminated in the vernacular, which in the climate of nascent Christianization, certainly enhanced further the scope of its appeal and impact (particularly, given the importance of orality and oral transmission of tradition in contemporaneous Slavonic cultures)5.

**Importance and social implications of the oral transmission**

The importance of the oral means of transmission of the earliest Christian tradition was underlined, among other, in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: *Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*. The *Episcopi vagabones*, prophets,

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2 The full name of this text is *Interrogatio Iohannis apostoli et evangelistae in cena secreta regni coelorum ordinatione mundi istius et de principe et de Adam*.


6 Rom. 10: 17, KJV.
and early Christian apostles travelled widely and spread the word: to Judea, Asia Minor, Rome, Egypt, the Balkans…7. The Gospel of John also undoubtedly makes mention of numerous unwritten events from Christ’s life: And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written8. Besides, the New Testament also bears witness of secret mysteries attributed to Paul, which might corroborate the existence of esoteric Christian traditions embedded in the apostolic one, and of its importance9. Oral transmission can also echo the emulation of the apostolic tradition and dissemination of the Early Christian doctrine. And furthermore, the more secretive the doctrine, apparently, the lesser the probability it would be transmitted in the writing10.

In early Medieval Bulgaria for example, debating on the issues pertaining to the new faith constituted a common practice even before the Christianization of the land11.

The Bogomils used to be very active in the process of dissemination of their teachings and to preach from village to village, from town to town12, often visiting people at their houses13, but also sojourning in Orthodox monasteries14. The Messalians and the Paulicians applied the same method whilst propagating their teachings – consisted, among other, of wandering and preaching15.

Namely, in the early Middle Ages, the majority of the population was incapable of understanding the sermons in Latin and Greek; additionally, the crisis which hit both the Churches in the Western Europe and in Byzantium in the 11th century, has extended its sway16.

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8 Jn. 21: 25, KJV.
The Great Schism in 1054 represented, in fact, only a culmination of a long series of events. More precisely, the conflicts which have arisen two centuries before were intrinsically connected to the Byzantine endeavors to expand missionary activities and include new territories into its realm, having started with the Filioque controversy and the ensuing “Photian Schism” in 860’s, and the fierce confrontation between the Frankish and Byzantine missionaries in the Bulgarian territories. Additionally, it was the general war-like-climate which marked the second half of the tenth century that may well have contributed to the spread of heterodox preachers and ideas, underpinned by the feelings of insecurity and instability within the Byzantine and Byzantine-neighboring lands.

In the second half of the ninth century, bishops Clement and Naum of Ohrid, together with Constantine of Preslav, continued the work of Cyril and Methodius aimed at spreading literacy. Constantine was priest in Pliska and Preslav, and later Bishop of Preslav, at the time when Naum moved to Ohrid. Importantly, Constantine translated four homilies composed by Athanasius of Alexandria against the heretics. Could this impetus have mirrored the heretical threat of the epoch, since, at the turn of the tenth century, a heretical presence was attested in Preslav?

At the same time, the heterodox preachers found their audience likewise, eager to hear the Good News in vernacular. Besides, the interrelationship between orthodoxy, heresy and literacy in the Slavonic, Bulgarian and Byzantine cultures played an important role. In the early phases of Slavonic literacy, heretical teachers may have possibly had recurrence to the material from the first translations.

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of the Scriptural texts into vernacular. And even more: forbidden apocryphal books were in possession of the Bogomil preachers who propagated and preached them. More precisely, scriptural parables and diversified mythological content found often their place in oral retellings, such as legends and apocryphal texts, constituting important links in the chain of the oral transmission. These narratives were not seldom embellished or simply enriched with the addition of some new elements as a result of the very nature of the process of the oral transmission and the inspiration of the preacher.

The rise of wandering preachers in Western Europe is to be sought in the late 11th and early 12th century. Moreover, similarly to these inclinations and habitual proceeding patterns of the heretical groups of people who have incessantly roamed the roads of Byzantium, so did the wandering heretical preachers like Tanchelm in Flandres, Henry the Monk, and Peter of Bruys in the early 12th-century France. Some renegade monks were among the Bogomils, too. Greek communities from Calabria maintained contacts with Byzantium and with monastic communities from the East, including the Athonite monks. On the other hand, the Byzantine monks used to travel to Rome and Jerusalem likewise: the flow of people, goods and ideas was assured, varying from higher to lesser intensity, but inevitably facilitating exchanges as much needed prerequisites for the oral doctrinal transmission.

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23 L. Mellinger, *The First Wandering Preachers…*, p. 61–68; cf. B. Hamilton, *Religion and the Laity…*; this represents a new avenue of research will be addressed more in-depth in the following months.
26 Д. Ангелов, *Богомилството…*, p. 70.
Aural conception and its symbolism

Apart from the elaboration of the incarnation *topos* retold in the *Interrogatio Iohannis* and mentioned above\(^{28}\), in the Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary was at times viewed as having given birth to Christ through her right ear. This was the case, for example, in Syrian hymns of the fourth and fifth centuries: in his *Harp of the Spirit*, Ephrem the Syrian has emphasized Mary’s virginity, similarly to Jacob of Serug in his hymn *On the Mother of God*\(^{29}\). Furthermore, this concept of aural conception is *lato sensu* intrinsically connected to that of *aeiparthenos*, perpetual virginity of Virgin Mary, especially underlined in literary sources and evidence shortly preceding or following the Council of Ephesus in 431, upon which Mary was officially proclaimed Mother of God, *Theotokos*. Afterwards, in 553, the Second Council of Constantinople attributed the title *Aeiparthenos* to the Virgin, defining her as the Perpetual Virgin, and it was upon the Council of Lateran in 649 that Pope Martin I proclaimed the threefold character of Mary’s virginity – namely, before, during, and after the birth of Christ. The *conceptio per aurem* was banned for good at the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

This doctrine of perpetual virginity of Mary could also mirror some Gnostic views of Mary as an angel, attested in the Cathar elaborations, but also in the concepts attributed to the “Bosnian Christians”\(^{30}\), among other. Moreover, this stance smoothly aligns to the docetic inclination of the Bogomil and Cathar communities who saw in Jesus’s bodily appearance only a chimera of corporality, whereas in reality it was built up of heavenly and spiritual substance\(^{31}\).

According to the Valentinian Gnostics, Jesus was clothed in his corporeal body in appearance only, upon his birth by the Virgin Mary, as he went *through her as if through a channel or tube without taking from her body*\(^{32}\). Namely, the Valentinians believed that Jesus *passed through Mary as water goes through a pipe*\(^{33}\).

The accounts on Mary’s birth in close relation to hearing and obeying of the word of God is found in other apocryphal texts likewise. In the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, dated prior to the 4th century, Mary relates that the Angel announced to her the Good News and said: *Yet three years, and I will send my word unto thee and*...
then shalt conceive my son. In the Gnostic writings attributed to Marcion, Christ's birth is interpreted in analogous terms: Virgin Mary had not in reality given birth, but that the child Jesus simply appeared near her. This narrative reflects also other texts, such as the *Protevangelion of James*. The notion of the *aurem conceptio* was also present in the philosophy of the fifth-century Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus. Even at a significantly later date, in the Kokkinobaphos manuscripts, written in the 12th century, monk Iakovos described the conception of the Virgin through a bodiless voice which had caused the Son of God to be clothed in the corporeal nature. This may also indicate the assumption that the Virgin had conceived Christ through the voice of God.

On the tympanum of the *Marienkapelle* in Würzburg (Bavaria, Germany), erected in the early fifteenth century, the apogee of the motif of the ear implying the process of hearing/obeying has been reached: namely, the tube stretching from the Archangel Gabriel to Mary's ear has been prominently portrayed.

In other traditions, the symbol of the ear relates to the act of hearing (in this case – hearing the word of God) too, but not exclusively. The right ear was permeated with the air of life, and the left one with the air of death, according to the ancient Egyptian mythology (in ca. 1550 BCE).

Furthermore, if we advance this symbolism one step further and upgrade it, the ear is structurally and allegorically related to a shell (cf. Serbian *školjka*), as a symbol of birth, rebirth, regeneration, fertility, and eventually, to the symbol of the spiral. More elaborately, the shell is a bearer of the pearl – symbolizing Christ in Origen's exegesis, for example, but also in Syrian Orthodox tradition. Similarly, in the writings of Kosmas Vestitor, Byzantine eighth-century homiletic, Mary is portrayed as an oyster shell of the spotless pearl. Across various cultures and traditions, the pearl has represented an ancient symbol of fertility.

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38 Ibidem, p. 145.
In the Gnostic tradition, the search for the pearl represents a climax of the Gnostic quest and is depicted in the *Hymn of the Pearl*\(^43\). It relates Christ’s descent into the sea of death in Jordan and slaughtering of an aquatic dragon, which symbolically embodies the initiatic obstacle, similarly as the Prince on his quest for the pearl in the *Hymn of the Pearl* would kill the snake – guardian of the pearl. The killing of a dragon ensures immortality\(^44\).

Pearls in Bogomil teachings represent the more secret and more valuable doctrines of their error, according to their interpretation of Matthew 7: 6 and to Euthymius Zygabenus\(^45\). This passage is also of high relevance to this story, because it implies that there were less and more secret teachings of theirs.

**The Poganovo monastery**

In the visual arts, the symbol of the birth from the shell is most famously portrayed in the renaissance paintings which oftentimes have their Greco-Roman pre-Christian origin (such as Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus”), but there are also other and significantly more ancient analogous iconographic monuments. For instance, on the Zeugma mosaics, dated to the second century AD and found on the locality of Gaziantep in the western part of the southeastern Anatolia in Turkey, the birth of Aphrodite in a seashell was represented\(^46\).

The womb of the Virgin Mary was metaphorically represented as a shell on the mosaics of the sixth-century *Basilica Eufrasiana* in Poreč, depicted by the Byzantine authors\(^47\), but also in a miniature of the representation of the Adoration of the Magi scene in the tenth-century Armenian Etschmiadzin Gospels, among other\(^48\). Curiously, an iconographic representation of Christ in a shell is to be found in the Balkans.

The Poganovo monastery\(^49\) was with high degree of probability erected by Konstantin Dragaš, Serbian nobleman and lord, nephew of Tsar Dušan at the end

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44 M. Elijade, *Slike i simboli...*, p. 172–175, 184–186.


49 C. Walter, *The Monastery of St. John Theologus at Poganovo*, ECR 6, 1974, p. 84–87; С. Радоичић, *Једна сликарска школа из друге половине XV века. Прилог историји хришћанске уметности*
of the fourteenth century (in ca. 1390) and dedicated to John the Theologian. After Konstantin’s death in the battle of Rovine against the Ugars in 1395, the construction of the monastery was continued by his daughter Jelena, wife of Byzantine emperor of Manuel II Paleologus, and mother of the last Byzantine emperors, John VIII and Constantine XII. The monastery is situated on the hilly slopes of the border-region between nowadays Serbia and Bulgaria, near Dimitrovgrad and the village of Sukovo, in the canyon of the Jerma river, and may have been erected either by the local skilled constructors, or the foreign ones, having reached the region from the adjacent areas. The very name reveals possible traits of a former pagan pre-Christian site in the region. At the time of its erection, the monastery lay in the realm of Bulgaria, and more precisely, in the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396).

The Poganovo monastery was painted in 1499. The iconographic themes represent the Pentecost, Anachorets, Apostles, Christ’s passion, details from the life of the Virgin, Christian feasts, Serbian saints; teachings of the church fathers, John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa have been depicted, apostle Paul, as well as celestial liturgy, and Ezekiel’s vision and Sources of Wisdom scene.

Some of the iconographic representations which decorate the walls of the Poganovo monastery could be ascribed to the years in which the Hesychast doctrine became officially accepted. Namely, at the Council held at the Blachernae palace in Constantinople in 1351, Hesychasm was proclaimed Orthodox. Besides, the iconographical theme of the Theotokos as the Life-Giving Spring emerged in the 14th century, accordingly to the introduction of the new liturgical office in honor of the Virgin Mary in 1335.

51 Г. Суботић, Једна градитељска радионица из друге деценије XV века у граничним пределима Бугарске и Србије, ЗРВИ 50, 2013, p. 825.
53 Cf. С. Радичев, Једна сликарска школа из друге половине XV века..., p. 97–100.
55 J. Hamilton, B. Hamilton, Christian Dualist Heresies..., p. 54; nevertheless, some caution in this respect (ascribing the Hesychast elements to the iconographic tendencies of the times), has been expressed by John Meyendorff, cf. J. Meyendorff, Mount Athos in the Fourteenth Century..., p. 164–165.
The iconography of the Poganovo monastery falls to the artistic school of the second half of the 15th century, consisted of itinerant painters, and of a team of artists, who decorated the churches and monasteries with fresco-paintings on the territory stretching from the Meteori monasteries in Thessaly, to Kostur, Ohrid, Prilep, Skopje and Niš. The frescoes of Poganovo monastery demonstrate significant topological analogies with those of the Transfiguration Church on the Meteori from 1483, with the frescoes of the church dedicated to saint Nicholas in Kostur of 1486, but also with those of the church of St. Nikita in Skopska Crna Gora from 1483/1484, as well as with one segment of the Treskavica monastery from the same period and with the altar frescoes of the St. Nicholas church in Ohrid. Interestingly, among the frescoes in the apse of the church stands one in which Christ the child is depicted in a shell, in the Virgin Pletytera scene.

This manner of depicting Jesus’s birth can well fall to the archaic forms of representation, as stressed by Christopher Walter. In the Pentecost scene, the tongues of fire emanate below the half-sun – which might also point to the act of prophesying, implying the “speaking in tongues” feature.

The Sources of Wisdom scene, represented just beside John Chrysostom and Gregory Theologus had its antecedent in the 14th-century Lesnovo church in Eastern Macedonia, which shows signs of adoption of some Hesychast elements. Apparently, this theme of the Virgin source of life was a common one, reflecting major artistic trends in the late Byzantine spirituality.

Interestingly, in the 12th-century abjuration formula, the Bogomils were alluded to as Pogomils. Etymology between “pagan” in Slavonic “languages” (morally filthy, but also heathen) and “pagan” is the same (<*lat. pagus*).

According to the account of Euthymius of Periblepton dated to the mid-11th century, some Bogomils were known to have painted icons. Apart from this short information, similar testimony has been left some time later, by Thomas the Archidiaconus. Namely, the author conveys the story of the two Apulian brothers who came to Bosnia to pursue their career as icon-painters together with the

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58 C. Радојчић, Једна сликарска школа из друге половине XV века..., p. 72–73.
60 Ibidem.
61 A. Strezoa, The Hesychasm and Art..., p. 235.
64 Ibidem, p. 130.
divulgation of their Cathar doctrine in the early 13th century. These two brothers, Matthäus and Aristodus, were said to have been excellent painters (optimi), and jewelers, who spread their artistic craft together with their heretical doctrine. The issues knitted around the question of possible Bogomil elements having influenced the artists are to be more furtherly explored.

Additionally, even if the birth through ear may not be directly attributable to the concepts and symbolism of the shell-birth representations, it is certainly interesting to observe the Poganovo monastery and its frescoes from the perspective of the possible artistic influences which came to be reflected on its walls, but also in relation to the very name of the site and its at least possible connections a formerly existing pagan site. At the very least, the name of the monastery which points to the preceding presence of the non-Christians at this location, may point to the potential Bogomil presence in the area.

Concluding remarks

The symbol of Logos, of the Word, of words and their transmission may have had particular importance among the Bogomils. The opening section of the Gospel of John, the preferred gospel among the Bogomils, which they used to carry in their hand on their journeys, and to use in their rituals, bears reminiscence of the Word of God, having descended among men and taken on a fleshly appearance.

The oral way of transmission of the Bogomil teachings may have been particularly important regarding their most secretive doctrinal corpus, probably established on the basis of the selected non-canonical and apocryphal writings. The Bogomils have probably resorted to this oral means of transmission particularly during their wanderings, and visits to monasteries.

66 Cf. I. von Döllinger, Beiträge zur Sektengeschichte des Mittelalters…, p. 156.
67 In spite of the fact that in scholarly circles, the fact that the Bogomils were opposed to the veneration of icons is well known and accepted, there may be some hints that they acted as icon-painters as well, but maybe compelled by their aspiration to hide their true faith under the guise of Orthodoxy, which apparently, appears to be one of their modi operandi: cf. G. Minczew, Słowiańskie teksty antyheretyckie…, p. 53–54; testimony by Euthymius of Periblepton, as in P Eleuteri, A. Rigo, Eretici, dissidenti…, p. 130, note 39.
Conclusively, the Bogomil itinerant preaching may also be seen as a segment of their apostolic tendencies, emulating the first early-Christian apostolic communities and thence the token of their apostolicity and of their self-understanding as guardians of apostolic heritage and tradition. Besides, the official stance of the Christian authorities was that against the wandering priests, monks, and eccentric saints\textsuperscript{68}.

The symbol of the ear is closely associated to that of a shell and at the further end – to the spiral, representing one of the aspects of the process of hearing and on the other hand, of the hearing of the word of God, of accepting the Word, and thus, of the oral transmission.

Furthermore, judging by the afore-mentioned, the oral transmission of the Bogomil teachings may have been organized in graded sequences, stages, or, levels: first to be transmitted were those doctrines which were easier to accept and less demanding to be received by the neophyte, based on some more general Christian narratives, and at the second, more advanced stage – the more secretive teachings would be communicated. This may have been corroborated by the very words of Euthymius Zygabenus on the Bogomils:

\begin{quote}
In the beginning they teach the newly converted simply, exhorting them to believe in the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit, to know that Christ was incarnate and gave the sacred gospel to the apostles. They order them to keep the precepts of the gospel and to pray and to fast and to keep pure from all uncleanness and live in purity and be longsuffering and humble and repentant and tell the truth and love one another. In brief, they teach everything worthy, beguiling them with excellent teaching, hunting them little by little, and unseen bringing them to destruction. As time goes by, they sow tares in the wheat. When they have made the poor wretches tame and obedient and got them within their nets, then, indeed, they give them the deadly potion, blaspheming openly and initiating them into the teaching of the devil.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

It may well be that it was in this early stage of their testimony to the others they pretended to be Orthodox\textsuperscript{70}.

Additionally, as we know that the Bogomils have mingled between the Orthodox monks, maybe we should also “search” them incognito among other categories of population – for example, among the artists.

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Importantly, Bogomil should be seen also as important mediators in the chain of the transmission of knowledge, of extra-canonical textual threads, but also of literacy, and especially of the vernacular tradition and heritage.

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