

Orthodox Subtexts in *Crime and Punishment*: Dostoevsky's Larger Context

Olga Meerson

Russian Orthodox religious subtexts are of a specific nature. Fyodor Dostoevsky uses both liturgical and biblical references, but a Russian speaker often perceives even a scriptural quote or allusion primarily through its liturgical context. Sometimes the same reference has two levels of allusion—as perceived in the biblical context and, separately, as it would be known to Russian speakers in Dostoevsky's time, even if they were only nominally Orthodox or merely had Orthodox friends. Using several examples, I will address both levels of allusion and their effects on Dostoevsky's primary intended readers.

Russian readers of Dostoevsky, especially his contemporaries, would catch liturgical allusions subconsciously rather than consciously. Subconsciously registered allusions often affect us more deeply than those we can register and analyze on the spot. Noting and understanding these allusions will allow current readers of Dostoevsky, both Russian and foreign, to get into the subconscious minds of his intended readers.

Although the liturgical principle is also present in other works by Dostoevsky, it is especially important in *Crime and Punishment*. Not only do liturgical allusions permeate *Crime and*

Punishment (1866), but the novel itself is also structured in a quasi-liturgical way: it allows characters, and by implication readers, to participate in a religious event rather than observe it from the outside. The plot of *Crime and Punishment* presents sacrifice as the most crucial theme. Even more importantly, Raskolnikov's whole ideologically driven experiment—to kill a worthless person for the supposed general benefit of humanity—illustrates what may go wrong with sacrifice. According to Dostoevsky, with the exception of Christ—who was sacrificed for everyone—sacrifice is right only when one freely and lovingly sacrifices oneself, rather than anyone else. Consequently, the main structuring element in the novel is the opposition between Raskolnikov's ideology of sacrificing another person for the general good and the motif of self-sacrifice—be that Sonia's or Dunia's or Pulkheria's, or a very important one alluded to in a biblical subtext I will discuss later: that of Isaac by his father, which God himself stops precisely because, although prototypical, Isaac and his father are not Christ and his Father.

As for the novel's own structure, its central liturgical event, obvious once we are attuned to the liturgical use of Scripture, jumps to the eye: it is So-

nia's reading aloud of John 11:1–45, about the resurrection of Lazarus. Its description resembles liturgical rubrics, even specifying the reader's intonational fluctuations. The narrator goes so far as to tell us that Sonia's "voice rang and broke like a high-strung wire"—a description that equally applies to an extremely emotional recitation and to Orthodox liturgical chanting:

"Now, a certain man was sick, named Lazarus of Bethany. . . ." — she finally uttered with effort, but suddenly, from the third word on, her voice started ringing and broke off like too high-strung a wire.¹

To illustrate liturgical experience as a likely source of Russians' familiarity with Scripture, an earlier section of the same episode will do. In part four, chapter four, before finally summoning the courage to read the gospel passage out loud, Sonia asks Raskolnikov, first, if he has ever read the Gospels, to which he nervously replies, "long ago, when I was a student"—and then she asks if he perhaps has heard the reading in church («а в церкви не слышали?»). Unlike most Orthodox, Sonia actually reads the Scriptures, rather than merely hearing them in church, where she comes rarely, being a shy prostitute. Below I will analyze the significance of this episode as liturgical. Here it suffices to say that Sonia herself is aware of both contexts for the resurrection of Lazarus narrative, the scriptural and the liturgical.

Before making any structural claims about liturgical structure and subtexts in *Crime and Punishment*, however, let us start with technicalities, closely reading a relatively short example of religious allusion.² In the passage in question, in part one,

chapter two, Marmeladov compares his benefactor Afanasy Ivanovich to wax:

Do you, sir, happen to know His Excellency Afanasy Ivanovich? No? Then you do not know one who is truly a man of God. [He is mild like] wax, real wax, before the face of the Lord—"as wax melts" . . . His Excellency even shed a tear after listening to my story.

Его превосходительство Ивана Афанасьевича изволите знать? Нет? Ну так Божия человека не знаете! Это—воск . . . воск перед лицом Господним; яко тает воск! . . . Даже прослезились, изволив все выслушать.

Marmeladov is alluding here to a hidden religious subtext:

Let God arise! Let his enemies be scattered, let those who hate him flee from before his face! As smoke vanishes so let them vanish, as wax melts before the fire, so let evildoers perish before the face of God.

In the original Russian, the conjunction "as" is given in Church Slavonic rather than the Russian (*iako*, instead of *kak*), which immediately marks the whole expression "as wax melts" as a liturgical quotation—something a Russian contemporary of Dostoevsky, and indeed of Marmeladov, would hear in church.

The sources of this quotation are multiple, and each has its own allusive power. The irony of Marmeladov's description sets in only once we consider the two basic layers of this subtext, biblical and liturgical. The liturgical subtext, in turn, is also twofold, as the quotation is used in two differ-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author. Russian quotations from *Crime and Punishment* are taken from Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Преступление и наказание*, v. 6 of *Полное собрание сочинений* (Lenin-grad: Наука, 1973).

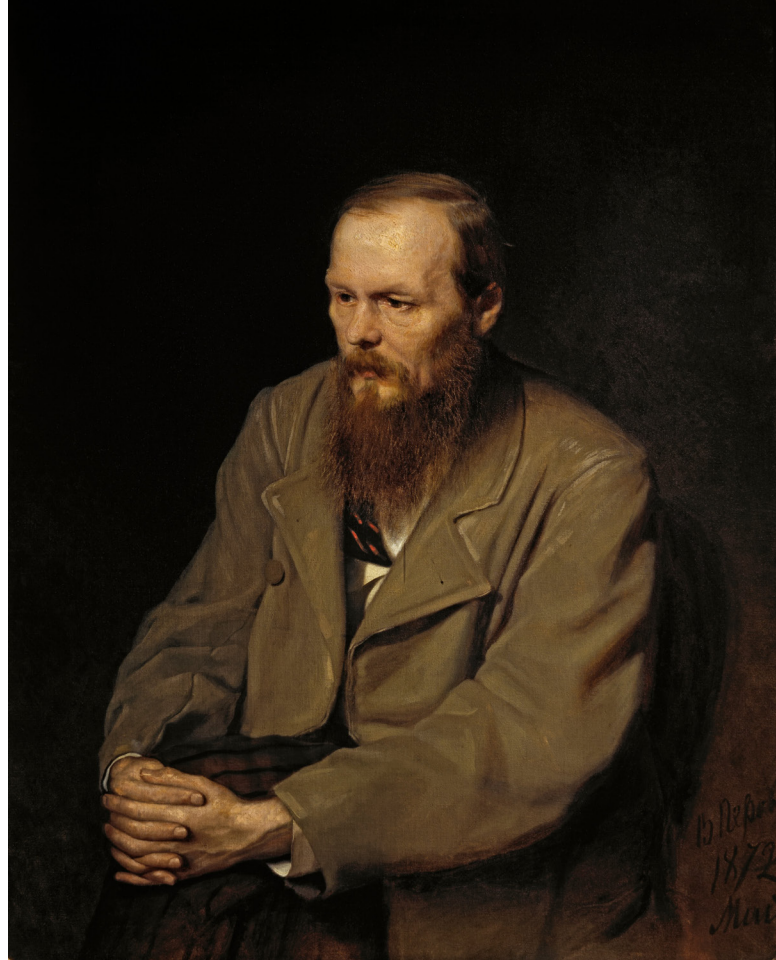
² The following analysis builds on an early article by me in Russian. See Olga Meerson, "Библейские интертексты у Достоевского. Кошунство или богословие любви?" in *Достоевский и мировая культура*, ed. K. A. Stepanyan (Moscow: Раритет-Классика плюс, 1999).

ent liturgical orders of the Orthodox church, one public—the Paschal service—and the other more private but no less significant—the prayer of exorcism.

On the scriptural level, the phrase alludes to Psalm 68:2—“as smoke vanishes so let them”—the *enemies* of the risen God—“vanish; as wax melts before the face of fire—so let sinners [מיעשר, evildoers] perish before the face of God.” Of course, the transformed biblical quotation already conveys irony: being *mellow as wax before the face of God* differs greatly from God’s enemies *melting before his face as wax melts before the face of fire*. The identity of those melting as the defeated evildoers (מיעשר) is clear even from the context of the psalm itself.

Yet even beyond referring to the scriptural Book of Psalms, this allusion by Marmeladov also appealed to Dostoevsky’s Russian Orthodox contemporaries, even subconsciously, even when they were lazy or scripturally illiterate. To put it in Sonia’s terms, “they might have heard it in church.” They heard and still can hear these verses in two very important and relevant contexts, each using a slightly different wording but both known widely, even to those who go to church only for Paschal services. In the first context, the Paschal Matins and Liturgy, the verses are sung, recited, and used as responses many times over.

The second context, the prayer of exorcism addressed to the holy cross as the instrument for casting out demons, is no less popular, for various reasons. This prayer is common for healing the sick as well as for various blessings, so even if they were not regular church-goers, people in Dostoevsky’s time would hear it and even



Vasily Perov, *Portrait of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, 1872.

recite it often. In the exorcism version, the word used to translate the original מיעשר is no longer *грешники* (sinners or evildoers) but *бѣси* (demons).

Here is the exorcism version in italics, parallel to the version of the psalm verse used during the Paschal services. The expressions Marmeladov uses, albeit in a different combination, are in bold:

Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered; and let those who hate him flee from his face. As smoke vanishes, let them vanish; and as wax melts from the presence [or face] of fire, so let the demons perish from the presence [or face] of *those who love God and who sign themselves with the sign of the cross and say with gladness: Hail,*

*most precious and life-giving cross of the Lord, for Thou drivest away the demons by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified on thee, went down to hell and trampled on the power of the devil, and gave us thee, his honorable cross, for driving away all enemies. O most precious and life-giving cross of the Lord, help me with our holy Lady, the Virgin Theotokos, and with all the saints throughout the ages. Amen.*³

Да воскреснет Бог и расточатся врази Его и да бежат от лица Его ненавидящие Его. Яко исчезает дым, да исчезнут; яко тает воск от лица огня, тако да погибнут беси/грешницы от лица Божия/любящих Бога и знаменующихся крестным знамением Его и в веселии глаголющих: радуйся, пречестный животворящий кресте Господень, прогоняяй бесов силою на тебе пропятого Господа нашего Иисуса Христа, во ад сшедшаго и поправшаго силу дияволю и даровавшего нам крест свой честный на прогнание всякаго супостата. О пречестный животворящий кресте Господень, помогай нам со Святой Госпожею нашею Богородицею и со всеми святыми во веки веков. Аминь.

The allusion Marmeladov makes is thus many layered: on the one hand, Afanasy Ivanovich (whose name means “the immortal one, son of John”!), while overtly praised, is covertly compared to a demon to be defeated or exorcised by the cross. On the other hand, Marmeladov’s own proximity to the original, Paschal context comes to the foreground because of his competence in invoking it—one of his traits that is further textually confirmed by his parable of the drunkards forgiven at the last judgment. Thus, what Dostoevsky manages to flesh out is the complexity of

Marmeladov’s own character, capable not only of bitter irony but of prayer and penitence as well. Importantly, this is a type of quotation that does not conjure up any imagery of an intellectual, let alone a snob. The source of this sarcastic wisdom in Dostoevsky is more often than not a drunk, a derelict, or even a pathological liar. Marmeladov presents an early example in Dostoevsky of a type of scandalous buffoon who proclaims important truths once we get into the language of their allusions; these characters include Lebedev, Ivolgin, Lebiadkin, Smerdiakov, and all sorts of unlikely authorities on truth.⁴ In Dostoevsky, *argumentum ad hominem* never works. Hence, no character ought to be disregarded. Dostoevsky’s buffoons parallel Shakespeare’s prophetic clowns or fools, thus invoking the Carnival, the Bakhtinian *yurodstvo* or holy foolishness, a phenomenon that ultimately continues a medieval or post-medieval Western tradition.

Most importantly, the liturgical quotation here links the verbal style to its function, the “how” to the “to what end” or “why bother.” The way Marmeladov quotes sets a pattern for characterizing *him* as a subject, not an object of a description. Ostensibly, then, Marmeladov is proclaiming his benefactor’s mild kindness, but the subtext he invokes actually nails this “benefactor”—whom he begrudges for firing him as a drunk—as mean though sentimental, a frequent combination both in Dostoevsky and in real life. Later, Dostoevsky even overtly labels Fyodor Karamazov as “sentimental and mean/evil spirited” (*он был сентиментален и зол*).

Dostoevsky might have learned this rhetorical trick from Archpriest Avvakum Petrov, leader of the seventeenth-century Old Believers schism.

³ English translation from “Orthodox Prayer to the Holy Cross,” *The Saint Gregory Palamas Outreach*, <http://www.saintgregoryoutreach.org/2010/01/let-god-arise-holy-cross.html>.

⁴ I have written on many of those buffoons as unworthy and unexpected prophets. See Olga Meerson, “Ivolgin and Holbein: Non-Christ Risen vs. Christ Non-Risen,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 39.2 (Summer, 1995): 200–13; Olga Meerson, “Скелетом наружу: система интертекстов как структура произведения вне его. Мотив трагедии «падшей» женщины в «Идиоте»,” *Достоевский и мировая культура* 23 (2007); Olga Meerson, *Dostoevsky’s Taboos* (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998), 183–210.

Avvakum's allusions are liturgically mediated even when they are biblical. Thus, at one point in his *Vita Written by Himself*, his most famous text, while describing his tormentor Pashkov, Avvakum suddenly mentions a certain little missive he had allegedly written to Pashkov: "Man, *fear God who sitteth on the Cherubim and looketh down into the abysses, the one whom all creation beholds in trembling yet you alone neglect.*" This alleged missive to Pashkov actually contains a quotation (shown here in italics) from the Orthodox rite of exorcism before the baptism of a catechumen. There the priest addresses these words to Satan before casting him out! What Avvakum and Dostoevsky's Marmeladov have in common is their use of a polemical quotation that is purely liturgical: as a formula, the subtext in Avvakum's alleged missive can be recognized solely from liturgy, not from the Bible directly.

Among the slightly less arcane intertexts in *Crime and Punishment* is the above-mentioned reading of John 11:1–45, about the resurrection of Lazarus, in book 4, chapter 4. Poetically as well as liturgically, it matters who is reading the passage to whom and how this reading is described. The narrator uses a very apt definition for what Raskolnikov and Sonia are, objectively—a murderer and a harlot—only once throughout the novel, in this passage. The term "harlot" (*блудница*) is rather biblical, which also tinges the word "murderer" with the same connotations. In any case, Dostoevsky's narrator never calls Raskolnikov a murderer directly anywhere else. So here is a whole set of questions pertaining to how this apt but harsh definition affects us as readers: Is the voice here the narrator's own? After all, these labels are quite harsh, so it matters on whose

authority the narrator uses them: his own or that of Scripture. Rather than judging them harshly by these labels, the narrator seems to *identify* his own characters, "a murderer and a harlot strangely brought together in reading the Eternal Book," with characters in the Bible itself. Paradoxically, this use of biblical language affects us as readers, making us empathize with Sonia the harlot and Raskolnikov the murderer. As noted above, this event itself is presented as liturgical. Liturgy, typically, turns its observers into participants. Hence we, as readers, are fully implicated in Sonia's reading.⁵

The next example explains why addressing religious subtexts in *Crime and Punishment* is imperative for discovering interpretive clues. Sometimes these subtexts are the only way to make sense of the text. For example, many readers of Dostoevsky find the novel's epilogue at least as problematic as that of the Book of Job: the resolution of the conflict in the epilogue seems incongruously easy in relation to how the conflict itself is presented. By the end of the novel Raskolnikov decides to turn himself in, but without repenting of his crime. At the epilogue, however, right before its very end, he seems to emerge as sort of a *poenitens ex machina*, without too much psychological or ideological motivation to his change of heart or mind (the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, actually means "change of mind"). What then suddenly and inexplicably moves him to repentance?

A scriptural-liturgical subtext here turns out to be unexpectedly relevant to the novel's central motif of right and wrong sacrifice: that of Genesis 22, the unrealized sacrifice of Isaac. Dostoevsky—who himself managed to survive his own execution for revolutionary activities—makes this Isaac-

⁵For possible links between subjective points of view, characters' sore spots, and axiology in Dostoevsky's poetics, see Olga Meerson, *Dostoevsky's Taboos* (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998).



Ernst Neizvestny,
illustration for *Crime
and Punishment*.

like experience relevant for his characters. Rather than trying to sacrifice another—the project that has driven Raskolnikov’s intentions since the beginning of the novel—Raskolnikov now experiences firsthand what it is to be in the position of Isaac, about to be sacrificed: he finds himself up on a hill, sitting on a bunch of firewood and contemplating “the times of Abraham and his herds” (*точно не прошли ещё века Авраама и стад его*). Then he gets up, a completely changed person. Very late in the book, on the last page or two before the end of its epilogue, this allusion to Genesis 22 seems strange indeed. Yet it pinpoints what is faulty about Raskolnikov’s argument: he had believed that it was acceptable to sacrifice a human life if the purpose was lofty enough, but until that very moment in the epilogue, Raskolnikov had believed in the sacrifice of *others’* life, not his own. Elsewhere I have presented my argument more extensively.⁶ Here it suffices to cite a portion of Genesis 22 alongside the relevant passage in the epilogue. All parallel themes, motifs, and expressions in Genesis and in this part of Dostoevsky are in italics. When appropriate, I also note the stylistic markers likely to impress Dostoevsky in the Russian edition of the Book of

Genesis, which would have been accessible to him by 1863:⁷

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took *two* of his young men with him, *and* his son Isaac; and he cut *the wood* for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, “*Stay here with the ass; I and the lad* will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.” And Abraham took *the wood* of the burnt offering, and *laid it on Isaac* his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, *the fire and the wood*; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham *built an altar there* [*устроилъ тамъ жертвенникъ*], and *laid the wood in order*, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, *upon the wood*. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him

⁶ See Olga Meerson, “Raskolnikov and the Aqedah (Isaac’s Binding),” in *Dostoevsky Beyond Dostoevsky*, ed. Svetlana Evdokimova and Vladimir Golstein (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 379–93.

⁷ The Russian translation of Genesis prepared by Archmandrite Makariij Glukharyov had been published in the journal *Православное обозрение* by 1863.

was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Some of the parallels between Genesis 22 and the following Dostoevsky passage are thematic while others are verbatim:

Again it was a clear, warm day. Early in the morning, at about six o'clock, [Raskolnikov] went to work in the shed on the riverbank, where gypsum was baked in a kiln [*устроена была обжигательная печь*] and afterwards ground. Only *three workers went there. One of them took a guard and went back to the fortress to get some tools; the second began splitting firewood and putting it into the kiln* [*накладывает в печь*, literally "piling it up in the kiln"—so the image in Russian is a pileup of logs]. Raskolnikov walked out of the shed and right to the bank, *sat down on some logs piled near the shed* [*сел на складенные у сарая бревна*], and began looking at the wide, desolate river. From the high bank a wide view of the surrounding countryside opened out. A barely audible song came from the far bank opposite. There, on the boundless sunbathed steppe, nomadic yurts could be seen, like barely visible black specks. There was freedom, there a different people lived, quite unlike those here, there time itself seemed to stop, *as if the centuries of Abraham and his flocks had not passed.*

Raskolnikov sat and stared fixedly, not tearing his eyes away; . . . *he was not thinking of anything* but some anguish troubled and tormented him.

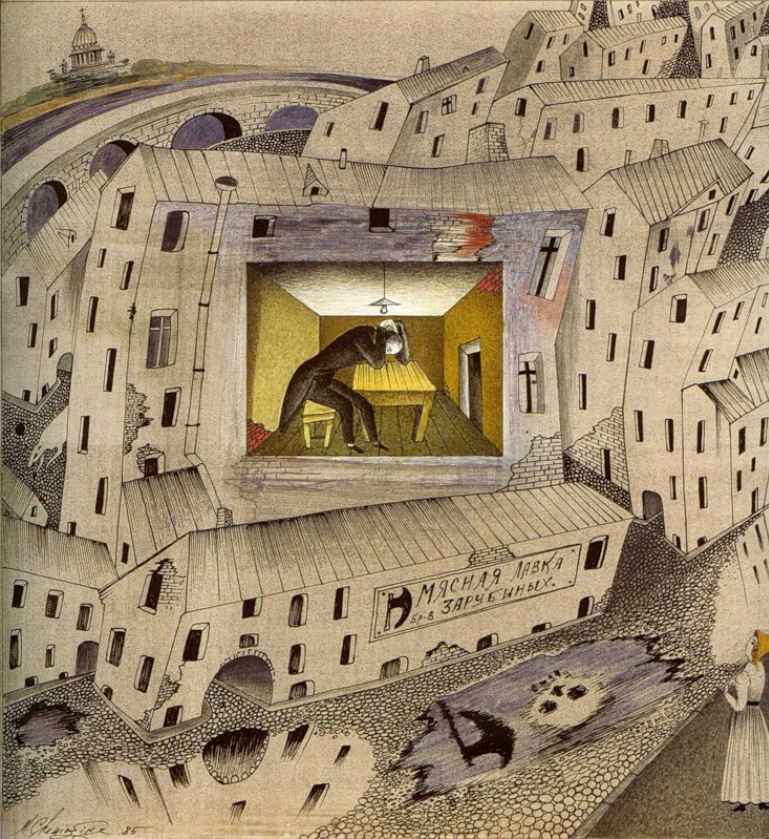
Suddenly [Sonia] was beside him. . . . *How it happened he himself did not know but suddenly* it was as if something had lifted him and flung him down at her feet. . . . They still had seven years more . . . but *he was risen and he knew it, he felt it fully with the whole of his renewed being.*⁸

Raskolnikov's sudden and complete transformation, comparable to Isaac's miraculous salvation from imminent death by sacrifice, invites another comparison: Sonia's sudden appearance parallels the miraculous and providential appearance of the sacrificial lamb or ram (the same word, at least in Hebrew: *שהה*), which liturgically and traditionally prefigures Christ Himself as the Lamb of God. Oddly but not surprisingly, the parallel obtains: after all, it was Sonia, Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, who first introduced Raskolnikov to Christ the Lamb of God as both Lazarus's and his own personal resurrector.

Genesis 22 is also liturgically prominent in the Orthodox Church, read during the Vespereal Liturgy of Holy Saturday, the last Eucharist before the Paschal Matins and Liturgy, as the dead Christ is harrowing Hades. The reading prominently underscores the context of Christ's victory over death achieved by its embrace. This liturgical context for Genesis 22 likens Abraham the father, ready to sacrifice his only son, to God the Father himself, who actually does sacrifice his own Son. Liturgically, then, the sacrifice of Isaac gains an additional meaning: God is telling Abraham: "now you know how *I* feel!" (To trace this Christian perspective back to its Jewish, albeit Christian-tinted, roots, a fascinating work of Mark Chagall, one of the many crucifixion scenes he painted, uses a stream of blood connecting

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⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 1993), 548–50.



Mihail Chemiakin,
Set design for a
ballet of *Crime and
Punishment*, 1985.

the cross to a background scene of the binding of Isaac. But Isaac was not slaughtered in the end, so the stream of blood seems to flow backwards in time—from the cross to the altar upon which the father of all Jews has placed his only son! This mentality, extra- and meta-temporal, willingly defying the linear flow of time, typifies both the Jewish artist and his Orthodox Christian liturgical predecessors.)

The sudden experience of subconscious empathy with Isaac shocks

the previously overthinking Raskolnikov in an immediate, non-intellectual way: rather than dialectically speculating on sacrificing *others* for the greater good of humanity, he suddenly finds himself in the shoes—or rather on the firewood—of the one to *be* sacrificed. According to Dostoevsky, the right kind of sacrifice comes at one's own expense. Raskolnikov, however, discovers this truth very late in the day, when he is no longer able to think but only to feel. Indeed, the next paragraph, the penultimate of the whole novel, starts: "But he could not think about anything anymore at that point: dialectics was replaced with life itself, so [his] consciousness needed to work out something quite different" (*Вместо диалектики наступила жизнь, и в сознании должно было выработаться что-то совершенно другое*).

We think about the Bible, but we live through liturgy. Dostoevsky used that fact to implicate his readers. ✱



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