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Stalin's Biblical Hermeneutics: From 2 Thessalonians 3 to Acts 4

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Abstract: This article concerns the creative reinterpretation of two biblical texts in the thought of Joseph Stalin: 2 Thessalonians 3:10 and Acts 4:32 and 35. Indeed, “anyone unwilling to work should not eat” became the hermeneutical frame through which the text from Acts 4, “everything they owned was held in common (...) They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need,” was reinterpreted. Already from 1917, the text of 2 Thessalonians was used by Lenin to define what would soon be called socialism, in distinction from communism (the distinction was itself a Bolshevik innovation). Stalin would make much greater use of the text, extending the sense of those not working – the idle capitalists and bourgeoisie – to those who lagged behind in the project of creating socialism. Further, it became the interpretive key for reworking the communist slogan, “from each according to ability, to each according to need” (itself a gloss on Acts 4) into a slogan for socialism, “from each according to ability, to each according to work.” These two forms of the slogan became the means to distinguish socialism from communism. The result of this process of biblical reinterpretation was the appearance of both biblical texts – one quoted and one glossed – in the “Stalin” Constitution of 1936. Throughout I seek to understand Stalin’s thought on the basis of his writings, without taking sides in the perpetual polarization over his legacy.

Keywords: Stalin; Bible; Soviet Constitution; 2 Thessalonians 3:10; Acts 4:32-35.

1 Introduction

The Soviet Constitution of 1936 contains a biblical verse and a gloss on a biblical verse.

In the USSR work is a duty and a matter of honour for every able-bodied citizen, in accordance with the principle: “He who does not work, neither shall he eat [*kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est*]”.

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The principle applied in the USSR is that of socialism: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his work [*ot kazhdogo po ego sposobnosti, kazhdomu – po ego trudu*].”¹

The man credited with framing the constitution is none other than Ioseb Besarionis Dze Jugashvili, more commonly known as Joseph Stalin. Given that Stalin was the only world communist leader to have undertaken substantial theological training (1895–1899), with a focus on biblical interpretation, it should come as no surprise that he would be responsible for some intriguing biblical hermeneutics. My task in this study is to examine how 2Thess 3:10 and a gloss on Acts 4:32 and 35 were reinterpreted in a way that they could appear in the “Stalin constitution” of 1936.

2 He Who Does Not Work, Neither Shall He Eat

I begin with 2 Thessalonians, which may be described as one of the texts that attempts to deal with the delay of the Parousia. In contrast with the first letter’s imminent eschatology,² it seeks to explain the delay, offering a number of conditions that have to be met before Christ’s return.³ In the key section of the second letter, the author directly addresses the claim that the day had come (2Thess 2:1–2).⁴ Not so, argues the author, for prior conditions must be met in what becomes an eschatological timetable: apostasy and rebellion; appearance of the “man of lawlessness” (anti-Christ); appearance of the “one who restrains” and then his removal. Only then will Christ come and inaugurate the end by slaying the lawless one. Throughout, the letter emphasizes the length of time between the present and the end, couching eschatological doctrines in mythological language, as much a mystery to present readers as it perhaps was to its initial recipients. This was also a crucial text in Eastern Orthodoxy (important for Stalin), which developed a keen sense of the trials and tribulations before the end time. The Antichrist – the

¹ Stalin 1936a: article 12, 1936b: stat’ia 12.

² Also to be found in Mark 13; Luke 10:1–16; 12:35–46; 17:22–37; Matt 8:19–22; 9:35–10:15; 10:37–38; Didache 16.

³ It is one of four responses to the delay: 1) revitalised and intensified expectation; 2) realised eschatology from Christ’s first appearance; 3) explanation of the delay; 4) proleptic eschatology, in which the future moment determines the present. In this respect, the delay may be seen the driving force for the development of theology.

⁴ See the useful expositions of this key statement in Menken and Nicholl (Menken 1994: 98–101; Nicholl 2004: 115–7).

man of lawlessness – is the key, for he will generate apostasy, resistance to God and try to pass himself off as God.⁵ Indeed, Eastern Orthodox thinkers took the main point of 2 Thessalonians – these events have not happened yet, so the end is not on its way⁶ – a step further: the text indicates that the work of the Antichrist had begun already with Christ's appearance and would be defeated only in the final struggle.

What happens in the meantime? The interim increasingly becomes the norm, in which tradition (2Thess 2:15), perseverance in tribulation (2Thess 1:4–12), steadfastness and hard work are the order of the day (2Thess 3:6–15). How the interim is interpreted is crucial, for it reveals at another level what I have elsewhere called the political ambivalence that runs throughout Christianity.⁷ Let me focus on 2Thess 3:10, which brings into relief this tension, now in terms of the class dynamics of interpretation: “anyone unwilling to work should not eat” [*hoti ei tis ou thelei ergazesthai mēde esthietō*]. This slogan, presented as an instruction or command from “Paul” when he was with the Thessalonians, is situated in the midst of admonitions to avoid disorder [*ataktōs*], to undertake appropriate labor so as not to burden others (2Thess 3:6–15).⁸ Although the range of suggested interpretations may seem significant,⁹ I am interested in the class dynamics of such interpretation in relation to work specifically.¹⁰ Many commentators would see a criticism of laborers and artisans shirking work in 2Thess 3:10. For example, they may be characterized as “idle beggars” (as seen by outsiders) who take advantage of Christian “brotherly love,” as boisterous and rabble-rousing poor who remained dependent on their rich patrons, or as greedy, lazy and undisciplined [*ataktōs*] unemployed manual laborers who were unwilling to work and looked to wealthy Christians to supply their wants as though the latter were new patrons, or even a congregation that was largely made up of manual laborers, some of whom shirked their responsibilities to the others in terms of working for the

5 Alfeyev 2008: 110.

6 Other later texts also tackle such problems, such as Jude and 2 Peter (Holladay 2005: 735–42).

7 Boer 2014: 125–206.

8 The theme of receiving “reward” for labour appears elsewhere in the gospels (Matt 10:5–10) and Paul's epistles (1Cor 9:1–14; 2 Cor 11:7–11). However, in these cases the reward in question is for the labour of the gospel rather than labour part from activities to spread the new faith.

9 A useful survey may be found in Nicholl (2004: 157–66). The best interpretation remains that of Bartlett (2012), from whom I have drawn much but with whom I disagree in some respects.

10 It matters little in this respect whether the question is framed in eschatological or non-eschatological terms. The connection with eschatological concerns was first made in 1742 by Johann Albrecht Bengel in his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742, vol. 2: 501).

“welfare syndrome’ of the common meal in light of “transformative love-patriarchalism.”¹¹ Class assumptions are very apparent here. Perhaps Nicholl expresses such assumptions best: “It is not difficult to imagine that some from the manual laboring class would have exploited the opportunity to be indolent rather than return to a life of hard manual work,” being all too ready to engage in “leeching” and “sponging.”¹² More generally, 2 Thessalonians 3:10 and the epistle as a whole advocate accommodation with the world as it is, to become respected citizens in existing society.¹³ Theorists and defenders of capitalism have often taken up the verse with a similar agenda: those who do not work are the idle unemployed, the poor who are so due to their own laziness.¹⁴ By contrast, a good citizen of the world has a job, pays taxes and is not to a burden on society. This conservative reading would help usher in Christianity as the religion of empire under Constantine. Many other texts could be marshalled to show how easily Christian hierarchs can slip into seats of power, sharing the space with petty despots and aspiring tyrants.¹⁵

A very different interpretation is also possible: those who shirk honest labor are in fact the rich, members of the ruling classes who undertake no productive

11 Russell 1988; Winter 1989: 309, 1994: 42–60; Aune 1989: 87–90; Nicholl 2004: 166–75; Jewett 1993; Murphy-O’Connor 1996: 117; Gaventa 1998: 128; Weaver 2007. Some go so far as to argue that the reason for abandoning work was “honourable” – to preach the gospel (Barclay 1993; Burke 2003: 213–16).

12 Nicholl 2004: 174; see also Thiselton 2011: 264.

13 Malherbe 1987: 105; Koester 2000: 251. Hans Conzelmann (1961) famously argued that Luke-Acts had a similar agenda. For a recent rearticulation of this position, see Holladay (2005: 238–41).

14 I can provide only a sample of the impressive range here. Max Weber sees it (1904: 159), through the influential Puritan Richard Baxter, as one of the cornerstones of Protestant asceticism and thus of early capitalism. James Smith, upon arriving at the Jamestown settlement in North America in 1908, invoked the verse in order to rectify the colony’s problems (Bartlett 2012: 37). William Graham Sumner (1840–1910), the erstwhile clergyman, anti-socialist and proponent of laissez-faire economics, also quoted the verse (Wilson-Reitz and McGinn 2014: 186). In our own time, ‘shock jocks’ such as Glenn Beck call upon the verse to challenge any form of welfare (Bartlett 2012: 37), as did Margaret Thatcher in her “Sermon on the Mound” before the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 1988. She suggested that 2Thess 3:10 provides the first biblical “principle” for shaping social and economic life: “We are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth.”

15 For example, Tat-siong Benny Liew (1999a,b) argues that the gospel of Mark replicates the “might is right” approach of colonial imperialism by proclaiming that Jesus Christ and not the Roman emperor is the highest authority. Stephen Moore (2006: 45–74) argues that the gospel of John is the gospel of the imperial status quo, intuiting that “Rome will eventually become Christianity and Christianity will eventually become Rome.”

work. Instead, they rely on the labor of others in order to live in the way to which they have become accustomed. It is to hard find this interpretation in early commentaries or indeed by recent critics, and this may be read as an unwitting signal of class assumptions.¹⁶ Perhaps the Bohemian reformer, John Hus (1371–1415), offers the first hint in this direction. In his *On Simony* of 1413, he attacks the medieval church practice of having many holdings so as to generate more income with no labor. Not only is this “trafficking in holy things” contrary to Scripture, but it also destroys the church: “Woe to the canons [...] bishops [...] and prelates who eat, gorge themselves, guzzle, and feast abundantly, but in spiritual matters amount to nothing.”¹⁷ This hint would finally be taken up by none other than the Bolsheviks, especially Stalin.¹⁸ Those who do not work are of course the capitalists, landlords and kulaks, whose relative wealth is extracted from others. To his (and Lenin's initial) interpretation I now turn.

3 Lenin's Interpretation

Lenin was the first to use 2 Thessalonians in such a fashion. In his exegesis of Marx's comments in “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” Lenin observes that in the stage of socialism “bourgeois law”¹⁹ (Marx's phrase) persists in terms of

¹⁶ The only recent work I have been able to find suggests rather weakly that the *ataktoi* and *per-iergazomenoi* (busybodies) are “upwardly mobile social climbers” and “ancient “yuppies” with-in a patronage system that despised labour (Wilson-Reitz and McGinn 2014). Bartlett's otherwise excellent study falls away from such a position by arguing, following Jewett (1993), that the early Christians in Thessalonica were all marginalized people in the “first phase of communism,” in which the difficulty of finding work meant that too many relied on the *agape* feast.

¹⁷ Hus 1953: 247. See also Calvin (1851: 355–56), who writes of the monks and priests as “lazy drones” whose “only religion is to be well stuffed, and to have exemption from all annoyance of labour.” Among the church ‘fathers,’ only Tertullian and John Chrysostom threaten to come close. Tertullian writes: “Each one should work with his own hands for a living.” Indeed, “[l]et the Church stand open to *all* who are supported by their hands and by their own work” (Roberts and Donaldson 1867–1873, vol. 3: 63; vol. 5: 63). As for Chrysostom (1889: 394), he observes in *Homily 5*, “To pray and fast, being idle, is not the work of the hands.” Notably, Augustine tends to restrict such precepts to monks, especially in his *On the Work of Monks* (1886).

¹⁸ It is pertinent that Hus, the reformer before Luther, was to become a pre-revolutionary hero in communist Czechoslovakia.

¹⁹ “Bourgeois law” is Marx's phrase, which Lenin seeks to explicate. For Lenin, of course, full communism meant the withering away of the state such that the continued presence of some forms of the state were seen as bourgeois relics. Stalin would later begin to redefine the state itself under socialism.

regulation of the allocation of labor and products. In this context, the “socialist principle, ‘He who does not work must not eat’ [*Kto ne rabotaet, tot ne dolzhen est*], is already realised”.²⁰ As Bartlett points out,²¹ Lenin removes the important dimension of willingness [*thelei*] to work from 2 Thessalonians 3:10, and he adds the obligatory *dolzhen*, must not or ought not (eat). Another socialist principle is closely related: “An equal amount of products for an equal amount of labour.”²² Shortly after, Lenin quotes this biblical text once again when addressing a crowd of workers in Petrograd. The context was the grain shortage of 1918, brought about by the destruction of the transport network by the First World War and the White Armies in the ‘civil’ war. Lenin accuses the bourgeoisie of disrupting the fixed prices, profiteering and resorting to bribery and corruption in order to undermine the power of the workers. By contrast, the “prime, basic and root principle of socialism” is:

“He who does not work, neither shall he eat [*kto ne rabotaet, tot da ne est*]”. “He who does not work, neither shall he eat” – every toiler understands that. Every worker, every poor and even middle peasant, everybody who has suffered need in his lifetime, everybody who has ever lived by his own labour, is in agreement with this. Nine-tenths of the population of Russia are in agreement with this truth. In this simple, elementary and perfectly obvious truth lies the basis of socialism, the indefeasible source of its strength, the indestructible pledge of its final victory.²³

This slogan – without the obligatory *dolzhen* – was plastered throughout cities, towns, and villages during the dire situation of the ‘civil’ war and its food shortages. Interpreted in the immediate situation, it meant state control of grain supplies and an absolute ban on private hoarding and trading; strict registration

²⁰ Lenin 1917a: 472, 1917b: 94.

²¹ Bartlett 2012: 37. Bartlett’s is the only analysis by a biblical scholar that connects Lenin’s interpretation with 2 Thessalonians, although he does not discuss Stalin. Menken (1994: 135–6) notes Stalin’s usage, but curiously suggests it is among a range of subsequent distortions of the text. Despite the plethora of Russian language texts that mention the text, very few note its biblical origins (Dubrovin 2015: 82). As for Soviet specialists, none recognise the importance of Lenin’s and Stalin’s engagements with this text. Even Filtzer’s careful studies (1986, 2004) of labour fail to mention it. Guins and Wilson-Reitz and McGinn mention, with no further comment, its appearance in the 1918 and 1936 constitutions, Fitzpatrick mistakenly attributes it to Marx and Krausz calls it a simplified principle of “ethical socialism” (Guins 1954: 150; Fitzpatrick 2000: 180; Krausz 2005: 239; Wilson-Reitz and McGinn 2014: 186). It is not uncommon to find treatments of the constitutions failing to discuss these biblical statements at all (Siegelbaum and Sokolov 2000: 158–206).

²² Lenin 1917a: 472, 1917b: 94.

²³ Lenin 1918a: 391–2; 1918b: 357–8.

of grain and efficient transport to deliver to places in need, and a “just and proper distribution of bread” among all citizens, which did not favor the rich.²⁴ The last point in particular reinforces the point that the ones not working were the old capitalists and the bourgeoisie, as they did not engage in productive labor, and it was high time they did so.²⁵ As I pointed out earlier, this distinctive interpretation has a potential perhaps in Jan Hus but is otherwise original to Lenin. Let me pick up Lenin's comment that this biblical text embodies the “prime, basic and root principle of socialism” [*pervoe, osnovnoe, korennoe nachalo sotsializma*]. This is a rather stunning observation, basing the stage of socialism on a biblical principle. At the same time, Lenin is quite clear concerning the nature of socialism: “But this is not yet communism.”²⁶

4 Stalin's Interpretation

Stalin would make much greater use of 2 Thessalonians 3:10 for defining socialism.²⁷ Already in 1920 he connects the text with voting. Only working people should have the right to elect other workers to the Soviets, since they are, after all, Soviets of the working people: “We in Russia believe that he who does not work,

²⁴ Lenin 1918a: 392; 1918b: 358.

²⁵ The biblical text also featured in a famous debate between Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Enlightenment, and Metropolitan Vvedensky, the leader of the Renovationist movement in the Russian Orthodox Church. Vvedensky observes: “When you say you are for the principle of work, I remind you of the slogan, ‘he who does not work shall not eat.’ I have seen this in a number of different cities on revolutionary posters. I am just upset that there was no reference to the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Thessalonians, from where the slogan is taken” (Vvedensky 1925: 193).

²⁶ Lenin 1917a: 472, 1917b: 94.

²⁷ On this matter, Stalin follows and develops Lenin's interpretation. I leave aside the continued debate as to whether Stalin continued faithfully in the Marxist, if not Bolshevik, tradition or whether he broke with some or all of its major features. On the former, some argue for such continuity as a way to denigrate Marxism, assuming that Stalin realizes the grave evil of Marxism itself (Kolakowski 1978: 1–44, 91–105, 141–66; Walicki 1995: 398–424; Rees 1998; Mawdsley 2003: 5–10). Others argue for continuity without such an agenda, simply pointing out that Stalin and indeed Bukharin were more orthodox (Burnham 1945; Akhminov 1970; Chalidze 1981; Meyer 1981; Von Laue 1981, 1983; Narayanswamy 1986; Lynch 1993; Van Ree 1998, 2005). As for breaking with the tradition, some suggest that Stalin distorted or simply abandoned Marxism for various reasons, whether Russification, pragmatism, historical conditions, or lust for power (Trotzky 1937; Deutscher 1949: 292–344; Wetter 1958: 228–68; Lowenthal 1960; Nove 1962; Leonhard 1974: 95–125; Allworth 1980; Cohen 1977, 1985: 38–92; Golubović 1981; Tucker 1990: 50–8, 319–28, 479–86; Daniels 1993a,b: xxxii, 190; Brandenburger and Dubrovsky 1998; Krausz 2005: 237, 239).

neither shall he eat;” moreover, “[y]ou must declare that he who does not work, neither shall he vote.”²⁸ Yet, the 1930s saw the greatest use of the text, especially in preparation for the Stalin Constitution of 1936. It arose in the context of the socialist offensive, with its massive industrialization and collectivism drives, the realization of the ‘affirmative action’ program in relation to nationalities²⁹ and the emerging Red Terror – all necessarily connected.³⁰ It was also the time when the claim was made repeatedly that socialism had been achieved in the Soviet Union.³¹

Article 12 of the constitution reads: “In the USSR work is a duty and a matter of honour for every able-bodied citizen, in accordance with the principle: ‘He who does not work, neither shall he eat’” [*kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est*].³² The text is a direct quotation from Lenin’s version of the saying from 1918, rather than his earlier and more forceful version of 1917.³³ The text is accompanied by scant interpretation in the constitution itself, except for the fact that the constitutions were designed as a statement that the workers of peasants were now in control. In order to see how Stalin interpreted the biblical slogan, I need to consider some writings published around the time of the constitution.

A significant step appears a few years earlier, in 1933 and as part of the lead-up to the constitution. Here, Stalin seeks to answer the question: If we are living under socialism, why do we have to toil [*trudit’sia*]? In the catechetical style that he developed, he replies that such talk is fundamentally wrong. It is the “philosophy of loafers and not of honest working people.”³⁴ But what does he mean by “loafers” [*lodyrei*]? The word evokes connotations of idlers, slackers and bums, with distinct echoes of *ataktōs* and *ataktōi*, living in a disorderly and idle fashion from 2Thess 3:6–11.³⁵ They are – and he credits Lenin for such

28 Stalin 1920a: 420, 1920b: 405. Indeed, in the 1920s, the term *netrudovoi element* [non-working element], was a neologism that entered into popular parlance (Shternshis 2006: 203).

29 I follow Martin (2001: 17), who translates *polozhitel’naia deiatel’not’* somewhat anachronistically as “affirmative action,” although, it is perhaps better translated as “positive activity.” The comparable *pokrovitel’stvennaia politika* means “advancement policy.” It is shorthand for the policies fostered by Stalin, policies that became the basis of the constitution of the USSR.

30 For a full elaboration of this point, see “A Materialist Doctrine of Good and Evil” (Boer 2016).

31 Stalin 1934a: 340, 1934b: 333, 1935a: 75, 1935b: 60, 1936e: 157–63, 1936f: 123–6, 1939a: 372–97, 1939b: 302–21.

32 Stalin 1936a: article 12, 1936b: stat’ia 12.

33 It also differs from the version that had appeared in the 1918 constitution of the RSFSR: “*Ne trudiashchīsia, da ne est* [he who does not work will not eat]” (RSFSR 1918a: article 18, RSFSR 1918b: stat’ia 18).

34 Stalin 1933a: 256; 1933b: 249.

35 The Synodal version of the Russian Bible has the adverb *beschinno* for the Greek *ataktōs*, which adheres to the strict sense of “disorderly.” However, the connotative connection or semantic overlap with *lodyr’*, loafer or idler, is very close.

an interpretation – both the former exploiters and those who do not enthusiastically support the new socialist project. The former we have met, in terms of those who do not work for themselves but compel others to work for them. A little later, in the *Short Course*, Stalin would point out that this group had now been compelled to work, or at least those who become – willingly or otherwise – part of the socialist project.³⁶ The latter, however, form a new category: they too “loaf and want to live at the expense of others.” They are the ones who drag their feet, who passively and actively resist the socialist offensive. They do not want to work conscientiously [*trudilis' chestno*], “for themselves, for the community.” These slackers are no better than the former exploiters and the biblical slogan also applies to them: “He who does not work, neither shall he eat” [*kto ne truditsia, tot ne est*].³⁷ This new category was in many respects created by the intensity of the socialist offensive of the 1930s, which turned the Soviet Union into a modern economic superpower in a breathtakingly short period of time. Many enthusiastically threw themselves into the new project, but many were those who did not, finding themselves left behind and opposing (passively or actively) the project itself. These are the ones Stalin has in mind with his second category of the ones who do not work.

Two further points are worth noting concerning this text by Stalin. First, his use of *truditsia* (*trudit'sia*) may seem innocuous here, for it has largely the same meaning as Lenin's use of *rabotaet* (*rabotat'*). The semantic fields are close: the former means to toil over, labor and work, while the latter means to work, function, be open and operate. However, Stalin's text is closer to the official Synodal version of the Bible from 1876, which he would have been familiar with from his theological studies. It reads, “*esli kto ne khochet trudit'sia, tot i ne esh'*.”³⁸ While both *trudit'sia* and *rabotat'*, along with their respective nouns and adjectives, were used in the party literature and government announcements, *rabotat'* was the favored term, along with *rabotnik* [worker]. Stalin's slight shift here may well indicate a more biblical tenor to his use of the slogan, especially in light of the fact that he uses *trudit'sia* heavily in the lead-up to his quotation of the biblical verse (as I have indicated) and indeed favors it in his later citations of the verse.

Second, the use of this text may be seen as a crucial signal of what can be called the delay of communism. When it became apparent that communism would not arrive any time soon, the Bolsheviks introduced the distinction between socialism

³⁶ Stalin 1938a: 229, 1938b: 219.

³⁷ Stalin 1933a: 256, 1933b: 249.

³⁸ And indeed closer to the 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR, which reads, using the present principle: “*Ne trudiashchii'sia, da ne est*” (1918b: stat'ia 18).

and communism, building on Marx's brief comments on the two phases of communism from "Critique of the Gotha Programme."³⁹ Stalin too would eventually adopt the distinction, especially in reply to a question from the first American Labour Delegation.⁴⁰ Asked about the nature of communist society, Stalin replies with the classic definition: collective ownership of the means of production; free associations of workers rather than the state and classes; a planned high-technology economy; the end of antitheses between town and country and between agriculture and industry; the ability-needs slogan; the flowering of art and science; and true individual freedom. But – Stalin points out – all this is still in the future, so what is needed now is that workers should "march towards socialism, and still more to communism."⁴¹ Indeed, socialism would become an "entire historical era" [*tseľiu istoricheskuiu époxu*] distinct from communism, albeit full of struggle and conflict.⁴² However, by the mid-1930s he began to claim that the new era of socialism had been achieved after the socialist offensive of the 1930s. These claims appear in the constitution of 1936, in his reflections on the constitution and in the infamous *Short Course* that appeared a couple of years later.⁴³ In these cases, 2Thess 3:10 becomes the hallmark of achieved socialism. It features in a list of the principles or pillars of socialism, which now include some features of communism: common ownership of the instruments and means of production; abolition of exploiting classes and of the gap between rich and poor; full employment; the right to education, rest and leisure; and work as both an obligation and honorable duty: "He who does not work, neither shall he eat [*kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est*]."⁴⁴

The interim state, socialism, had become the norm and in this norm 2Thess 3:10 was now in effect. In doing so, Stalin and the Bolsheviks drew upon a slogan from a key biblical text concerning the delay of the Parousia. The connection is far from coincidental, not merely because of Stalin's extensive theological training, but also because 2 Thessalonians has been a key text in Russian Orthodox exegesis. Here we find a powerful connection: the delay of the Parousia is translatable with the delay of communism. The interim created by the delay, the time in between, was to be for those who put in an honest day's work.

³⁹ Marx 1875a: 87, 1875b: 15; Lenin 1917c: 84–5, 1917d: 179–80, 1917a: 464–79, 1917b: 86–102, 1919a: 284, 1919b: 33.

⁴⁰ Stalin 1927a: 139–41, 1927b: 133–5.

⁴¹ Stalin 1927a: 140, 1927b: 134. At the seventeenth party congress in 1934, he speaks of "the first stage of communism, i.e. the socialist stage of development" [*pervoï stadii kommunizma, – sotsialisticheskoi stadii razvitiia*] (Stalin 1934a: 349–50; 1934b: 343).

⁴² Stalin 1924a: 115, 1924b: 111–2; see also Stalin 1927a: 100, 1927b: 95.

⁴³ Gusev's PhD thesis (2003) offers a detailed and careful study of the *Short Course*.

⁴⁴ Stalin 1936e: 166, 1936f: 128, 1938a: 126, 229, 1938b: 122, 219.

5 From Each According to his Ability, to Each According to his Work

I now turn to the other biblical verse, or rather its gloss in the 1936 constitution: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his work” [*ot kazhdogo po ego sposobnosti, kazhdomu – po ego trudu*].⁴⁵ I suggest that this principle is a reinterpretation of Acts 4:32 and 35 in light of 2Thess 3:10. How so? The texts of Acts reads: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common [...] They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” The biblical context contains a brief account of early Christian communism, in which everything was held in common and no-one had private possessions (see also Acts 2:44–45).⁴⁶ Everyone would put whatever wealth they had into the common property and then it was distributed according to need. I do not wish to go into the long history of the various interpretations of this passage, save to point out that Acts 4:32 and 35 eventually became a socialist slogan, “from each according to ability, to each according to need” – found in the writings of Marx, Engels, and frequently in Lenin and Stalin.⁴⁷

Yet, the Soviet Constitution of 1936 does not use this version of the slogan. Instead, it has “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work [*trudu*].” The new version is crucial, for it marks the stage of socialism in contrast to communism, of recompense based on work in contrast to need. Stalin makes the distinction quite clear on a number of occasions from the 1930s onwards: in a discussion with Emil Ludwig; an address to the first conference of Stakhanovites; in his report to the seventeenth congress of 1934; in an interview

⁴⁵ Stalin 1936a: article 12, 1936b: stat’ia 12.

⁴⁶ The initial proposal for early Christian or ‘heterodox’ communism appears in the work of Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, although they argue that it was a communism of consumption, not production, and thereby bound to fail (Kautsky 1908a: 171–83, 1908b: 347–73, 1895–1897: 25–49; Luxemburg 1905a,b; Boer 2014: 198–205).

⁴⁷ The current form of the slogan appears first with Louis Blanc: “*de chacun selon ses facultés, à chacun selon ses besoins*” (1851: 92), although the principle can be traced back through socialist circles in other forms (Bowie 1971: 82). I am not the first to make the connection with Acts 4 (Berman 2001: 151–2), but I go far beyond a brief acknowledgement to focus on the variation on the slogan for socialism. Biblical commentators typically water down the text of Acts 4:32–5, in terms of an idealised generalization that may indicate some sharing in the context of social welfare arrangements, or as a benign ethos of community sharing that had much in common with its Hellenistic context (Esler 1987: 186; Barrett 1994: 251–6; Marguerat 1996: 165–6; Talbert 2005: 47–9).

with Roy Howard from Scripps-Howard newspapers in the US; and in his extensive reflections on the constitution. They all make basically the same point: in both socialism and communism one was to contribute according to ability, but under socialism one would receive articles for consumption “not according to his needs, but according to the work he performs for society [*obshchestvabe*].” The reason is that the cultural and technical level of workers is not yet high enough and production is not yet sufficient for open distribution according to need. Moreover, certain inequalities continue under socialism, not in terms of unemployment, exploitation and oppression of minorities, but in terms of what one receives in return for the quality and quantity of one’s labor. By contrast, when these factors have developed sufficiently and when wage differentiation has been overcome under communism, one receives items for consumption “not according to the work he performs, but according to his needs as a culturally developed individual.”⁴⁸ However, note the two crucial qualifications: it is not to be any type of work but work for society or the community [*obshchestvabe*]; and one’s needs are defined in terms of being the cultural needs for human development that one may have [*potrebnostiam kul’turno razvitogo cheloveka, kotorye u nego imeiutsia*].

For these reasons, the 1936 constitution was based on the socialist principle of work rather than need, for communism had not yet been achieved.⁴⁹ Now we can see how the socialist principle of “to each according to work” arose: it was the result of the conjunction of the biblical texts from 2 Thessalonians and Acts 4. The latter may speak of distribution according to need, but the former speaks of eating in recompense for work. So this text from 2Thess 3:10 – “anyone unwilling to work shall not eat” – becomes the interpretive frame through which Acts 4 is read. This connection was made explicit in the *Short Course* from 1938. Stalin invokes the biblical slogan from 2Thess 3:10 as the principle of socialism in which the “goods produced are distributed according to labor performed.”⁵⁰ This is clearly an echo of the slogan, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work.” Not only does one need to work in order to eat, but one also works according to ability and is recompensed in light of the work done. It is for good reason that the gloss on Acts 4:32 and 25 and text from 2 Thessalonians 3:10 appear side by side in the constitution of 1936.

48 Stalin 1935c: 92, 1935d: 81; see also Stalin 1934a: 362, 1934b: 355, 1936c: 141–2, 1936d: 108–9, 1951, 1952a: 272, 275; 1951–1952b: 202, 205. The distinction first appears, albeit briefly, in the interview with Emil Ludwig (Stalin 1931a: 120; 1931b: 118).

49 Stalin 1936e: 164–5, 1936f: 127.

50 Stalin 1938a: 126, 1938b: 122.

The conjunction and creative reinterpretation of both biblical texts became key features in the effort to define the new stage of socialism, in contrast to a delayed communism. Stalin would take this definition much further: in terms of the dialectical diversity and unity of languages and cultures; the intensification of class conflict even in the context of achieved socialism; the doctrine of socialism in one country as never being entirely secure in light of capitalist encirclement; the strengthening of the state as the basis for the state's withering away; and even what may be called proleptic communism, in which the communism to come acts creatively on the present under socialism. All these are worthy topics for future analyses concerning the Stalin's potential theoretical contribution to the dialectical space that opens up with the era of socialism.

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