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Reflections on the Origin of Some Letters in the Glagolitic Alphabet, part 2

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REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF SOME LETTERS IN THE GLAGOLITIC ALPHABET, (part 2)

Gerald Cohen

INTRODUCTION

The Glagolitic alphabet of the early Slavs was devised by Saint Cyril (birth name: Constantine), who together with his brother Methodius was sent in 862 by the Byzantine Emperor to teach Christianity to the Slavs of Moravia. Prince Rastislav of that country had requested such a mission, evidently in an effort to lessen the political influence of the Franks from whom he had earlier sought support. The two brothers complemented each other in their talents – Cyril as a scholar and Methodius as an administrator.

My interest in Glagolitic was stimulated by my Columbia University graduate-school professor, the late George Shevelov, who mentioned in a lecture ca. 1964 that someone (I no longer remember who) had very interestingly explained the similarity of I (I) and S (S) as due to their being the first two letters of *Isus* (Jesus). I later noticed (and I don't claim originality) that the similarity of Glagolitic X (X) and R (R) may be connected with their being the first two letters in *Xristos* (Christ). And Schenker (1995: 168) notes that A (first letter; A) might be an image of the cross.

These letters when considered together indicate that Cyril might have brought some Christian symbolism into his new alphabet, which in turn raises the question whether he did so with any other letters.

For example, Glagolitic sh (pronounced 'sh') is clearly borrowed from Hebrew, but note the three vertical lines. Would they not have reminded Cyril of the Trinity, and might that not have played a role in his selecting sh for his alphabet?

Similarly, I and S might have also symbolized the Trinity (three straight lines of the triangle representing 'three' and the circle represent-

ing unity). By incorporating some Christian symbolism into the alphabet, Cyril would help reinforce the religious messages he was trying to

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convey; the readers might be reminded of the Trinity each time they saw one of the letters that symbolized it.

And if the letter for R (looks like an upside down Greek letter *rho*) really did represent the upside-down crucifixion of Saint Peter, Peter's act of profound reverence for Jesus might come to mind each time a reader saw the letter in text. Saint Peter himself had requested the manner of his crucifixion, since he considered himself unworthy to die the same way Jesus did.

The present article is presented very much as reflections, almost in the spirit of thinking out loud. And, of course, any errors are entirely my own responsibility.

GLAGOLITIC LETTER FOR THE SOUND ‘SH’: Ш;
SIGNIFICANCE OF ITS SHAPE FOR CHRISTIAN
MISSIONARY/TEACHER CYRIL

The Glagolitic letter Ш (named *sha* and pronounced like English ‘sh’) is the only one which Cyril borrowed from Hebrew (שׁ). As I mentioned in Cohen 2008 and 2019, he likely saw this letter with its three vertical lines as being useful to represent the Trinity, but I overlooked something important there, viz. the bottom line of the letter, which unites the three vertical lines. ‘Three’ is of course important for the concept of the Trinity, but so is oneness; and oneness in the Hebrew letter is provided by the horizontal line at the bottom. Cyril likely saw this letter as symbolic of the Trinity and therefore worthy of being incorporated into his new alphabet.

Incidentally, note also the letter *shta* שׁט , which differs from *sha* only by its circle below. In the letters שׁ (I) and שׁ (S), where the circle appears together with a triangle, we seem to deal once more with the Trinity (3 sides of a triangle and the unity of a circle). So if a circle does represent unity (rather than merely being ornamental), we would see in *shta* a reinforcement of the notion of the Trinity: three vertical lines united by the horizontal line and reinforced by the unity of the circle below. And as mentioned already in Cohen 2008 (but not original with me), the similarity of Glagolitic שׁ and שׁ is very likely connected with their appearance in *Isus* (Jesus).

POSSIBLE PARALLEL: TRINITY SYMBOLISM IN
GLAGOLITIC ALPHABET (SAINT CYRIL) AND SHAMROCK
(SAINT PATRICK)

Several legends tell how Saint Patrick used the shamrock in his missionary work in Ireland to illustrate the mystery of the Trinity: the three

leaves are distinct and yet part of one plant. Cyril and Methodius likely also faced the task of explaining the Trinity to the Moravians and

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perhaps used the Glagolitic letters with three lines for illustration: The lines are distinct and yet part of a single unit.

An Internet article summarizes the importance of the shamrock for Saint Patrick, and since I see a possible parallel (*mutatis mutandis*) to the work of Cyril and Methodius, I'm reprinting it here:

(<http://catholichotdish.com/the-pastors-page/saint-patrick-the-shamrock-and-the-trinity/>)

‘Saint Patrick, The Shamrock, and the Trinity’

‘The shamrock is a symbol both for the Holy Trinity and St. Patrick (389-461). The shamrock is a clover plant with a yellow flower and leaflets made up of a stem with three small green leaves. The plant is very common and widely distributed throughout Ireland.

‘St. Patrick was a zealous missionary to the Irish, a people who upon his arrival in 432 had heard little or nothing of Jesus and his gospel. St. Patrick was an energetic traveler, a determined evangelizer, and a courageous preacher, and as he canvassed the countryside he was assailed by bitter opponents who threatened his life and undermined his message, but undeterred, he made hundreds and thousands of converts.

‘Whether St. Patrick was speaking to local pagans who knew nothing of the Christian faith, or to neophytes, newly-baptized disciples who were not well-grounded in the truths of the faith, he was faced with the daunting task of explaining profound mysteries such as the Trinity, which are so difficult to understand.

‘There are several popular legends about how St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the mystery of the Trinity. According to one story, St. Patrick went to Connaught where he met two of King Laoghaire's daughters, Ethne and Fedelm. St. Patrick had been unable to persuade the king to convert, but he convinced the king's daughters. During their time of instruction St. Patrick used a shamrock to visualize the mystery of the Trinity, how a single plant with three leaves is analogous to the one Triune God with three separate and distinct Persons (Thurston, H. J., ed., *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, Vol. 1, 615).

‘According to another legend, St. Patrick used a shamrock to help explain the Trinity in a sermon he preached directly to King Laoghaire.

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‘According to a third legend, St. Patrick was traveling and happened upon a number of Irish chieftains along a meadow. The tribal leaders were curious about the Trinity and asked St. Patrick for an explanation. So he bent down, picked a shamrock, and showed it to them, and explained how the three leaves are part of the one plant, and how similarly the three Persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, are part of one Supreme Being.’

GLAGOLITIC LETTER FOR 'DZ': ; MIGHT THE TOP PART REPRESENT THE LILY OF THE VALLEYS?

Glagolitic  ('dz'; name: *dzělo*) is of unknown origin (Schenker (1995: 168), but here is a guess: Might the top part of the letter represent the lily, especially the lily of the valley? The circle with its attached curved line seems remarkably reminiscent of actual lilies with their bowed heads; cf. this picture from the Internet:



As for the triangle in which the lily is planted, I suspect that any design with three straight lines in Glagolitic may symbolize 'three' in the Trinity. So we see several concepts linked in the letter: a lily, the Trinity (or more broadly here: Christianity), and the notion of taking root.

In regard to the lily taking root, perhaps Cyril had Hosea (14:5) in mind:

'I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon.'

I.e., the lily in the Glagolitic alphabet could have been a prediction that Christianity would take root in Moravia firmly and widely ('he shall grow as the lily'; the lily in real life is known to grow and spread rapidly). And the effects of this development would be very beneficial ('I will be as the dew unto Israel').

The phrase 'lily of the valley' appears only in the Old Testament's

Song of Songs (also known as Song of Solomon) 2:1:

‘I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.’

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But the flower receives attention in the New Testament too, e.g.,
Luke 12:25-27:

25: ‘Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?’

26: So if you cannot do such a small thing, why do you worry about the rest?

27: Consider how the lilies grow: They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was adorned like one of these.’

And while appearing in the Old Testament, the Song of Songs has also been given an interpretation within Christianity. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (online) writes:

‘...Among Jews, the allegorical interpretation regards the book as an allegory of God’s love for the Israelites, with whom he has made a covenant. Among Christians, the book is interpreted as describing the covenantal love of Christ for his church. ...’

At least in modern Christian writings, the lily is seen as symbolic for Jesus: purity (symbolized by its striking whiteness), humility (head bowed), very fruitful (one root may put forth fifty bulbs; cf. John 15:8: ‘By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.’), medicinal qualities (cf. Jesus as a healer).

I do not know if the lily was regarded as a symbol of Jesus already in the ninth century, but Cyril was no doubt well aware of the lily and its very favorable qualities. Those qualities alone could have persuaded Cyril and Methodius to use the lily symbolically in their teaching of Christianity to the Moravians.

GLAGOLITIC LETTER  APPEARS UPSIDE DOWN IN 
(Y + NASAL O: /jǫ/)

Remarkably,  also appears elsewhere in the Glagolitic alphabet, but this time it is upside down:  . Whatever the reason, it is likely
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something significant, i.e., Cyril was almost certainly trying to illustrate some important point, but which one?

First, let's see the two letters clearly in enlarged form:



Let's also note at least two cases when Cyril inverted letters in his alphabet.  (I) and  (S) are inverted images of each other likely because of their side-by-side appearance in *Isus* (Jesus). Also, as I suggested in Cohen 2019, the upside down Greek *rho* in Glagolitic  (R) likely symbolizes the upside down crucifixion of St. Peter. The Greek letter *rho* is known to have been borrowed from Phoenician, whose letter for R was originally a picture of a head.

So the upside down appearance of a letter in Glagolitic is best viewed as religiously significant rather than some arbitrary development.

And now for a guess about why  was inverted in  . 1 Peter 1:23-25 says:

‘...You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of unperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and *the flower falls* [italics added], but the word of the Lord remains forever”.’

‘The flower falls’ – Might that flower be the lily, the most beautiful of flowers (‘...not even Solomon in all his glory was adorned like one of these’)? Peter’s passage here is one of death and rebirth (‘You have been born again’); everything perishable shall perish, even that which is

most beautiful, but Jesus is promising something imperishable: eternal life after death.

That message might have struck Cyril as worthy of being highlighted by incorporation into the new alphabet.

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POSSIBLE CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN THE GLAGOLITIC LETTER FOR THE SOUND 'IA':

Schenker (1995: 171) says of Glagolitic  (name: YAT'; pronounced 'ia'): 'Perhaps from epigraphic Greek A alpha.' That's true, but in looking at the Glagolitic letters I have come to suspect the following:

1. Cyril could give a Christian interpretation to letters already in existence in other alphabets, and perhaps also alter them a bit. So even if he were inspired to create  on the basis of Greek alpha (and there is no assurance this was his main motivation here), he may have been primarily interested in having  convey a Christian message.
2. I see any Glagolitic letter with three straight lines as possibly representing the notion 'three' in the Trinity. Cf. in this regard the triangle in  (I) and  (S), with both letters appearing in *Isus* (Jesus).
3. I see the circle in several Glagolitic letters as representing the unity part of the Trinity and therefore regard the circle's purpose as far deeper than being merely an ornamental addition.
4. I also view either the design of three straight lines or the design of a circle as possibly being shorthand for the Trinity and from there symbolizing Christianity as a whole. Of course, the possible relevance of this for  concerns only the three straight lines in the triangle.

With the above considerations in mind I think Cyril may have intended the following symbolism when creating :

The small T-shape in the middle of the triangle represents a crucifixion. The triangle with its three lines represents the notion 'three' in the Trinity, then by shorthand the entire Trinity and then Christianity as a whole. The triangle far outsizes the cross within it, perhaps to emphasize the strength of the religion. The message

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seems to be: Whatever suffering you may endure, Christianity will be there to comfort you and ultimately provide eternal life.

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