CHAPTER SIX

THE CONFLICT OF JUSTICE AND MERCY: ATTITUDES TO THE DAMNED IN APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

I Introduction

In Book V, chapter 5, of The Brothers Karamazov, in which Ivan Karamazov tells his story of the Grand Inquisitor, the following passage forms part of Ivan’s ‘literary introduction’ to the story:

There is for example one minor monastic poem (translated from the Greek, of course), The Virgin among the Damned, which in its descriptive power and daring can be compared with Dante. The Mother of God visits hell and the Archangel Michael acts as her guide. She sees the sinners and their torments. There is by the way one particularly curious category of sinners in a burning lake; some of these have been plunged into this lake and can never escape from it, even God has forgotten these—a conception of remarkable depth and power. The Virgin, devastated and weeping, falls to her knees before the throne of God and begs mercy for all in hell, for all those she has seen there, without favour. Her conversation with God is interesting in the extreme. She begs, she insists, and when God shows her the marks of the nails on the hands and the feet of her son and asks, “How can I forgive his torturers?” she calls upon all the saints, all the martyrs, all the angels and archangels to kneel with her and to plead for mercy for all, without distinction. It ends with her winning from God an annual cessation of tortures from Good Friday to Pentecost, and the sinners from hell thank Him there and then, crying out to Him, “You are just, O Lord, in your judgment of us.”

Dostoevsky has here summarized accurately the contents of a Slavonic version2 of the Greek Apocalypse of the Virgin,3 a work of

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uncertain date, no literary merit, but evidently, to judge by the number of extant Greek manuscripts and versions, very popular. It is one of the least interesting of a series of apocalypses which feature the seer’s prayers for mercy for the damned (see section III below), but Dostoevsky’s use of it shows his awareness that it at least poses a serious issue: that of eschatological justice and mercy, which has been Ivan Karamazov’s own theme in his famous argument about theodicy in the preceding chapter. Although ostensibly Ivan’s account of the apocalypse forms a purely ‘literary introduction’ to the story of the Grand Inquisitor, in reality it also forms a conceptual link between this story and the preceding argument. It takes up the question of eschatological forgiveness for the torturers, which Ivan

only the Greek text published from a Bodleian MS by M. R. James (Apocrypha Anecdota [Texts & Studies 2/3; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893] 107-126). In fact, however, several other, variant texts have been published: C. Gidel, ‘Etude sur une apoclypse de la Vierge Marie,’ Annuaire de l’Association pour l’encouragement des études grecques 5 (1871) 92-113 (Paris MS Gr. 390); A. Vassiliev, Anecdota Graeca-Byzantina (Moscow: Imperial University Press, 1893) xxi-xxv, 125-134 (a Rome MS, with variant readings from a Vienna MS); H. Pernot, ‘Descente de la Vierge aux Enfers d’après les manuscrits grecs de Paris,’ Revue des Études Grecques 13 (1900) 233-257 (reprints Gidel’s text, together with three more MSS: Paris Gr. 395, Paris Suppl. Gr. 136, and a MS from Pyrghi). See also, for references to other MSS of the work, C. Tischendorff, Apocalypses apocryphae (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1866) xxi-xxix; James, Apocrypha, 110; Vassiliev, Anecdota, xxxv. See further, chapter 13 below, section I. Dostoevsky’s account does not correspond precisely to any one of these published Greek texts, which vary considerably. But each of the elements of his account is found in at least one of them: the sinners in the lake whom God forgets are in James §23; God’s inability to forgive the Jews who inflicted the wounds of persecution is in Pernot §21 (which shows James §26 to be defective at this point); the period of rest granted to sinners corresponds to that in Pernot §25 (C text) and in Vassiliev (p. 132), better than to that in James §29; other elements are found in all the texts except those which break off before the end of the work.

4 It might be as early as the sixth century or as late as the ninth. Its probable dependence on the Apocalypse of Paul is the only real clue (Himmelfarb, Tours of Hell, 159-160). Other literary relationships (suggested by James, Apocrypha, 111-113) cannot be properly assessed until a critical edition is available. See also the more general considerations which point to the early medieval period, in Gidel, ‘Etude,’ 99-102, 108.

5 Cf. James, Apocrypha, 111: ‘extremely monotonous, quite contemptible as literature, and even positively repulsive in some parts!’


7 There are versions in Armenian, Georgian, Old Slavonic and Rumanian: see chapter 13 below, section I.

8 The unpleasantly anti-Semitic nature of the discussion of this question in the Greek Apocalypse of the Virgin is ignored by Dostoevsky.