



**St. John and Bulgakov:  
The Model of a Parody of Christ**  
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In this essay, first presented in 1977, Pruitt argues that Bulgakov's treatment of the story of Christ is based on the version by St. John. Published in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 15, nos. 2-3 (summer-fall 1981): 312-20.

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Mikhail Bulgakov's account of the trial of Jesus of Nazareth ("Ieshua ha-Notsri") before Pontius Pilate is considerably better-organized and more logical than any of the accounts of that event in the New Testament. The four gospel versions--those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--show a kangaroo court and a vacillating viceroy who yields to the pressure of the mob and then disposes of his own guilt by the cynical act of washing his hands in public. Bulgakov shows an orderly legal procedure conducted by a clear-sighted, cold blooded viceroy whose primary shortcoming is his cowardice, yet who is sufficiently human to realize--too late--that he has committed an injustice for which he must eternally suffer.

The victim of that injustice is a poor itinerant against whom the written testimony of a would-be follower--testimony which the itinerant, Ieshua, claims is erroneous--is used as evidence. The victim of persecution in the gospels is the omnipotent Son of God who voluntarily surrenders his life to redeem man, and whose acts are recorded by four men, none of whom probably witnessed any of them, and whose testimony is used, although suspect, as evidence in favor of his divinity. The attributes of godhood belong in the novel to a figure ostensibly of evil derivation and intent--Woland--who says he knows the truth about Jesus and whom, I feel, Bulgakov intended to serve as a parody of Jesus. Much support of this view can be found in one of the gospels--that according to St. John. This article discusses that relationship.

Concerning the gospels, it should be noted that Biblical scholars commonly hold the Gospel According to St. Mark to have been the first in order of composition (c. AD 71), and therefore closest in time, and so perhaps in accuracy, to the events related. The Markan Gospel was followed by, in order, those of St. Matthew (c. AD 80), St. Luke (c. AD 85), and, finally, St. John (c. AD 100).<sup>1</sup> Examination of these works shows that, while the first three are remarkably similar--so much so that it is not inconceivable that each may be in fact a version of another, a fourth, which preceded them and is now lost--the Gospel of St. John is of a considerably more mystic tone or atmosphere in its relation and evaluation of the life and works of Jesus.

The Christian scholar S. G. F. Brandon states that John's Gospel "reveals a significant awareness of the political factors involved in Jesus' career, and it gives the impression of knowing about incidents not mentioned in the other Gospels."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Jewish scholar and Justice of the Israeli Supreme Haim Cohn notes that "clashes and disputes between Jesus and the Jews, for which the earlier evangelists appear to have possessed no traditions and which are reported in John alone, cannot prima facie be regarded as authentic."<sup>3</sup> The same sorts of arguments abound regarding the merits and shortcomings of all four Gospel tales: in brief, no one knows what happened at Jesus' trial.

Yet it seems to me that it is this account by John, the most "mystical" of the four, that is basic to Bulgakov's telling of the events which occurred on that fourteenth day of Nisan. Indeed, there are many passages in the novel common to all four Gospels: these are the basic occurrences: the arrest, the trial, the conviction, and the crucifixion. But there are several significant parallels between the novel and certain facets of the trial reported only in St. John. And in examining them, one cannot help concluding that Bulgakov chose this account to create a parody of Jesus--not in the figure of Ieshua, but rather in that of Woland.

I have always, ever since the first time I read the novel, been concerned with a question which I then posed myself: Why, at the end of the story of the Master and his beloved Margarita, must the Christ-figure Ieshua ask the devil-figure Woland for the freedom of the suffering Pontius Pilate? If Ieshua was intended to represent the Man-God (and we must assume he was, for he performs a miraculous cure during the interview with

Pilate), why could he himself not have granted that freedom, especially since it was he whom Pilate unjustly persecuted?

It is obvious that those chapters in the novel which deal with Ieshua and Pilate are written as presenting cold, hard fact. They are therefore at odds with the rest of the work--with the Moscow fantasy. Christian tradition has become fact, and the story of Christ's trial and crucifixion reads in a quite straightforward fashion. The Soviet reality of the 1930s has become the fantasy, and reads as such. Fact and legend have changed places. Therefore the omnipotent Son of God must ask a favor of the Prince of Darkness: for if fantasy is fact and fact is fantasy, then the legendary Christ must be presented as less powerful than the adversary whom he overcomes in the Christian tradition. Woland thus becomes a parody of Christ.

As I examined the scriptures to see how the Evangelists showed their conceptions of Jesus of Nazareth, I began to see what would appear to be certain scriptural justification for Bulgakov's reordering of things, and to see what look to be links between Woland and Christ. This justification seems to be primarily St. John's Gospel.

The first example concerns the interview between Jesus and Pilate which is reported by St. John in John 19:10-11: "Pilate therefore said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have the power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."" Bulgakov develops this exchange into the following scene; Pilate begins:

*" [Your life] is hanging by a thread: know that."*

*"You don't think, do you, hegemon, that it is you who hung it?" asked the prisoner. "If you do, you are quite wrong."*

*Pilate shuddered and answered through his teeth: "I can cut that thread."*

*"You are wrong there, too," responded the prisoner. "You must agree, I think, that only he who hung the thread can cut it." <sup>4</sup>*

The parallel is immediately apparent. And this passage may be even more significant in the development of the theme of the redemption of Pilate, as Bulgakov relates it. Jesus' answer, recorded in the Gospel, may be interpreted to mean that Pilate shall not be considered guilty of his crucifixion, since the Procurator was merely acting as the agent by which ancient prophecies were to be fulfilled. This could have shown Bulgakov the possibility of having his Pilate redeemed from eternal torment, after centuries of purgatorial punishment for his participation in the trial. In other words, Bulgakov sees Pilate as a Job, condemned to suffer agonies through no fault of his own, as were the citizens of Stalin's Moscow, but finally given surcease because of the magnitude of his sufferings. It is Woland who gives both the Moscow public, through the magic show, and Pilate respite, either temporary and illusory or permanent and real.

Bulgakov may have been strengthened in this view of Pilate by discovering certain ancient legends about the Procurator. According to these legends, the historical Pilate achieved redemption (and, indeed, sainthood, in the Ethiopian Christian church) because he recognized the Messiahship of Christ and was merely the instrument of God; as such, he therefore could not be held responsible for the crucifixion. <sup>5</sup>

The second example of the influence of St. John on the novel deals with what is surely the most famous and enigmatical of questions. The Gospel account gives the following exchange, in John 18: 37-38: "Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this was I born, and for this have I come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" In the parallel passage in the novel, Ieshua tells Pilate of his belief in the coming "new temple of truth"; Pilate responds: "Why have you, you vagrant, troubled the people in the marketplace with your talk about the truth, about which you can have no notion? What is truth?"<sup>6</sup> Bulgakov seems to believe that the truth hurts--be it the truth about contemporary Moscow, with its persecuted citizenry, or the truth about Pilate, which has condemned him. Illusion frees both: again, Woland is responsible, for he creates the illusion of beauty at the magic show, and allows the release of Pilate--during which Ieshua lies to the Procurator in telling him that those events did not occur. The ancient question recorded by St. John therefore seems to have been once more crucial in the development of the novel.

Another, minor, instance of St. John's reflection in the novel involves John 18:28; only in this passage in the four Gospels do we find it recorded that the priests of the Sanhedrin refuse to enter Pilate's palace for the trial of Jesus, for fear of defiling themselves on the eve of the Feast of the Passover. In the novel, Bulgakov allows the High Priest Caiaphas, who is the only member of the Sanhedrin to see Pilate, to refuse to enter the palace balcony to escape the blazing sun.<sup>7</sup>

This sun and its light, and the moon and its, are constantly present throughout the novel, in the "Moscow" chapters as well as in the "Bible" chapters. The appearances of Ieshua, the references to him, are permeated with light. This, I wish to suggest, reflects the influence on Bulgakov of Holy Writ in general and particularly might derive from St. John's Gospel, where there are many references to Christ as Light. Perhaps the most important of these references is that found in John 8:12, in which Christ is reported as saying of himself, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The opposition of light and darkness are crucial in scripture. The very first image of the first book of the Bible is that of God the Creator saying at the dawn of history, "Let there be light." (Genesis 1:3) This light came out of primordial darkness, and it is often used as a symbol of God. The Psalmist cries (Psalm 27:1), "The Lord is my light and my salvation; of whom, then, shall I be afraid?" The very last book of the Bible, which may have been written by the same John who composed the Gospel, has in its last chapter the following passage: the author, telling in Revelations 22:5 of the blessed city of the redeemed, says that the servants of God who live in that city "shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads, and night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall be their light and they shall reign for ever and ever."

Another facet of this opposition of light and darkness may be observed in that passage in the novel in which Woland tells the Muscovites Berlioz and Bezdomnyi, regarding the trial of Jesus, "The fact of the matter is that I personally was present during all of this. I was on Pontius Pilate's balcony, and in the garden, when he spoke with Caiaphas, and on the rostrum, but only secretly, incognito, so to speak, so I ask you to tell no one a word about that--keep it a strict secret."<sup>8</sup> In what persona was Woland there? The only element present in all three locations (except for Pilate himself, and he is neither Ieshua nor Woland) is light--the blinding, searing, overpowering light of the hot noonday sun. That famous swallow, which many have thought to be Woland's persona, appears only in the first location: on the balcony, during the interview between Pilate and Ieshua. Therefore I wish to suggest that Woland attended the trial not in the guise of the swallow (by the way, I can find references to Satan's assuming many various disguises, but never that of a swallow),<sup>9</sup> but in that of light; and this would indeed be a true incognito, to use Bulgakov's own word, for the Prince of Darkness, one of whose nicknames is "Lucifer."

That light blinds Pilate to his duty of conscience and thus explains his constant preoccupation with light in its many manifestations in the novel.

This use by Bulgakov of the image of light to represent Woland is, I think, but one more step in his apparent preparation of the parody of Christ that is Woland. It is reinforced by several passages in John's Gospel in which devils or demons are mentioned, some of the time directly linking Christ and the devil.

In John 7:19-20, we find recorded the following exchange between Jesus and the Jews: ""Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" The people answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?" In another conversation, St. John reports, in John 8:45-52, the following:

*Jesus said to them, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a father and the father of lies. But, because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I have not a demon, but I honor my father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it and he will be the judge. Truly, truly I say unto you, if any one keeps my word, he will never see death." The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, as did the prophets. Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?"*

Jesus here clearly equates the devil with lying. In the novel we are shown how, at the end, walking down the path of moonlight with the now free Pilate, it is the Jesus-figure, Ieshua, not Woland, who lies, telling the Procurator that the execution never happened. Thus we find another link of parodic nature between Ieshua and Woland, one as directly related to the Gospel According to St. John, and none of the synoptic Gospels, as is the image of light.

In a third conversation, St. John again connects Jesus and the demon. Jesus and the Jews, speaking in John 10:17-21, say as follows, beginning with the Lord: ""For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one may take it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again; this charge I have received from my father." There was a great division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, "He has a demon, and he is mad; why listen to him?" Others said, "These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

St. John also apparently provided Bulgakov with certain support in making the demon Woland the omnipotent secular ruler of Moscow for the duration of his stay there. Here are two examples. In John 14:30, Jesus says, "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of the world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the father commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the father." Further, in John 16:7-15, we have the following words of Jesus:

*It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in me; of righteousness, because I go to the father and you will see me no more; of judgment, because that ruler of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he*

*will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.* <sup>10</sup>

Turning to the novel, we see that it is indeed the devil who is the ruler of the world of Moscow, and is the Spirit of Truth, just as Christ predicted in those words quoted from St. John's Gospel. The Prince of Darkness rules Moscow. He tells Berlioz the truth about Christ. He wields all the power; and in the Russia of the thirties he has gained absolute authority over mankind. This situation has been carried to such a state that the Christ-figure Ieshua cannot himself arrange for the release from torment of his tormentor, as would be expected of the Prince of Peace. He must ask the ruler of the world, Woland, his parody, to grant that release.

In other words, the fallen Lucifer has done just what Christ predicted, in that passage emphasized: he has taken what is Christ's and declared it to the world. As I noted above, the fact has become fantasy and the fantasy, fact. Woland himself is concerned with the point: in his conversation with Berlioz and Bezdomnyi, he asks: "Here's a question that bothers me: if there is no God, then one wants to ask, who controls men's lives and in general the way the world is organized?" <sup>11</sup> Of course he knows the answer: he himself rules.

As the ruler of the earth, as the spirit of truth, Woland performs Christ-like acts. To achieve this situation, Bulgakov has taken some of St. John's linkages between Christ and the devil and turned them around. Instead of calling Ieshua a demon, he makes the demon a Christ. Woland in spite of himself performs what amount to acts of Christian charity throughout the novel; hence the epigraph to the novel, Goethe's "I am a part of that force which ever wills evil and ever works good." Perhaps the major portion of his activity is dedicated to the righting of wrongs. That is most clearly seen in his manipulation of events so as to restore to each other the oppressed Master and Margarita. The course of the love between these two, and its eventual blissful resolution, may I think be viewed as a parody of the expulsion from Paradise suffered by Adam and Eve. But, whereas the spirit of lies--of evil, of knowledge--deprived the first couple of its innocence, we see in ***The Master and Margarita*** the spirit of truth restoring an innocence destroyed by the exigencies of contemporary Soviet society. This restoration by Woland amounts practically to an annulment of sin. Only the Omnipotent can perform such an annulment. Christ came to earth to atone for the sins of mankind; and therefore this act of Woland provides one more parodic link between him and Christ.

Turning from textual parallels, I should like now to examine parallels of structure and style which link ***The Master and Margarita*** and the Gospel According to St. John. Stylistically, St. John's Gospel is written on two planes--the relation of the events of Jesus' life, and the highly symbolic acts of his earthly ministry. The same two-level approach is a major stylistic characteristic of the novel.

The Christian scholar Eric Lane Titus has written:

*Method is of the essence in understanding John's gospel. Its author consistently places one level of meaning against another, just as he places two levels of reality in opposition to each other. He moves from the level of the material to the level of the spiritual. The "sign" is a material vehicle pointing to a "higher" reality beyond itself. Material things, such as wine, bread, water, door, vine, way, etc., are all symbolic of spiritual values. This is a highly intricate and pervasive aspect of the gospel. Taken seriously, it raises the question of the bearing of this method on each and every element of the gospel, including the suprahistorical picture of Christ. Is the Jesus of John's gospel a structure consciously created to set forth in mythological language the true meaning of the incarnation? When that meaning is abstracted from the gospel, it seems to emerge in*

terms of light, life, truth, freedom, and love. These, it seems to me, are the real concerns of John; what he communicates through his structure rather than the structure itself constitutes his interest.<sup>12</sup>

Bulgakov's structuring of the novel appears to parallel this Johannine structure. There is the outward appearance of the results of Woland's visit to Moscow; and there is the hidden result--that which most closely touches these themes of love and life and light and freedom and truth seen in St. John; and all are brought about by the antithesis of the light of John, Christ, which is Woland, the embodiment of the Prince of Darkness.

We might see Bulgakov's Ieshua, too, in John's Christ; Titus describes him in the following manner: "In effect two Jesus figures appear in the fourth gospel. There is the Jesus who appears as a god, and there is the Jesus of the Jews. The latter stands in sharp contrast to John's Logos-Christ. He is a Galilean Jew whose father's name is Joseph; he is a sabbath-breaker; he is a revolutionary; he is an unlettered man; he is demon-possessed; his origin is unknown; he is a sinner; he makes blasphemous claims; he is subject to arrest; and to punishment by death; his reply to the high priest is considered insolent; and he is an evildoer."<sup>13</sup>

The Woland whom we see in the novel may be viewed in the same way as this Christ of St. John. He appears to the people of Moscow as a lawbreaker, a magician, a trickster who comes from unknown parts. Certainly by Soviet standards he is a sinner--witness the miracle of the new clothes at the Variety Theater, which gratifies the citizens' lust for luxury in a society unconcerned with affording that luxury. (Parenthetically, we may view this miracle of Woland's as a parody of Christ's first public miracle, the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, which is also a secular miracle and which is recorded only in St. John's Gospel, where it is mentioned twice--first in John 2:1-11, and then in John 4:46.) Woland makes blasphemous claims (to have been present at the crucifixion). In all these deeds I believe we can see the parody of the Jesus whom the Jews reputedly hated; and this is therefore another link, through St. John, between Woland and Christ.

Why has Bulgakov created such a parody? I would suggest the following as a possible answer. All that is of importance in the Soviet society of the 1930s, when the novel was being written, represents a perversion of Christian values. Man exploits and persecutes man, rather than treating him as his brother. The traditions of Orthodoxy have become the traditions of evil, of atheism, and of that phenomenon which eventually came to be known as "the cult of personality." There are only two righteous people in this entire Garden of Hell: the Master and his beloved Margarita. Their reward is to be cast out of that garden, as the sinning Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden; and the instrument of their removal, their redemption, is the parody of good that is Woland.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

S. G. F. Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), pp. 162-63. These are the traditional datings, and make it rather unlikely that any of the Apostles who wrote were eyewitnesses to the events they describe, or else were describing those events as eyewitnesses but at a removal of at least some forty years and therefore recording with accretions intended to enhance the reputation of their subject. Hence their unreliability, and Bulgakov's making Ieshua fear the inaccuracies of Matthew's parchment. It is interesting to note that, just recently, the controversial Anglican scholar and theologian John A. T. Robinson has made a convincing case that all four gospels were written before AD 70 (none of them mention the sack of the Temple), and that indeed John's was written within ten years of the crucifixion of Christ. (See John

A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976], especially pages 254-311.)

Brandon, p. 125.

Haim Cohn, *The Trial and Death of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 63.

Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita* (Frankfurt/Main: Possev-Verlag, 1969), pp. 36-37. Translations from the Russian used herein are mine.

Brandon, p. 155. I cannot help wondering if Bulgakov based his entire theory of the redemption of Pilate on this one verse, unique to St. John's Gospel.

Bulgakov, p. 34.

*Ibid.*, p. 45.

*Ibid.*, p. 57.

See, for example, Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1939 and 1951).

Emphasis added.

Bulgakov, p. 19.

Eric Lane Titus, "The Fourth Gospel and the Historical Jesus," in *Jesus and the Historian: Written in Honor of Ernest Cadman Caldwell*, F. Thomas Trotter, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 105.

*Ibid.*, p. 105. I have omitted in citing this paragraph Titus's listing of the chapter and verse from St. John in which each characteristic appears.

For an interesting discussion of "Satan" as a parody of God, see E. E. Ericson, Jr.'s "The Satanic Incarnation: Parody in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Russian Review*, 33, No. 1 (Jan. 1974), 20-36. Prof. Ericson bases his discussion on the Glenny translation of the novel.

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