St. John and Bulgakov: The Model of a Parody of Christ*

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).1 Examination of these works shows that, while the first three are re-

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1. 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
markedly similar—so much so that it is not inconceivable that each may be in fact a version of another, a fourth, which preceeded 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." 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." 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

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.)

2. Brandon, p. 125.