An Investigation Into Christian Parallels and Symbolism in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*

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1 Introduction

The Master and Margarita is a novel written by Mikhail Bulgakov between 1928 and his death in 1940. In this time, the novel was edited and rewritten several times. Because of strict censorship under the Stalinist regime, the novel was not published until 1967 (and then only in a heavily censored form), when it was published serially in the magazine *Moskva* and separately as a manuscript. The publisher *Posev* in Frankfurt published the first uncensored version in 1969, but a *zamizdat*[1] version circulated some time prior.

The story shifts between 1930s Moscow and the Jerusalem (Yershalaim) of Pontius Pilate. In the first setting, the mysterious Professor Woland arrives to Moscow's Patriarch's Ponds with his bizarrely dressed valet and ex-choirmaster Koroviev, the overgrown, talking cat Behemoth, the fanged hitman Azazello and the female demonic vampire Hella. Over some days, the entourage wreaks havoc over the corrupt union members of the MASSOLIT union for writers, journalists and bureaucrats. The second setting is explored in four chapters and is connected to the first partly through a conversation between Woland and MASSOLIT chairman Berlioz, and partly as the setting of the (somewhat autobiographical) novel written by the Master, who is introduced to Woland and his companions along with his mistress Margarita. The story in Jerusalem primarily concerns the trial of the historical Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Yeshua Ha-Notsri) and Pontius Pilate's reluctance and abject acceptance concerning the later execution.

Mikhail Bulgakov was born in Kiev in 1891 as one of seven children of a prominent Russion Orthodox professor, essayist and theologian and his wife, a former teacher. Considering this background, it is no surprise that Christian theology may have had an influence on Bulgakov's bibliography. This becomes clear through the Jerusalem chapters, the story being an overt reimagining of the arrest of Jesus Christ, as well as the subsequent trial through the Sanhedrin, sentencing by Pontius Pilate and crucifixion: material mainly known from description in the New Testament Gospels. Of course, this story being only part of the novel and the novel being written in the—officially atheistic—Soviet Union might lead one to consider several other interpretations of the novel.

Among the more obvious established interpretations are the comparisons to Goethe's *Faust* maintained by the likes of Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor (1969), and, similarly,

[1] Secret reproduction and dissemination of forbidden literature in the Eastern bloc during Soviet regime.

those made to Gounod's opera *Faust* by Lowe (1996). One can, however, also look at the novel through the lense of the fairy-tale (Hoisington, 1981), demonology (Wright, 1973), mythicism (Haber, 1975), occultism (de la Cour, 2005) or even Jewish kabbalah (Burmistrov, 2007).

Despite this, the category of interpretations that most attempts fall into remains that of Christianity or any of the other ancient religious ideas and systems which originated from early Christian and Jewish sects, such as Gnosticism, Manichaeism or Bogomilism. In particular, there are also references and parallels to Christianity in its various forms that pervade *The Master and Margarita* even beyond the chapters explicitly centred on Jerusalem.

2 Main body

2.1 Scope

An assumption commonly made about the novel is that of Woland's identity as Satan. This has several reasons, a main one being that ”Woland” along with ”Weiland”, ”Wieland” and ”Voland” are old Germanic names for the devil (Jones, Woolf, & Woolf, 1931; Lakshin, 1968). Supporting evidence for that assumption is also the iconic quote from *Faust I* (Von Goethe, 1808) (Mephistopeheles answering) used as an epigraph for the novel:

> ”Say at last—who are thou?
> ”That power I serve
> Which wills forever evil
> Yet does forever good.”

For brevity's sake, this study will regard Woland and Satan as one—even though it is by no means as obvious as it seems at first glance, or even the only interpretation. The discussion of this has been rigorously explored by several critics, among those Wright (1973) and Ericson (1974) who illustrate the similarities to the Satan depicted in the Old Testament and early rabbinic literature, rather than the generally recognised one, described mainly in the New Testament. This is further supported by Haber (1999) who

also inquires into the historical accuracy of Yeshua and Woland's entourage. Lacking this clarification about the possibility of dualism, through which Satan—"God's prosecuting attorney", (Freehof, 1958)—might be considered a necessary antipole to God, a reader might find it confusing to see Woland defending the existence of Jesus to Berlioz (Rzhevsky, 1971) or being in God's service (Bulgakov, 1966, p. 450).

2.2 Christian Symbolism and Parallels

Following this, we can start to explore the clues hidden in the designated portion of the novel. Beginning with the first chapter, there are some very striking parallels between the death of Berlioz and the traditional death of Jesus. We remember the story commencing in Moscow's Patriarch's Ponds. Intriguingly, there is a Patriarch's Pond in contemporary Jerusalem, located slightly northeast of the original location of Herod's Palace, near Golgotha, and right off the Gabbatha, i.e. the spot where the historical Jesus is said to have begun his *via dolorosa*. Bethea (1982) points out that Berlioz's proverbial *via dolorosa* begins at the homonymic site in Moscow and ends soon thereafter, not with his crucifixion, but with his decapitation by tram.

One may also, like Bolen (1972), argue that Berlioz acts as a parody of John the Baptist. A Soviet Magazine editor and propagandist, he prepares the coming of a new mode of thought—not Christianity, but communism. Additionally, the statement "Berlioz's high tenor rang out in the deserted walk…" (Bulgakov, 1966, p. 6) ironically echoes the biblical description of "the voice of [John] crying out in the desert…" (Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, & Perkins, 2010, Isaiah 40:3). A spiritual (or at least ideological) teacher, he is in fact also, at times, a satire of Jesus. Ironically, the twelve writers who wait for him at the MASSOLIT headquarters Griboyedov House decide to eat without him, satirizing the Last Supper of Jesus and his twelve apostles. During the banquet there, the main topic of discussion is the guest list to the Writers' retreat and summer "paradise" Perelygino[2] at Klyazma. Inevitably, this conjures images of the discussions about Paradise presumably had during the biblical Last Supper.

Briefly considering the (at least physical) death of both Margarita and the Master towards the end of the novel, we can identify a few meaningful clues linking it to both

[2]Presumably a parody of the real Union of Soviet Writers' village Peredelkino, where writers like Boris Pasternak and Ilya Il'f spent productive periods. The word *lygin* is Russian for *lie*.

the Jerusalem chapters and Christian theology in general. Among others, the Falernian wine, now poisoned, that Azazello serves them in order to liberate them from the earthly existential plane was a known favourite of Pilate's. In this sense, one might consider Pilate to have killed not only Jesus but them too, which naturally gives rise to parallels between Jesus and the two protagonists. It is also quite telling that this sequence takes place on a Sunday; in Russian the word for Sunday is воскресенье (*translit.*: voskresenye) which literally means "resurrection day".

Two out of four characters in Woland's entourage share their names, more or less, with classical characters of the Hebraic tradition. The name Behemoth appears in ancient Jewish lore, Genesis and the Book of Enoch, there describing the largest of all land animals, said to have been created on the fifth day. Weeks (1984) emphasises the parallels between the biblical creature's food intake and Behemoth's appetite. She goes on to describe the relationship of Koroviev (Russian корова, *translit.*: korova meaning cow) to the legendary golden calf, as well as the similarities (grantedly: not in name) between Hella and the demon queen Lilith, the legend of whom goes back to Middle Eastern mythology ca. 2400 BCE (where she appears in the archives of a Sumerian king as Lilitu). In 13th century kabbalistic literature, her position as wife of Sammaêl, King of Demons, is elaborated upon. Finally, Weeks details the obvious similarities between Azazello and Azâzêl, the Hebraic demon ("first in order, tenth in command", Charles (1912)) who appears briefly in the Old Testament. According to tradition, these demons shared forbidden knowledge about astrology and metallurgy with mankind after the great flood. Azâzêl was known as a specialist in weaponry and the equivalent of modern-day make-up. Thus, it is no surprise that Azazello throughout the novel is associated with his trusty gun, and that he is the one to give Margarita the cream that turns her into a beautiful witch at the beginning of the second part of the novel.

Fittingly, we close on the superficial similarities between the destruction of Moscow—specifically, the burning of significant locations like Griboyedov House, the Master's apartment and symbolic prison and the puzzling Apartment 50, dwelling of Woland and his retinue—and the devastation of the earth brought on by the biblical Apocalypse, described in the Book of Revelation. These similarities continue to the imagery of Woland's four companions, described in their true forms as sombre knights, each riding a black steed beside Woland over the night sky of Moscow, leaving a trail of havoc

behind. Elucidation of how this is similar to the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is presumably unnecessary.

3 Conclusion

Ultimately, it is clear that *The Master and Margarita* carries references and parallels to Christianity in one or several interpretations, both in the chapters explicitly detailing the crucifixion of Jesus and in those centred on Moscow and the plot there. Not only does the background of both the author and the milieu in which the novel was written hint at such an interpretation, but the characters and story motifs can be directly and logically linked to mainly archaic Christian motifs, but also to some extent to parts of e.g. the New Testament. Despite this, it is worth restating that the plethora of discourse regarding other interpretations—whether Faustian, occult, mythic or otherwise—shows that a Christian interpretation is in no capacity the only reasonable or conceivable one.

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