Mikhail Bulgakov's Jesus in *The Master and Margarita*

Graeme Watts

Introduction

Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) was by any account an extraordinary person who in some ways has almost become the stuff of legend. First, he had the distinct misfortune as a novelist and playwright to choose to remain in Russia after the 1917 revolution where he attempted to make an idiosyncratic and unwelcome contribution to that country's post-revolutionary theatre and literature. As a consequence, Bulgakov was to become a prime target of the repressive Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and for many years was consigned to the wilderness of Russian literary society. Under fierce, even vicious, criticism, his works were consistently rejected for publication but in stubborn response, and refusing to be broken by such rejection, Bulgakov prepared for possible publication a stream of novels and plays. Through the rather bizarre instigation of no less than Joseph Stalin, Bulgakov was to find work as a minor functionary at the Moscow Art Theatre. However, the last ten to fifteen years of his life were spent in a state of creative frustration, living barely above the poverty line, suffering increasing ill-health, all of which was to lead to his early death in March 1940.

In what was to subsequently prove to be his greatest work, his novel *The Master and Margarita,* not unlike that of its author, also had a checkered history. Bulgakov began this novel in 1928 in what was to prove to be a long and tortuous process. This first attempt Bulgakov consigned to the fire but was to again take up the task, writing and rewriting in secret at night, producing no less than four extensive revisions. At the same time Bulgakov was under no illusion as to the possible publication of this novel.

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To a fellow writer he wrote as late as March 1937:

> I am convinced over the past few years of the fact that not a single line of mine will ever be printed or staged. I am trying to develop an attitude of indifference towards this fact … At the moment I am on a job that is entirely senseless from the point of view of everyday life—I am doing a final revision of my novel *The Master and Margarita*.[1]

With no complete definitive version finalized, Bulgakov ceased writing some four weeks before his death leaving unfinished sentences and many loose ends still awaiting closure. From the final text and with notes preserved by his widow a heavily censored version of *The Master and Margarita* was published in two parts in the *Moskva Magazine* (no. 11, 1966 and no. 1, 1967). Pirated versions subsequently appeared in Paris (1967) and Frankfurt (1969) but in the Soviet Union a complete version was not published until 1973. Amongst the early English translations that by Mirra Ginsberg, published in 1967 and subsequently revised in 1995, is commended for its lively and spirited tone and in capturing the humour of the novel.[2] Unfortunately, this translation is also based on a heavily censored version of the Russian text resulting in some significant omissions with, for example, two-thirds of chapter fifteen deleting all of Nikanor Ivanovich's dream and a quite crucial omission in chapter twenty-five where Ginsberg fails to include an important quote from Jesus regarding the sin of cowardice. These, and other omissions, were largely corrected in a 1997 translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky[3] and, unless otherwise specified, this publication serves as the basis for quotations in this paper.

The Novel and its Principal Characters

With such a history of changes and revisions, it is to Bulgakov's credit that *The Master and Margarita* continues to attract serious attention to the present day. It is a difficult and complex novel which demands more than a

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[1] J. A. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: Michael Bulgakov. A Life in Letters and Diaries* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd. 1991), p. 284.

[2] Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, translated by Mirra Ginsberg (New York: Grove Press, 1995).

[3] Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Pocket Books/Random House, 2016 [1977]).

single reading with as yet no ready consensus as to its overall theme or interpretation of the principal characters. It is almost as if the novel itself is a narrative in search of an ending or, more likely, a puzzle inviting a solution.

The general structure of the novel itself can be simply summarized. Satan and his retinue descend upon Moscow and create havoc amongst the citizenry. The narrative of a failed author, the Master, and of his lover, the spirited Margarita, unfolds as a somewhat veiled satirical attack of soviet society as well as a tale of love and redemption. Placed intermittently throughout the novel is an account of the trial and execution of Jesus with particular emphasis on the moral failure of Pontius Pilate. Notwithstanding this apparent simplicity the novel unfolds with a challenging complexity and ambiguity which has encouraged readers to feel free to continue scrutiny of the text and to offer fresh comment and interpretation.

This paper first focusses appropriate attention on the characters from whom the novel takes its name, a writer who is called the Master and his lover Margarita. Equal, if not more, critical attention is warranted regarding Woland, the ever-present Satan figure. Pontius Pilate looms large throughout but it is, however, the primary purpose of this paper to focus attention on the depiction of Jesus and to argue that there are grounds for concluding that in his novel Bulgakov offers a fresh and idiosyncratic interpretation of this figure. This focus calls for some care in detaching references to Jesus from the influence of an array of strong characters and from intertwining plots and subplots, all of which could effectively camouflage his place in the novel.

With the novel's title itself perhaps prompting as a clue to its main theme, the characters of the Master and Margarita invite obvious attention. The couple meet as if by chance, fall instantly in love and enjoy a blissful existence as the Master completes a novel. Typical of his inclination to acquiesce with life as it unfolds, the Master eloquently recalls their first meeting: "I crossed the road to her side … and suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, understood that all my life I had loved precisely this woman."[4]

Although the Master shares the title to the novel, Bulgakov is by no means in a hurry to introduce him into the narrative, indeed waiting until well into the novel before he appears in a chapter appropriately titled 'The

[4] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 170.

Hero Enters'. It transpires that a novel which the Master had written concerning Pontius Pilate had been subject to fierce public criticism with resulting personal humiliation for its author. This harsh and unremitting experience drove the Master to despair to the point of consigning his novel to the flames (as had Bulgakov) and in a chaotic mental state seeking refuge in a psychiatric clinic. This experience of the Master has promoted a common interpretation of the novel as a satirical expose of the tyranny of the Soviet estate. In this novel as in Stalin's regime censorship is ever present spreading its tentacles through all levels of society. The experience of the Master being victimised for stepping outside the accepted bounds of the Moscow literary association (Massolit) could be easily taken as a direct parallel to Bulgakov's own experience with the RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers). It is hardly co-incidental that the Master's first appearance in the novel is as a patient in a psychiatric clinic, the fate in Stalinist Russia of many who fell foul of the State. So complete is the Master's re-education in the sanatorium that even though he has the means to escape he has no wish to do so.[5]

Coupled with references to secret police, people suddenly disappearing, non-conformists routinely consigned to a lunatic asylum, graft and corruption, privileges for an elite few and so on, it is easily appreciated how the novel has been interpreted as a satire of Bulgakov's Soviet society. Lewis Bagby is typical of those who hold this view: "this novel expresses the author's moral outrage at the Soviet system of government, its bureaucracy and petty Gogolion mankind which grinds the bureaucratic machinery to a halt."[6]

For her part, Margarita does not make an entrance until even later in the novel. Her major appearance is where, with courage and a display of selfless love, she agrees to be transformed into a witch. She then proceeds to preside over a satanic ball with the hoped-for reward that the Master will be transported from the confines of his clinic to her side. Not only is she successful in this regard but the Master's novel is magically restored by Woland with the sardonic quip "manuscripts don't burn."[7] Some readers have been quick to identify Margarita's readiness to make whatever

[5] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 161.
[6] Lewis Bagby, 'Eternal Themes in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*', *The International Fiction Review*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1974), p. 27.
[7] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 358.

sacrifices may be necessary to restore the Master to his previous life style as not only a shining example of sacrificial love but also of one attaining a heightened level of wisdom and spiritual insight.

As significant as is the portrayal of these lovers, no reading of the novel can fail to note the dominant role played by the character Woland who occupies centre stage from the beginning of the novel to its end. It was without hesitation that the Master unambiguously identified Woland as Satan.[8] Bulgakov, however, does not offer any certainty in this regard drawing readers into one line of interpretation only to be tempted by another. Early drafts of the novel had such titles as *The Black Magician*, *The Prince of Darkness*, and *The Consultant with a Hoof*, and this direct reference to Satan is clearly promoted with the final draft of the novel opening with a frontispiece link with Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*. Besides the choice of this frontispiece there are other teasing parallels to Goethe's *Faust*, such as Woland's walking stick with a poodle's head, a pact with the Devil, a baby's death and a mother forgiven, and a Walpurgis Night Great Ball at Satan's. Bulgakov continues to vary his depiction of Woland with at one time likening his appearance as portrayed in *Job*, a Satan who patrols the earth surveying the activities of the human race and from time to time reporting on the wrongdoings of mankind to the heavenly court. Woland appears in this light as the star performer in the Black Magic Show. As Woland arrived on stage he first directed a question aside to his assistants which clearly implied that his purpose in arranging this assembly was so he could make some assessment of the audience: "What do you think, the Moscow populace has changed significantly, hasn't it … and … a question of much greater importance: have the city folk changed inwardly?"[9]

In his summing up, Woland obviously compares his assessment to some previous reporting mission: "Well, now … they're people like any other people … they love money, but that has always been so … ordinary people … in general, reminiscent of the former ones."[10] Following the magic show, Woland confirms this reporting function quite clearly in conversation with an aggrieved citizen:

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[8] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 165.
[9] *The Master and Margarita*, pp. 147-148.
[10] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 153.

> I'll reveal a secret to you. I'm not an artiste at all, I simply wanted to see the Muscovites *en masse*, and that could be done most conveniently in a theatre. And so my retinue arranged for this séance, and I merely sat and looked at the Muscovites.[11]

In yet another variation on his presentation of Woland, and one with a decidedly theological slant, Bulgakov portrays Woland as the Adversary without whom Good could not exist. In a pointed exchange with Matthew Levi, Woland responds to the accusation that he only serves the purpose of evil in the world with the challenging riposte that good and evil exist together, that without evil there can be no good, that evil is the inevitable consequence of light:

> 'Kindly consider the question what would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look like if shadows disappeared from it? Shadows are cast by objects and people. Here is the shadow of my sword. Trees and living beings also have shadows. Do you want to skin the whole earth, tearing all the trees and living things off it because of your fantasy of enjoying bare light? You're a fool'.[12]

Woland again returns to this concept of a good-evil partnership as with an echo of St. Paul's "all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28) he assures Margarita at the end of the novel not to be over concerned with correcting seeming injustices: "don't trouble yourself here, Margarita. Everything will turn out right, the world is built on that."[13]

From such a diversity of interpretations of this central character, Barratt came to the rather novel conclusion that Woland's unorthodox persona could best be accommodated within a gnostic framework. In essence, Barratt interpreted the characters of the Master and Margarita as examples of those potentially open to be initiates into the lost secrets of divine wisdom and it is Woland who constitutes the divine representative conveying this privilege. Barratt concludes:

> Thus … despite his superficial diabolical features, Woland is not the devil but a gnostic messenger. This solution is doubly attractive, for it both captures the paradox in the novel's Faustian epigraph and returns us to the bifurcation of the plot in Part 1, a formal division which may be seen to mirror the disjunction between Woland's apparent purpose and his true mission.[14]

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[11] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 256.
[12] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 449.
[13] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 477.
[14] Andrew Barratt, *Between Two Worlds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 172.

That *The Master and Margarita* could invite a gnostic interpretation is typical of the capacity of this novel for flexible review. Two other unusual interpretations could be noted simply by way of many possible examples. One such from Sona Hoisington proposes a novel interpretation of *The Master and Margarita* as a source of fairy-tale elements. She notes that as is common in fairytales natural laws do not always operate in *The Master and Margarita*. Margarita becomes a witch for a time, characters turn into animals and animals assume human characteristics, people are instantly transported over vast distances, time may stand still, objects appear and disappear, some characters are privileged to ride horses through the sky and so on through a raft of magical episodes. With respect to such occurrences in *The Master and Margarita*, Hoisington notes: "Most importantly, these events provoke no surprise, they are presented as being perfectly natural."[15] An equally unexpected interpretation came from Radha Balasubramani who read the novel from a Hindu perspective:

> Central to my reading of Bulgakov's novel is the recognition that divinity's presence in *The Master and Margarita* is more complex than its apparent Christian representation. This reading draws upon an older religious tradition, namely, the Hindu system of belief, to establish correspondences between Hindu images of God and Bulgakov's portrayal of otherworldly entities.[16]

Jesus

The foregoing brief references to major characters and themes obviously merits attention and, indeed, have provided the primary focus for many readers of this novel. However, it now remains to concentrate attention on the figure of Jesus. First, with respect to his name, Jesus is introduced in the novel as Yeshua Ha-Nozri (in Aramaic 'the Lord of Salvation' and 'of Nazareth')[17] but, for the purpose of consistent focus on the topic in hand, throughout this commentary he is routinely referenced as Jesus. It is in the very opening chapter that Bulgakov injects Jesus into the novel through a blunt assertion as to whether or not there ever was such a person. In no uncertain terms the very existence of Jesus is denied outright by Mikhail Berlioz, the Chairman of the Board of a major Moscow literary association

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[15] Sona Hoisington, 'Fairy-Tale elements in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*'. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1981), p. 44.
[16] Radha Balasubramanian, 'Reading Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* from the Perspective of Hinduism', *The International Fiction Review*, vol. 28, no. 1-2 (2001), p. 1.
[17] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 500.

who, in restating the official Soviet view is typical in every sense of an educated and privileged Moscow citizen:

> the main thing was not how Jesus was, good or bad, but that this same Jesus, as a person, simply never existed in the world, and all the stories about him were mere fiction, the most ordinary mythology … (and further that) … without inventing anything new, the Christians created their Jesus, who in fact never lived.[18]

Then, in what is typical of Bulgakov's eye for the absurd, it falls to Satan, at this time in the character of a visiting professor in black magic, to bluntly state the opposing view: "the professor whispered: 'Bear in mind that Jesus did exist … There's no need for any points of view … he simply existed that's all'."[19] Without further ado, these comments from Woland merge into the following chapter of the novel where there follows a first-hand narrative account of the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate. While the latter clearly would have preferred to save Jesus from execution he does not have the resolve to do so. In what follows, Matthew Levi, an apostle follower of Jesus, makes a woefully inadequate attempt to assassinate Jesus to save him from the agony of death hanging on a cross. In this account Matthew does succeed in briefly removing the body of Jesus but this is swiftly retrieved and Jesus is buried in an unmarked grave with two criminals.

Much has been made of the details of this account and of the many omissions and variations from the biblical record. With Matthew Levi seemingly the only disciple to have any involvement in the trial and execution of Jesus, it is instructive to compare Bulgakov's account with that from Matthew's Gospel. Agreement between the two accounts is sparse. The action in Bulgakov's account does not take up until the point where Matthew records Jesus appearing before Pilate (Matt. 27:11). Then, whereas the Gospel account records Pilate asking Jesus as to whether or not he was the King of the Jews, Bulgakov inserts a reference to an earlier episode in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus had predicted that the Temple of Jerusalem would be destroyed (Matt. 24:2) prompting Pilate to accuse him of promoting violence: "So it was you who incited the people to destroy the Temple of Yeshalaim?"[20]

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[18] *The Master and Margarita*, pp. 5-6.
[19] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 17.
[20] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 19.

From this opening exchange the variations and omissions from Matthew's Gospel are such that an informed reader could conclude that Bulgakov's account is more accurately described as a deliberate parody of this chain of events. Jesus was arrested through the agency of a Judas of Kiriath, who was not a follower of Jesus but simply an unprincipled young man ready to help snare Jesus for a monetary reward. Judas was to subsequently die in dramatic circumstances, not by his own hand but assassinated on the orders of Pilate! No mention is made of a tumultuous entry into Jerusalem with Jesus mounted on an ass, no crown of thorns, no plea from the wife of Pilate to release Jesus nor of the troop of soldiers mocking him as King of the Jews. One Simon of Cyrene is not mentioned nor any reference to the women followers watching the execution. Jesus' body is not retrieved by Joseph of Arimathea and, quite significantly, there is no report of resurrection from a tomb or later meeting with his disciples.

Bulgakov chooses to break up the text referring to Jesus by spacing out references throughout the novel, first in a narration by Woland of the trial before Pilate. Much later, and in what was to be the first of a number of dream sequences, Ivan Nikolaevich Ponyrev, the poet Homeless, visualises in considerable detail the action surrounding Jesus' execution. There then follows a long diversion from the Jesus narrative before Bulgakov returns to this topic. This is provided through the medium of Margarita reading from the text of the Master's novel on Pontius Pilate an account of the last hours of Jesus and the predicted assassination of Judas. In a subsequent chapter Pilate receives the report on this assassination which by an interesting choice by Bulgakov took place in the garden of Gethsemane. While waiting for this report Pilate fell into a fitful sleep and dreamed of meeting Jesus on a shining path leading to the moon. Jesus finally re-appears in the last chapter of the novel where indeed on a path of moonlight Pilate and Jesus were to meet again. In an Epilogue, Bulgakov draws a line under the Pilate-Jesus interaction in the context of yet another dream sequence, this time again by the poet Homeless, in which is recounted a conversation between Pilate and Jesus as they walk this moonlight path.

To follow this drawn-out and interrupted sequence tests the patience of any reader in attempting to develop a comprehensive account of Bulgakov's references to Jesus. Indeed, no single reading of *The Master and Margarita* will be sufficient to untangle the complexity of the intertwining plots and to tease out the overall intention of the author. In addition, there is the constant challenge as to agreement on the reliability of

Bulgakov's final text let alone its subsequent translations. Andrew Barrett has provided one of the most comprehensive reviews of this novel and with regard to the reliability of the text finally concludes:

> it is clear that the problems of establishing a truly reliable text for *The Master and Margarita* are immense, and it would be naïve in imagining that these problems would be solved simply by publishing all the relevant materials, helpful though this would be. Given the facts—an unfinished manuscript, authorized revisions scattered amongst various typescripts and notebooks, and later editorial work by the author's widow—it seems most likely that no single 'authentic' version of the novel will ever be produced.[21]

And yet, perhaps it is in this novel with so many loose ends and such a mixture of ambiguity, absurdity and tragedy, that Bulgakov shields his core message. And this concerns Jesus.

An Aesopian Text

Before examining further references to Jesus, and in particular what Jesus is recorded as saying, it is appropriate again to simply acknowledge the complexity of the overall narrative. Storylines interact, characters exist in different dimensions, situations become quite bizarre, buffoonery sits side by side with tragic events while now and then emerge profound issues of good, evil and redemption. Yet with Bulgakov at the helm there is a strong case for concluding that this decidedly complex presentation was quite deliberate. Bulgakov clearly intends the narrative to be challenging yet entertaining and this is not without a purpose for in *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov could be interpreted as employing an Aesopian style of writing. Taking its name from the Greek storyteller Aesop this is a literary device that was dear to satirists in nineteenth century Tsarist Russia where a text with a seemingly innocuous meaning could be quite revolutionary without attracting the undue ire of the censor.

For example, in *The Master and Margarita* it is likely that the diverting behaviour of Soviet citizens serves to somewhat mask a direct criticism of a society marked by avarice and abuse of privilege. The shameful persecution of the Master unfolds in a largely comic tale of misadventure and compliance. With specific reference to the appearance of Jesus in the novel, it is the mental anguish of Pilate which is given prime attention and together with so many omissions and contradictions to the

[21] Andrew Barratt, *Between Two Worlds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 74.

Gospel record, a reader could easily be led to conclude that the depiction of Jesus is no more than an interesting addition to an array of complex characters and storylines.

While confined to a distinctly modest proportion of the content in the novel, the dialogue attributed to Jesus of course makes essential reading. Arraigned before Pilate, Jesus first commits an error in speaking to him as 'Good Man', a term which earns him a beating as Pilate regards this address as disrespectful. It is, however, of fundamental significance to Jesus that all people are regarded as inherently good. Pilate himself was drawn to pursue this issue: "Now tell me, why is it that you use the words 'good people' all the time? Do you call everyone that, or what?" "Everyone," the prisoner replied: "There are no evil people in the world."[22]

Jesus rather hesitatingly responds to Pilate's subsequent questions regarding his name and family but is stirred to strongly refute Pilate's charge that he had encouraged the people to destroy the temple: "Never, Hegemon, never in my life was I going to destroy the temple building, nor did I incite anyone to this senseless act."[23] In his further defence, and by means of which Bulgakov clearly inserts a critical reference to the accuracy of the biblical record, Jesus explains that the common people, who lack an education, confuse the meaning of what he has been saying: "they haven't any learning and have confused everything I told them. Generally, I'm beginning to be afraid that this confusion may go on for a very long time."[24]

Returning to the issue of the temple being destroyed, Pilate again asked Jesus to repeat what he had actually said about the fate of the temple: "I said, Hegemon, that the temple of the old faith would fall and a new temple of truth would be built. I said it that way so as to make it more understandable."[25] Prompted by Jesus' reference to a new temple of truth, Pilate asks the often quoted question: what is truth? (John 18:38). In the Gospel record Jesus makes no reply but here he gives an unexpectedly secular response: "The truth is, first of all, that your head aches, and also so badly that you're having faint-hearted thoughts of death."[26]

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[22] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 28.
[23] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 22.
[24] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 22.
[25] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 24.
[26] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 2.

Through further responses to Pilate, Jesus continues to clarify misconceptions about him which could have been formed on the basis of the Gospel records such as, by way of example, denying any triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Matters, however, take a fateful turn with Jesus' statement relating to his view on state authority which had been elicited from him by Judas of Kiriath. While explicit, but not meant to be revolutionary in any way, it was to prove to be Jesus' undoing:

> 'Among other things', the prisoner recounted, 'I said that all authority is violence over people, and that a time will come when there will be no authority of the Caesars, nor any other authority. Man will pass into the kingdom of truth and justice, where generally there will be no need for any authority'.[27]

Pilate immediately recognizes the danger in this statement and although he tries to lead Jesus to modify his view it is to no avail. Jesus naively restates his basic tenet that a kingdom of truth will replace any need for State authority. In some manner this exchange has echoes of a similar confrontation between Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor and his captive Jesus. Reverence for authority is at the heart of both discussions with Pilate and the Grand Inquisitor speaking in defence of systems which demand total respect for worldly authority. The Jesus in both instances stands in defiance of this dictum. Almost in exasperation and realising that Jesus' fate is all but sealed, Pilate asks if he believes in any gods to whom he may pray. Bulgakov seizes this moment to allow Jesus to make a further fundamental assertion: "God is one," replied Jesus: "I believe in him."[28]

Again typical of Bulgakov's tendency to suddenly veer away from the standard Gospel record, Jesus, in his final exchange with Pilate is painted in decidedly human terms. Speaking suddenly as worried and afraid: "Why don't you let me go, Hegemon? I see that they want to kill me."[29] Under political pressure and lacking personal resolve, later to be interpreted as cowardice and for which he is to be condemned to some two thousand years of penance, Pilate declares Jesus guilty, accepts the demand that Barabbas be released, and sends Jesus to be executed. In a chapter simply titled 'The Execution', reference to Jesus again takes the form of a dream sequence. On this occasion the poet 'Homeless' visualises Jesus, roped to a cross, dying as a guard plunges a spear into his heart, uttering a

[27] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 32.
[28] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 33.
[29] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 34.

final reference to Pilate simply murmuring "Hegemon."[30] This incident is followed by Margarita reading the Master's account of Pilate receiving a report on the execution from Aphranius, the Head of his Secret Police. It has been questioned as to whether this report is entirely accurate as Aphranius seems to be deliberately stirring Pilate to feel uncomfortable. Nevertheless, this report is significant in recording at least his version of the last words from Jesus. Pilate was particularly intent on knowing if Jesus had said anything:

> 'He said' the guest answered, again closing his eyes, 'that he was grateful and laid no blame for the taking of his life and that the only [other] thing he said was that among human vices he considered cowardice one of the first'.[31]

Not surprisingly this reference to cowardice particularly stung Pilate but he was unable to extract any further details. The death of Jesus continues to play on Pilate's mind and when he fitfully succumbs to sleep he dreams of ascending a beam of moonlight in the company of Jesus. In Pilate's dream he wishes the trial and execution had never taken place and, at least in his dream, this was fulfilled. Yet it remains significant to note that while the execution could be wished away, even in a dream the matter of cowardice remained:

> It went without saying that today's execution proved to be a sheer misunderstanding. Here this philosopher, who had thought up such an incredible absurd thing as that all men are good, was walking beside him, therefore he was alive. And, of course, it would be terrible even to think that one could execute such a man. There had been no execution! No execution! That was the loveliness of this journey up the stairway of the moon … and … There was as much free time as they needed, and the storm would come only toward evening, and cowardice was undoubtedly one of the most terrible vices. Thus spoke Yeshua Ha-Norzri. No philosopher [said Pilate] I disagree with you: it is the most terrible vice![32]

In this context cowardice is pointedly a failure on the part of those who indeed are aware of the truth but fail in their actions. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent but could not through self-interest summon the courage to follow his conviction.

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[30] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 224.
[31] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 381.
[32] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 398.

A Testament

When extracted from the captivating antics of Woland and his retinue, and also from the love story of the Master and his adoring Margarita, and then from the drawn out attention to the mental state of Pilate, Bulgakov's account of the specific actions and words of Jesus can be distilled into a succinct summary. First, Jesus lived. Conveying a simple but powerful message, and against all the pressure of the official atheist Soviet position, Bulgakov affirms that Jesus actually existed. Bulgakov clearly chooses to isolate this fundamental assertion from many otherwise debatable Gospel incidents by omitting references to visiting angels, a virgin birth, miracles and the like. Jesus himself offers little information on his background even to the point of stating that he could not even remember his parents. However, while minimalist in detail, Jesus is depicted as having actually lived. Secondly, with virtually all the details of the life of Jesus concealed, Bugakov confirms the record that Jesus was tried before Pontius Pilate and condemned to die on a cross. Details of this process vary considerably from the Gospel accounts but the basic facts remain intact. Finally, in a spiritual form, Jesus continues to live, to interact in the world, and through whom a sinful life may eventually be redeemed.

The potential inherent in this core summary has not been lost on many readers of the novel. However, while there is common agreement that Jesus as presented by Bulgakov is a significant figure many conclude that this Jesus falls short of divine status and is somewhat overshadowed by other characters. Edythe Haber, for example, is one of those who interpret the presentation of Jesus as mixed. In an early paper exploring the mythic structure in *The Master and Margarita*, Haber first described Bulgakov's presentation of Jesus as someone weak, vulnerable and even mildly comic and only subsequently acknowledging an emerging complexity in his character:

> (Initially) … Jesus appears a mere solitary man, the individual with his private vision, confronting the awesome power of the state … (yet) as his interrogation unfolds, we see the hidden power of the seemingly weak Yeshua.[33]

This concept of Jesus as possessing a form of spiritual strength is taken up by Hannah Schneider who interprets Bulgakov's novel on a broad scale

[33] Edythe Haber, 'The Mythic Structure of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*', *The Russian Review*, vol. 34, no. 4 (1975), pp. 8-9.

shifting her interpretation from a traditional Christian context to suggesting that in *The Master and Margarita* there may be discerned a new theology:

> This novel cannot be explained by one system (whether Christianity, Pelagianism or Manichaeism) but must be addressed in its own right as a constructive theological system. By treating Bulgakov's work not as a variation on something pre-existent, but as a theology with familiar symbols but with entirely different implications, we can begin to understand what Bulgakov was presenting was a new religion for the Soviet age.[34]

This broad-theme conclusion from Schneider is again typical of the flexibility with which Bulgakov's novel offers support for widely differing interpretations. In reaching her conclusion regarding a new theology, Schneider systematically re-examined the roles of major characters to finally conclude that it is Woland who is undoubtedly the principal divine figure of the novel. With specific reference to the character of Jesus, Schneider argues that as there are too many problems in reconciling Bulgakov's narrative with the Gospels: "This is why no matter how much Yeshua resembles Jesus, he is not functioning in the novel in the same way Jesus functions in the Bible and in Christian theology."[35]

In reaching this conclusion Schneider focusses on Bulgakov's presentation of Jesus as failing to match many details recorded in the biblical Gospels. As already observed, such agreement will be difficult to find as Bulgakov's style of narrative quite deliberately obscures such concordance. Some twenty years before Schneider's paper, Edward Ericson had also focussed on how Bulgakov's record of the last days of Jesus differed markedly from the Gospels. In summary, like many other critics Ericson chose to read *The Master and Margarita* as principally concerning Satan, interpreting the Woland character both as a parody of God and as an agent of divine providence:

> As the existence of the shadow proves the existence of that which casts the shadow and as the existence of moonlight presupposes the existence of sunlight, so Satan's existence bears witness to God's existence … So Bulgakov's concentration on the reality of Satan is his indirect method for propounding the reality of God.[36]

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[34] Hannah Schneider, 'Neither God nor Devil: A new Theological Approach to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*', *International Journal of Russian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2014), p. 179.
[35] Schneider, 'Neither God nor Devil', p. 183.

Even so, while Ericson draws many threads of Bulgakov's novel around the character of Woland he does acknowledge that Jesus is presented as an agent of God's mercy and love.

Yet while Ericson concedes that the references to Jesus are crucial to the coherence of the novel he nevertheless stops short of interpreting Jesus as the prime focus of attention. On balance it is Ericson's conclusion that the way in which *The Master and Margarita* is to be meaningfully read is as an examination of the Satanic incarnation.[37] A review by Margot Frank also agrees that it is not principally Jesus but Satan who is central to the action and major themes of *The Master and Margarita*. In this context Frank chooses to focus on the purpose of the Jerusalem chapters not so much as an account of the last days of Jesus, but rather to make the case for the place of evil in the world and the role played by Satan in this respect: "That evil is the inevitable shadow without which the light of good would not be light: that without evil there cannot be good; therefore that good and evil are dual constituents of the moral universe."[38]

Gareth Williams is yet another critic who agrees that it is the nature and stature of the Woland character which presents the most puzzling aspect of *The Master and Margarita.* With specific reference to the character of Jesus, he observes that while Jesus is depicted as a very good and even remarkable person he is without any attribute of divinity and gives no indication that in him God had become man. Williams finally draws an interesting conclusion: "Both the motif structure and the role of Woland in *The Master and Margarita* can be satisfactorily explained by an examination of Manichaean dualism as Bulgakov might have been expected to know it."[39] It is certainly not as if the above critics are overlooking the figure of Jesus in *The Master and Margarita* but their overall emphasis is on a different interpretation of the novel.

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[36] Edward Ericson, 'The Satanic Incarnation: Parody in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*', *The Russian Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1974), p. 24.
[37] Ericson, 'The Satanic Incarnation', p. 35.
[38] Margot Frank, 'The Mystery of the Master's Final Destination', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, vol. 15, nos. 2-3 (1981), p. 8.
[39] Gareth Williams, 'Some Difficulties in the Interpretation of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and the Advantages of a Manichaean Approach, with some notes on Tolstoi's influence on the novel', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 68, no. 2 (1990), p. 241.

Three reviews are typical of those which begin to tease out a stronger profile of Jesus. Katherine Sirluck directed attention away from an emphasis on Satan to what she saw as Bulgakov's intention to assert that Jesus did exist as a real and vital person. In addition she also suggests that Jesus continues to exist as some form of spiritual force through which atonement may be sought. In reaching this conclusion Sirluck interprets this Jesus figure as in her view offering a non-institutional path to salvation.[40]

A. C. Wright in an early review of *The Master and Margarita,* is another who first accords prominence to Woland as a dominant Satan figure:

> Woland's nature will become clear if we examine the broad conceptions of Satan as they occur in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We may trace three stages of development, corresponding roughly to the Old Testament, to the Rabbinic apocryphal and apocalyptic literature, and to the New Testament.[41]

At the same time Wright then goes some way in identifying characteristics of Bulgakov's Jesus that sustain his historical identity. Wright is not arguing that the Gospels are false, but rather:

> that Bulgakov presents us with facts that differ in detail but ultimately do nothing to alter the fundamental message of the Gospels. Once again he is interpreting in his own fashion, giving greater, not lesser, status to Christ and Pilate in making them more human rather than the symbolic figures they have become, and re-emphasizing the importance they have for the twentieth century.[42]

As a final example of those readers who have accorded some prominence to the Jesus character, Isobel Martin identified close parallels to the institutional church with, in this instance, that of the Russian Orthodox. In considering the representation of Jesus in the novel, Martin observes:

> In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov's portrayal alters the unalterable facts of the Gospels but, far from creating a piece of arch heresy, he composes a Christ figure who in essence bears many of the messages of the New Testament and displays a calm, honest and

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[40] Katherine Sirluck, '*The Master and Margarita* and Bulgakov's Antiauthoritarian Jesus', in *Jesus in Twentieth-Century Literature, Art, and Movies*, ed. C. P. Burns (New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 75-108.
[41] A. C. Wright, 'Satan in Moscow: An Approach to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*', *PMLA-Modern Language Association*, vol. 88, no. 5 (1973), p. 1164.
[42] Wright, 'Satan in Moscow', p. 1169.

> simple goodness to which Christian teaching also aspires. Bulgakov subtly shows the reader Jesus' true powers on earth and, though far from suggesting a glorious portrayal of Christ on the throne in judgement so common in the iconography of the Church, he pictures Jesus in heaven as still the wandering philosopher who comes to greet Pilate personally. Bulgakov conveys His divine nature through the conversation between Matthew Levi and Woland where we are given to understand that this once humble man is indeed omnipotent God.[43]

Encouraged by such latter interpretations a patient reader may move closer to what is arguably the central theme of *The Master and Margarita*.

Bulgakov reserves his final words of or about Jesus until the very end of his novel in an epilogue. This epilogue is no mere after-thought as if to just tidy up loose ends for it is in these final paragraphs that Bulgakov confirms some crucial concepts. First, it is clear that Jesus, who had died on the cross and was summarily buried with two criminals, remains alive in some spiritual form. Secondly, this Jesus is active in the world. He has read the Master's novel and decreed that the Master and Margarita are to be rewarded by an eternal peaceful existence. It is Jesus who advises that the Master's novel requires an ending and it is in this ending that Pilate is released from two thousand years of guilty remorse: "You're free! You're free! He's waiting for you!"[44]

The "He" waiting for Pilate is Jesus and it is Jesus who will grant Pilate redemption. For his part, having carried out his instructions from Jesus, and at this point clearly underlining his subsidiary status, it was time for Woland to summarily leave the scene. Without ceremony Woland and his retinue disappear into a gap in the landscape leaving the remaining narrative, in the form of a dream experienced by Homeless, clearly focussed on the actions of Jesus:

> A broad path of moonlight stretched from his bed to the window and a man in a white cloak with blood-red lining gets on to this path and begins to walk towards the moon. Beside him walks a young man in a torn chiton and with a disfigured face. The walkers talk heatedly about something, they disagree, they want to reach some understanding.[45]

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[43] Isobel Martin, 'Religious doctrine in the works of Mikhail Bulgakov' (Doctoral thesis, Durham University), p. 108.
[44] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 477.
[45] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 494.

For his part, Pilate is desperately seeking relief from his feeling of failure and shame, and from his continuing sense of cowardice. And in this respect, if he is to find redemption it is Jesus who has the power to grant this:

> 'Gods, gods' says the man in the cloak, turning his haughty face to his companion. 'Such a banal execution! But, please' Here his face turns from haughty to imploring, 'tell me it never happened! I implore you, tell me, it never happened.'
>
> 'Well, of course it never happened' his companion replies in a hoarse voice, 'you imagined it'.[46]

The Epilogue, then, brings to a close a complex web of entertaining narratives within which Bulgakov unfolds his personal portrait of Jesus and of his core teaching. Further, on initial inspection this portrait seems to be so deliberately misleading as to be but a parody of that presented in the biblical record. Crucially, Bulgakov clearly chooses to make the point that Jesus regarded such records as unreliable and would have preferred them to be discarded. Early in the novel this point is made forcefully when Jesus refers to a record being kept by his follower Matthew Levi:

> 'there's one with a goatskin parchment who follows me, follows me and keeps writing all the time. But once I peeked into this parchment and was horrified. I said decidedly nothing of what's written there. I implored him: Burn your parchment, I beg you! But he tore it out of my hands and ran away'.[47]

It is important, then, that in order to interpret the person of Jesus in this novel it is first necessary to set aside the existing biblical records as Bulgakov's Jesus dismissed these as unreliable. It is also relevant to recall that presenting an obviously biblically based Jesus would have drawn a savage rebuff in the light of the official Soviet rejection of Christianity and clear denial that Jesus even existed. In this context it is helpful to recall the elaborate distractions which Bulgakov built around his presentation of Jesus. The Master's experience as a writer easily diverts attention as does his extraordinary adventures with his lover Margarita. As already emphasised, the weight given to the character of Woland has drawn many critics to conclude that indeed here lies the main theme of the novel. Finally, it is the experience and moral failure of Pilate which dominates accounts involving Jesus in the novel. Inserted amid these distracting

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[46] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 494.
[47] *The Master and Margarita*, p. 23.

diversions direct references to Jesus are relatively limited, yet when extracted from the pages of *The Master and Margarita* these yield a simple summary testament according to Bulgakov:

> There is one God.
>
> Jesus lived, died, and in a spiritual sense still lives and is active in the world.
>
> There are no essentially bad people, all people are good.
>
> Man will eventually come into a kingdom of truth and justice, and there will be no place for oppressive authority.
>
> No matter how seriously one errs in life it is possible to hope for redemption.

Conclusion

After well over a decade of intense effort, and with exhaustive editing and redrafting, Bulgakov produced a captivating and complex novel which although presenting at times as chaotic is nevertheless very carefully written. In addition, *The Master and Margarita* is the product of an author fully aware that publication is a hopeless goal and as such this novel represents a highly personal work. Writing in secret at night and aware that he was dying, Bulgakov had every reason to choose his words carefully. Inserted within camouflaging narratives, and in the deliberate company of striking and distracting characters, it is his personal portrait of Jesus which can claim to be the essence of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita.*