

## THEOLOGY AND CHARACTER IN THE QUEST FOR SALVATION IN PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

Noelene Kidd

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (C-Version c.1387) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) are major literary answers to the question of the Philippian gaoler, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). In his complex poetry, Langland, a cleric in minor orders, offers a complicated anatomy of the quest for salvation, with an incomplete resolution; whereas Bunyan, a tinker, writing from a non-conformist Protestant perspective describes more simply a personal quest with an unequivocal resolution.

Although writing three hundred years apart, Langland and Bunyan shared a tradition of homiletic material which did not change markedly over that period (Owst 280). Both used the Bible as their chief source-book and have much theology in common but their soteriology differs. In *Piers Plowman* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* the protagonists clearly reflect the informing theology of the authors. Both writers use the conventions of religious allegorical dream-visions, but convert them to their own use. Langland's Will is a complex character and he travels in a circular pattern so that there is no end to his quest. Bunyan's simpler theology ensures that his Christian walks a more direct path. Will and Christian bring into sharp relief the variation in the portrayal of the quest for salvation in the medieval and Restoration periods.

Will and Christian are not characters in the usual sense of the term. They are personifications of "the human will," and of "a person who follows Christ," but in the poem and the prose narrative they are portrayed like "real" characters, the protagonists of the literary works. Some readers prefer to see Piers rather than Will as the protagonist of *Piers Plowman* and he does play a major role expressing the theme of the poem. He is the ideal human who knows the way to Truth; he is identified with the Good Samaritan and Jesus; and he represents St. Peter the Bishop of Rome; but he only makes a few appearances. Will

is present throughout, in or out of dreams, and it is his quest that dominates.

Both characters seek the way of salvation in similar terms. Christian's way seems comparatively straightforward, with few setbacks, whereas Will's journey is more complicated and less conclusive. The differences between Will and Christian are chiefly evident in the way their quests begin and end, and in their patterns of spiritual growth.

Will's quest is indicated by his words to Holy Church, "Teche me to no tresor, but tell me this ilke, / How y may save my soule" (1.79-80). The church is the means by which the gospel is preached to the world, and in Langland's theology the church mediates salvation. Holy Church had assured Will that he was acceptable because of his baptism, "Y undirfenge \_e formeste and fre man the made" (1.73), but Will still cries for grace. Christian's initial cry is, "*What shall I do?*" (8). Afraid of death and its consequences, he is beset by a "distemper" which keeps him in tears night and day until, from reading in his "Book," his understanding deepens and he is able to expand his question to one more like Will's: "*What shall I do to be saved?*" (9).

The opening scenes of the quests illustrate the differences in the works. Will begins his quest in circumstances typical of many medieval dream-visions. The setting is an idyllic May morning in the Malvern Hills, where the Dreamer falls asleep in the balmy air, and has a vision of "a fair feld ful of folk" (Prologue 19). Bunyan's Dreamer is sleeping in a den in "the wilderness of this world" (8), and sees not a multitude of people but one man, an indication of Bunyan's post-Renaissance pre-occupation with the individual rather than the community. Christian is outdoors, like Will, but is not enjoying the fresh air. In a field with his face turned from his own home, he is in personal distress.

The clothing of the two characters at the beginning of their quests reflects their different dispositions. Will wears a shepherd's cloak like that of a wandering hermit. His status is ambiguous: he may even be a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (Pearsall's note Prologue 2). His initial motive is "wondres to here," and in this mood he falls asleep to dream "merueylousliche" (Prologue 4-9). Christian's motivation at the commencement of the narrative is more clearly defined than Will's. His foremost thought is to escape the danger he is in in the City of Destruction. Christian's dress indicates his spiritual status. He is clothed in the "Raggs" of self-righteousness (Isaiah 64:6) and weighed down with a huge burden on his back which he cannot remove.

Will desires salvation, and his first goal is to seek the treasures of Truth and Love as Holy Church advises. She chides Will for his lack of understanding and misspent youth, pointing out that love for God is a natural capacity--"kynde knowynge" (1.141), a response to the love of God shown in the Incarnation and in the Atonement. Holy Church assures Will that the way to Truth is through the practical Christianity of James 2:26, "Faith without works is dead."

Christian seeks the Wicket Gate as the entrance to the road leading to the Celestial City, and relies upon Evangelist to direct him to it. The Gate is Christ, the Door of the sheepfold (John 10:9). Many of those who joined the conventicles were converted through the ministry of evangelists and pastors like John Gifford, who influenced Bunyan. The Gate may also be a figure drawn from Bunyan's personal vision of a gap in the wall excluding him from salvation which he describes in *Grace Abounding* (20). Although Christian sets out to find the Gate this does not imply a belief in unaided human ability to have faith in God. The grace of God is emphasised more in Bunyan's allegory than in Langland's.

Various alternative ways to salvation are considered by the pilgrims. Christian turns "out of his way" (20) to seek Legality's house in the town of Morality at the direction of Mr. Worldly Wiseman. Evangelist re-directs Christian to the Wicket Gate, assuring him that "the just shall live by faith" (21). These words from Habbukuk 2:4 (cf. Romans 5:1), brought to pre-eminence by Luther in the Reformation, are continually echoed in Bunyan's writing. This episode denying the efficacy of the Law comes early in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but in *Piers Plowman* the same subject is not discussed until *Spes/Moses* appears late in the poem and presents his "patente, a pece of an hard roche" (19.12).

The contrasting emphases of the authors is shown in the placement of the crucifixion in the two works. Bunyan places the Cross at the beginning of his story, while Langland reserves the Passion, and Will's reaction to it, until the latter part of the poem. Langland, in the medieval tradition, devoted the best of his poetry to a long devotional passage on the saving acts of Christ while the nonconformist Bunyan sketched the crucifixion and resurrection in two short paragraphs, and emphasised the efficacy of the atonement.

Will does not undergo a conversion experience like Christian, but his vision of Jesus does change him. In Lent he was "wollewaerd and watschoed ... as a recheles renk \_at recheth nat of sorwe" (20:1-2). After viewing the Passion, he withdrew in the darkness to watch the

Harrowing of Hell and the Resurrection. When the Easter bells ring, his actions indicate the change in his attitude. Will puts on his best clothes, and calls his wife and daughter to accompany him to church, "Arise, and go reuerense godes resureccioun, / And crepe to \_e croes on knees and kusse hit for a iewel" (20.473-74). He partakes of communion, and has another vision of the crucified Christ. In his dream Will worships, joins in the chorus of "*Veni creator spiritus*," and cries with Conscience, "Helpe vs, god, of grace!" (21.210-12).

Christian's encounter at the Cross is *crucial*, and his conversion occurs near the beginning of the narrative. His burden of sin fell from his back as he responded to the Cross, the supreme act of Love. Christian's change of clothes, given to him by an angel, is a token of God's grace in his heart. The pilgrim is never the same again. Although he has difficulties, he experienced the grace of God and henceforward he is able to overcome all obstacles on the road to heaven.

Will's progress fluctuates as he does not know whether to depend on grace or good works. He is sometimes uncertain as to his salvation and at other times he appears to achieve real knowledge. When Scripture preaches, his heart begins to tremble, and he thinks that he may be one of the many called, but not one of the few chosen (Matthew 22:14). Then he consoles himself with the remembrance of his baptism. He learns that Fortune is unreliable, and at the feast begins to acquire patience. This advance is quickly reversed when Will aspires, like Dr. Faustus, to know all: "3e, sire! ... by so no man were ygreued, / Alle \_e sciences vnder sonne and all \_e sotil craftes / Y wolde y knewe and couthe kyndeliche in myn herte" (16:208-10). Thoroughly rebuked for his pride by *Liberum Arbitrium*, Will turns his ambition to a better goal--to know Charity, and says, "Were y with hym, by Crist, ... y wolde neuere fro hym" (16.334).

With the Word of God in his hand and heart Christian advances steadily in his spiritual life. In the Valley of Humiliation, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and in Doubting Castle, his spiritual growth is evidenced by his actions based on knowledge of the Bible. These experiences leave him "down but not out." In the fight with Apollyon he is victorious when he uses the sword of the Word: "*we are more than Conquerors, through him that loved us*" (60). In the Valley of the Shadow of Death he uses the weapon of "*All-prayer*" (63), and is reassured by the Word again - Psalm 23:4 (64). In the dungeon of Doubting Castle Christian remembers the Key of Promise - the scriptures - and is able to open the doors and escape from the clutches

of Despair. Emphasis on the necessity of reading the scriptures as a spiritual guide-book is typical of seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography and continues later in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

Langland presents the dark aspects of eschatology in the portrayal of his protagonist. At the end of his journey Will is confronted with an old age of uncertainty and woe. While awake "hevy-chered" and "elyng in herte" (22.2), he meets Need, who accuses him of being a false beggar and gives him no solace. Falling asleep, Will dreams of Antichrist's reign when "al the crop of treuthe / Turned hit tyd vp-so-down" (22.53-54). His vision unnerves him and he is afraid when Kynde visits the earth with disease, death and destruction. Elde leaves his marks upon Will, making him "balled bifore and baer on e crowne," deaf, toothless, gouty and impotent, derided by his wife (22.184). The perplexity and misery that Will endures indicates how elusive the way of salvation is in the poem.

Will has no real assurance of his acceptance by God. When he senses the approach of Death, he begins to quake with fear. Through Contrition and Confession Will comes to the besieged barn, Unity - a place of community, but not of reward. When he hears Conscience's resolve to "bicomme a pilgrime ... to seke Peres the plouhman" (22.380-2), Will wakes, older and wiser, and the poem ends rapidly, leaving the reader with no absolute idea of Will's spiritual standing.

Bunyan concentrates on the personal aspect of eschatology, the future reward of the individual believer. The glorious end of Christian's pilgrimage is celebrated in glowing detail, but before that *finale* he must pass through the River of Death of which he is much afraid. Bunyan's marginal note explains Christian's fear: "*Death is not welcome to nature though by it we pass out of this World into glory*" (156). As Christian goes down into the water the sins of his unregenerate life prey upon his mind, but in due course he recalls the scriptures--the solution to every difficulty encountered on his pilgrimage (158). On the other side of the River, Hopeful and Christian, "The Heirs of Salvation" (158), are greeted by angels. Their mortal garments are left behind and they are swept up through the air to the Celestial City where they are given crowns, harps and "Raiment ... that shone like Gold" (161-2). Christian's quest is realised completely - he achieves ultimate salvation.

The differences in the protagonists, Will and Christian, clearly show how, as Angus Fletcher suggests, "Allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology" (368). Both characters seek salvation in similar terms but

their quests are different, reflecting the authors' divergent theology. The aim of the characters is the same - they both wish to be saved - but their motivation, intermediate goals, spiritual growth and destinations are different.

Langland offers no easy solutions to complex questions. Will searches for Truth in Dowel, Dobet and Dobest. He seeks Love and Loyalty in *Piers Plowman*. It is only towards the end of the poem that his quest is partially fulfilled, when he has a vision of Christ's Passion. Through contrition and confession he comes to the Church-Unity, a place of refuge but he continues to be fearful of old age and death. Langland's Catholic theology makes his protagonist more elusive and ambiguous than Bunyan's. The complications of the alliterative poem sometimes makes Will's path difficult to discern. His journey has a circular motion, his progress fluctuates and there is no lasting resolution to his quest; he must set out again, continually seeking. Bunyan's Calvinistic theology is unequivocal, Christian's way is linear and, despite some ups and downs, he must obtain salvation. The narrative is comparatively straightforward and Christian is a less complicated character than Will. Trusting in the grace of God, he seeks the way to the Celestial City through the Wicket Gate and the Cross and the major part of his pilgrimage is concerned with his lively adventures after his conversion. From the time Christian begins to follow the Way, and exercises faith in Christ, his path is sure, his goal is fixed and he achieves his quest.

*James Cook University, North Queensland*

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