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NEITHER GOD NOR DEVIL: A NEW THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO BULGAKOV'S *THE MASTER AND MARGARITA*

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Summary

This paper presents a new approach to Bulgakov's masterpiece, the novel *The Master and Margarita*. By examining the theme that "manuscripts don't burn," this paper argues that this novel cannot be simply compared to individual religions or to other works of fiction, as it has generally been treated. Instead, a multivocal analysis is needed since none of these past interpretations succeeds in rationalizing a monological foundation of the novel. This paper analyzes the characters of Ieshua and Woland to demonstrate that the 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 of something preexistent, but as a theology with familiar symbols but entirely different implications, we can begin to understand what Bulgakov was presenting as a new religion for the Soviet age.

Keywords: Theology, Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, Pelagianism, Manichaeism, God, Devil.

While many scholars compare *The Master and Margarita* to the Bible, or to other literary and philosophical works, they do not explain *why* these similarities are significant. Bulgakov's novel cannot be interpreted by trying to fit its complexities into any one literary or theological system; instead, it must be read as a constructed theological system, a project Bulgakov embarked on in order to rewrite the gospels and emphasize what he believed were the most important aspects of human spirituality. This essay breaks down traditional, monological interpretations of *The Master and Margarita*, and parses the significance of a new, constructive theological approach.

The novel, written between 1928 and 1940 but only published decades later, details the account of the devil's visit to Soviet Moscow. The novel proceeds in two planes—one takes place in Moscow in the era just mentioned, while the other takes place in first century Jerusalem. The Jerusalem sections, Bulgakov's rewriting of the Gospels, leave some crucial scenes missing (such as the last supper and the resurrection), which shockingly appear in the Moscow sections. The chronotope of the novel, therefore, is far from linear, and conceptions of time and space become problematic. The Jerusalem narrative begins from the mouth of Woland, the devil character, and continues in the Master's novel, and even appears as a dream of another character, the mad poet Ivan Homeless. The continuity of the story is broken; split between narrators, major questions about the origin and legitimacy of the Jerusalem chapters arise, and the question what Bulgakov was trying to demonstrate about the nature of gospels by writing his own version becomes ineluctable.

The novel lends itself to so many theological and philosophical comparisons because on first glance, Ieshua clearly seems to represent Jesus Christ and Woland clearly seems to represent Satan (multiple characters in the novel even confirm the latter suspicion). But the obvious similarities are far less interesting than the subtle differences, and the significance of the novel lies obscured in minutiae and not in broad comparisons.

Traditional structural or thematic analyses of the novel end with literary conclusions, but Bulgakov's multivalent novel deserves multivalent analysis. This paper addresses the theological implications of Bulgakov's project and the textual justification for treating *The Master and the Margarita* as a theological work. For the enormity of the theological analysis necessary to decode this novel, many more pages are needed, but this paper will hopefully prompt further discussion of these themes, and analyze a few key points which will attract further attention in the future.

Throughout Bulgakov's novel, the theme that "manuscripts don't burn" keeps appearing. In the first Jerusalem chapter of the novel, Ieshua, on trial for allegedly inciting the people, explains to Pilate that he is afraid that misunderstanding of his statements will "last for a very long time."^[1] Defending his own innocence Ieshua explains his predicament with Matthew the Levite, his disciple who follows him "everywhere with nothing but his goatskin parchment and writes incessantly." Ieshua continues, stating: "I once caught a glimpse of that parchment and I was horrified. I had not said a word of what was written there I begged him, 'Please burn this parchment of yours!' But he tore it out of my hands and ran away."^[2]

The implication is that Matthew the Levite's text survived, and that that is what we know of as the Bible today: it is a misunderstood account created by a half-mad disciple. That makes Bulgakov's novel, in contrast, the true version of the events of first century Jerusalem. This is the first of several instances in the novel where a text, once written, cannot be erased. In this case, according to Bulgakov, the results of the indestructibility of Matthew's manuscripts began millennia of false religious understanding.

In another instance that demonstrates Bulgakov's concept of eternal manuscripts, the Master burns his novel about Pontius Pilate in his apartment stove only to have it handed back to him later by Behemoth the cat at Woland's behest. Woland chastises him, exclaiming that he ought to know by now that "manuscripts don't burn."^[3] An eerie parallel to Bulgakov's own life emerges: he simply could not eliminate the manuscript. He burned the original draft of *The Master and Margarita* in 1930 only to begin rewriting the whole thing the next year. His wife kept the manuscript hidden from Soviet authorities for years before trying to publish it. Even when it first came out, it was heavily censored (especially the sections that blatantly mocked bureaucratic officials), but the censors did not prevail; eventually those sections were restored.^[4] The parallels between the novel and Bulgakov's own life and political situation (including readings of the novel

which equate Woland with Stalin) certainly aid in interpreting the foundations of *The Master and Margarita*, but like the parallels to the Bible, the divergences become more interesting than the convergences, and similarities to life and other traditions are only the building blocks of the story.

In light of the theme that “manuscripts don’t burn,” the novel is Bulgakov’s tribute that nothing written can be destroyed. In writing his novel, Bulgakov had a profound sense of duty—duty because he knew that whatever he wrote would last. His novel would become a new version of the Bible for many Russians. Upon publication in the 1960s, the novel attracted an instant cult following that has flourished up until the present, with the Bulgakov Museum functioning as a gathering place for enthusiasts. There are still shrines to *The Master and Margarita* in Moscow, and numerous songs, films, and paintings have been inspired by the book.

The theme of the author and his everlasting work, therefore, is critically important to discerning crucial thematic elements of the novel. Since Bulgakov treated his novel as a new and indestructible theological work, readers ought to approach it with a similar understanding of Bulgakov’s project in mind. And since a large part of the novel deals with undermining the authority of the Biblical gospels and rewriting the gospels, these themes must be addressed. Bulgakov’s novel, therefore, must be treated as he wrote it: as a theological system, with all of the ensuing implications addressed.

In light of Bulgakov’s constructive project, the nuanced divergences in the novel from its source texts don’t heighten importance. This essay focuses on the characters of Woland and Ieshua in comparative analysis and suggests a synthesis of the theological implications of the twists and variations on these characters.

None of the recent approaches to the topic of tangled theology in *The Master and Margarita* has successfully encompassed Bulgakov’s project. Boris Gasparov famously analyzed the structure of the novel, noting that sometimes the novel is not “entirely like the gospels, and sometimes it is entirely not like the gospels.”^[5] He suggests that it is not identical to the Bible because Bulgakov was writing polemically, but I suggest that there is a deeper, more fundamental reason that Bulgakov changed the gospel narrative.^[6] Gareth Williams, contrary to Gasparov, claims that there is a way to read the theology of *The Master and Margarita* as a cohesive whole. Reading it through a Manichean lens, he argues, makes sense of Woland’s and Ieshua’s roles.^[7] In Manichean philosophy, equal powers of light and darkness battle in the universe, and since Ieshua and Woland are more equal in the novel than Jesus and Satan are in an orthodox reading of the Bible, Williams argues that a Manichean understanding is more apt than a Christian one. There are many moments, however, when the Manichean system breaks down in the novel, and it would be a stretch to assert that Bulgakov’s main goal was to write a novel based on Manichean philosophy. A.C. Wright, in “Satan in Moscow: An Approach to Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*,” also tries to fit Woland into a single, preexisting theological system. He claims that in the Old Testament the devil had no malignant attitude toward God and mankind, and that that was a New Testament distortion of the Old Testament’s description of Satan. According to Wright, therefore, the Old Testament explains Woland’s seemingly contradictory character in ways the New Testament cannot. But on closer examination, this proves to be unorthodox and shoddy exegesis of the Old and New Testaments, and so Wright’s argument that Woland can be categorized as a strictly Old Testament figure is fundamentally faulty. Another attempt to explain the novel using a single coherent framework was made by Val Bolen. Bolen claims that “the novel as a whole reflects a universal plan based on justice.”^[8] But this, too, does not explain Bulgakov’s system. It seems that justice, as it is usually defined, would not send Margarita to suffer the Master’s fate of lost memory, or that justice would have Ieshua killed when he had done nothing wrong. If justice is defined as giving each person

according to his due, and Ieshua had lived an honest and innocent life, then it could not have been just for him to die a tortuous death as a criminal—at least in a human scheme of justice. If Bulgakov is writing based on some “universal plan of justice” then he has also redefined this universal plan based on seemingly illogical categories.

Joan Delaney makes another attempt to interpret this novel monologically. Instead of using a philosophical approach, she allows theological concerns to fade to the background and claims that the novel is best explained in light of Bulgakov’s life: it is about “the artist and his work.”^[9] As discussed earlier, this is surely a crucial theme, but Delaney fails to steward the analysis to its natural conclusion; she compares the Master to Bulgakov, but she does not examine the broader implications of the fact that Bulgakov presented his novel as the true version of the gospels, which are the basis of one of the most widespread religions on earth. The present essay extends Delaney’s analysis and critiques her analysis.

Understanding Bulgakov’s theological system requires beginning with the basic differences between Christianity and the novel and why they are significant for his system. A comparison of Bulgakov’s theological system to Christianity, as Gasparov suggests, reveals stark differences. In addition to the fact that Ieshua is not the divine savior, there is another huge problem: God is not visible in the novel. Ieshua cannot be God since he clearly does not have ultimate authority in the novel. For instance, when Matthew the Levite appeals for the eternal fate of the Master, it is Woland to whom he appeals, and not Ieshua. When Matthew appears to Woland, he explains, “he has sent me...and he asks you to take the master with you and reward him by granting him peace.”^[10] The Biblical Jesus would not need to ask permission of the devil; instead, he would be able to pardon himself. He is omnipotent, as he states explicitly according to the Gospel of Matthew 28:18: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.” He also cannot be the Son of God. First, he makes no such claim. But second, he also fails to meet any of the Old Testament prophecies about the Son of God. For instance, he comes from the town of Gamala, not Bethlehem as was foretold.^[11] He also does not claim that God is his father. When Pilate asks him about his parentage, he falters, “I don’t know exactly...I don’t remember my parents. I was told my father was a Syrian.” But the key moment is when Pilate asks Ieshua “What is truth,” which is quoted straight from the Bible.^[12] Ieshua’s answer addresses the pain that Pilate was secretly suffering from: “At this moment the truth is chiefly that your head is aching and aching so hard that you are having cowardly thoughts about death.”^[13] Jesus, on the other hand, clearly states what truth is in the New Testament: “I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but through me.”^[14] At every pivot in the novel where Bulgakov could have asserted the divinity of Ieshua, he alters the details just enough in order to make it nearly impossible for the reader to hold that he could be either God or the Son of God. Instead, Ieshua fits quite nicely into Renan’s positivist tradition, which promotes a view of Jesus as just a human caught up in the politics of first century Jerusalem.

Since God is not visible in the novel, it is impossible for the central message of the Bible to be conveyed in the novel. That is, the message that God sent his son into the world to die the death that sinners deserved so that men may be reconciled to God. Ieshua’s death, once again, does not meet the criteria of the Old Testament prophecies as Christ’s was meant to (Ieshua’s hands and feet are not pierced, for instance,^[15] but tied).^[16] Aside from all of these detailed discrepancies, however, one glaring passage proves the difference of Bulgakov’s cosmic schema from the Biblical one. At the moment of crucifixion, Matthew stands at a distance and begs “God to perform a miracle and allow Ieshua to die.”^[17] He also curses God, exclaiming, “no other God would have allowed a man like Ieshua to be scorched to death on a pole.”^[18] Finally he goes even further, screaming, “you are

a God of evil... You are not an almighty God—you are an evil God!”^[19] While Matthew can see nothing in the crucifixion of Ieshua but cruel and unjust atrocity, the crucifixion of Christ resulted in something quite different: it was intended to demonstrate God’s ultimate justice and authority. While the crucifixion was brutal and gory (for this is the punishment that humans were meant to pay for betraying God with sin, according to the Bible), it was also the beginning of the victorious redemption that Christ would make for his children, mankind. Anglican theologian N. T. Wright (not to be confused with literary scholar A. C. Wright) explains, “on the cross Jesus has won the victory over the powers of evil.”^[20] Jesus conquered the power of evil because once the sinless God had paid the penalty for sin, which is death, there could be no other sacrifice needed, no other victims of death. In Christ, men can live, and at the end of time, Christ will return to raise the dead and put an end to suffering. In the novel, however, this is not what transpires. Whereas in the gospels, Jesus triumphantly raises from the dead and ascends to heaven in preparation to come to earth again, in the novel, the naked body of Ieshua slips down off the cross, never to be seen again. Indeed, the word “cross” is not even mentioned in the novel. Instead, the words “pole” or “crossed sticks” are used. Bulgakov eschews any semblance of a sacrificial death or atonement. Far from the powerful death and the triumphant resurrection of the gospels, in the novel, Ieshua slips from view while Woland, the devil character, grows in power.

God clearly does not appear in the novel, except for in name when Matthew the Levite curses him, and when Pilate calls upon pagan gods. But it is less clear whether the devil appears. After all, if Woland is so powerful, could he properly be conceived as the devil? In fact, Bulgakov’s depiction of Woland places him outside the categories of the Biblical devil, further distancing Bulgakov’s novel from a Christian interpretation.

Woland is indubitably the principle divine figure of the novel, which in itself indicates a different focus from that of the Bible. Beyond his prominence, he also serves different functions from those of the Biblical devil, as mentioned. But there are problems with comparing Woland to the Biblical devil in the first place since there are vast disagreements in the literary world about this character. Some literary scholars have argued that the Biblical devil serves a different purpose in the Old Testament from the purpose he serves in the New Testament.^[21] But while the devil may be described differently in literary terms in the two halves of the Bible his roles are the same. In the books of Genesis and Job, for instance, the devil tempts people and distracts them from God. This accords with the devil’s intentions as laid out in the New Testament, in 2 Corinthians 4, for instance, when it is written that Satan “blinded the minds of the unbelievers.”^[22] Though A. C. Wright argues that the devil in the Old Testament does not have any malignant attitude toward God or his followers, this cannot be the case: according to the Bible “all wrongdoing is sin,”^[23] and since sin is anything that goes against the will of God, if the devil is tempting people to act contrary to God’s will, then the devil is acting as God’s adversary. Even though the theology is not spelled out in the Old Testament as it is (by Paul, for instance) in the New Testament, there is clear consistency between the two Testaments. Since the goal of the devil in the Bible is to thwart the will of God on earth, but God does not even appear in Bulgakov’s novel, it is difficult to argue that Woland parallels the devil as presented in either testament. A. C. Wright’s rendering, therefore, cheapens the Biblical presentation of the devil and does not help in analyzing Woland.

In addition to the problems Woland presents, however, Ieshua also presents problems. Not only is he not the son of God (but instead the son of some unknown father), but it is also unclear whether he is a powerful and good deity (as Trinitarian Christian theology claims that Christ is part of the godhead), or just an employee of a different “department” for the institution that Woland also works for. He does not redeem people in the novel, but pardons them. This is a crucial point:

whereas in the Bible people are so evil that they could not possibly conduct lives worthy of salvation without Christ taking their punishment, in the novel, Ieshua does not take people's punishment upon himself, but instead pardons them. There is no schema of atonement. There is no need for grace. When Matthew the Levite comes to Woland in the second half of the novel to appeal the fate of the Master, he pleads with Woland: "He [presumably Ieshua] has read the Master's writings... and asks you to take the Master with you and reward him by granting him peace."^[24] Woland responds by asking, "why don't you take him yourself to the light?"^[25] Matthew's answer is revealing. He makes an appeal to an independent standard:

"He didn't earn light. He earned peace."^[26]

This means that in Bulgakov's anthropology, man is good enough to follow a set standard in order to gain certain rewards. Christ is not necessary to absorb the wrath of God on man's behalf. This is why no matter how much Ieshua resembles Jesus, he is not functioning in the novel in the same way Jesus functions in the Bible and in Christian theology.

Ieshua's powers are more ambiguous than Woland's: it is unclear to what degree the devil can control the fate of those who did not "earn light." For example, the matter of whether Woland freed Pilate from torture out of mercy, or whether he freed Pilate because the latter genuinely earned peace remains unresolved. At the very end of the novel, Woland escorts the Master and Margarita to some state after death where they also see Pilate, who is tortured with insomnia during full moons. Voskresenskaya Square^[27] Margarita, showing her characteristic compassion, questions the justice in this scenario: "Twenty-four thousand moons in penance for one moon long ago, isn't that too much?"^[28] She goes on to scream that he be released, to which Woland answers, "there is no need for you to plead for him, Margarita, because his cause has already been pleaded by the man he longs to join." Moments later, the Master announces Pilate's freedom by hollering, "You are free! Free! He is waiting for you!"^[29] It seems, therefore, that while Ieshua might have pleaded the Master's case, it was Woland who made the decision. If it was not Woland who made the decision, then perhaps it was a designated length of punishment that Pilate was forced to endure, although this option seems less likely according to the text.

This scene indicates a critical distinction in Bulgakov's system: there will be no final judgment. Since in the Bible Christ comes to "judge the living and the dead"^[30] but in the novel there is no Christ, only a deficient Ieshua, there is no implication that the eternal ramifications of Ieshua's life will include a final judgment. Instead, each person seems to earn a fate that can then be altered by some sort of divine bureaucracy, but not by a mandate ordained before the dawn of time.

In addition, the Christian view of the final resurrection is very different from Bulgakov's portrayal of life after death. N. T. Wright argues that for Christians the resurrection of the physical body when Jesus returns to remake the world is crucial. "God's intention is not to let death have its way with us," he explains.^[31] He continues, stating that "if the promised final future is simply that immortal souls leave behind their mortal bodies, then death still rules—since that is a description not of the *defeat* of death but simply of death itself, seen from one angle."^[32] This is exactly what Bulgakov has shown: death has had its way despite the continuation of souls. For Christians, the kingdom of heaven "in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven.'"^[33] Bulgakov's picture, then, excludes this kingdom of heaven; the concept of "light" as opposed to "peace" in the novel is still far more abstract and vague than the images in Revelation of Christ's remaking of the physical world to redeem it to its Eden state. Bulgakov's Ieshua and Woland are difficult to interpret because the cosmic order in Christian theology is thrown off-kilter

by not having a resurrection, a final victory where life conquers death and good conquers evil.

Bulgakov's novel, and more specifically, the idea that the characters earn their eternal destinies, more closely echoes one of several early Christian heresies than it does Christianity. The early Christian heresy of Pelagianism strikes a particularly familiar resonance. Pelagianism, formulated by the 4th century monk Pelagius, defends the possibility of innate human goodness and free will as a combination that could bring man to God without the help of a redeemer. Though this soteriology seems to fit with Bulgakov's, the entire framework still does not mesh: Pelagianism, even though condemned by the church, still maintains a grounded concept of God which Bulgakov prevaricates.

Another possible influence for Bulgakov's theological system is a similar heresy, namely, Manichaeism, in which there is a struggle between the powerful (but not omnipotent) good spirit called God, and the non-eternal evil figure Satan. In addition, Manichaeism champions a concept of a spiritual realm of light versus a material realm of darkness. This helps explain some of Bulgakov's terminology, especially in cases when Matthew the Levite uses terms like going to "light" (as quoted earlier) instead of to heaven or some other familiar religious post-mortem location. This could be another allusion to Manichaeism. And indeed, Woland seems to imply Manichaean philosophy in his conversation with Matthew the Levite:

Where would your good be if there were no evil, and what would the world look like without shadow? Shadows are thrown by people and things. There's the shadow of my sword, for instance. But shadows are also cast by living beings. Do you want to strip the whole globe by removing every tree and every creature to satisfy your fantasy of a bare world?^[34]

Woland discusses here a balance in the universe between good and evil that would be perfectly congruent with Manichaean teaching. Following the Manichean dichotomy of good and evil coequal powers, we see that Ieshua and Woland seem also to fall into place: Ieshua sees the good in all people, as he explains in the first Jerusalem chapter of the novel. Pilate asks him about the peculiar term he keeps using to describe people—good men. "Is that what you call everybody," Pilate wonders.^[35] Ieshua responds, "Yes, everybody... there are no evil people on earth."^[36] Woland sees the bad in all people (as well as some good), the greed, dishonesty etc. and names them simply "people like people." In the chapter entitled "Black Magic Revealed," Woland sets up a farcical show with his troupe of demons in a prominent Moscow theater. But what starts as a compulsion of magic tricks transforms into a different kind of show. Woland causes money to fall from the ceiling and opens a magical shop for ladies on the stage (complete with free Chanel No. 5 and chic dresses). All of this is meant to help him determine the character of the Muscovites, whether they were the same as always. Woland even obliges when the audience unsuspectingly demands that he lob off the head of the M.C., Bengalsky. In the final analysis, Woland declares,

they're people like any others, but thoughtless...but they do show some compassion occasionally. They're overfond of money, but then they always were...humankind loves money, no matter if it's made of leather, paper, bronze or gold. They're thoughtless, of course, but then they sometimes feel compassion too... They're ordinary people—in fact, they remind me very much of their predecessors, except that the housing shortage has soured them.^[37]

In this case, Woland's philosophy proves to contradict Manichaeism: for Woland, there is a blurry distinction between the pure light of the spiritual realm and the pure evil of the material realm, as is delineated in Manichaeism. People are partly good and partly bad for Bulgakov. In this blurriness, it is clear that Bulgakov does not maintain that there is a binary opposition between light and darkness.

This same phrase that breaks down the possibility of a Manichean interpretation also confirms the impossibility of a Christian framework for the novel. The problem is that in Woland's view, people are soured by circumstances, and not by a condition of the heart, as is the case in Christian theology. In Christianity, no people are ordinary people, because man's intended state was to be one of sinless communion with God, which was broken by the fall. If anything is clear, it is that the Soviet regime is a power of darkness which must be exposed for its intrinsic evil and fought against. This, however, is more a political binary than a theological one.

The mysterious irony is that the devil does not look so bad in comparison to the Soviet officials. Later in the novel, Woland does actually release one soul, named Frida, from the eternal punishment of being faced with the handkerchief she had wielded to strangle her child. It seems that Woland releases Frida at Margarita's request, but it is unclear whether it was Margarita's request that in itself served as the absolution of Frida, or whether it was Woland who allowed her to be freed. Whether it was Woland's power, Margarita's purity, or Woland acting on behalf of someone else, it is still a moment of grace. The Soviet officials, in comparison, seem merciless. The Master suffers because of the officials who censor his novel, and the other corrupt officials appear throughout the novel. The Master suffers at the hands of merciless political powers, whereas humans both suffer and are blessed by these seemingly evil deities. What kind of devil is this if human evil can be so much worse than his? Once again, Manichaeism seems to break down in the novel because there is no clear difference between good and evil, or between light and darkness. These elements are mixed within the people of Moscow and even within Woland himself. While Williams claims that "the reader finds out that darkness and light are used throughout the work in a manner consistent with the Manichaean philosophy,"^[38] this is not the case. In Bulgakov's novel, light and darkness are not simple representatives of Manichean good and evil.

Evidently, in order to do justice to Bulgakov's spiritual framework, and thereby to this novel, analysis must penetrate beyond the classically undertaken comparative studies. Now that distinctions have been made, we must proceed with the particularities of Woland's roles, and what these mean for Bulgakov's theology. In the first conversation of the novel, we see that Woland, who has appeared in Moscow, engages two prominent figures of the Soviet intelligentsia, Berlioz, "editor of a highbrow literary magazine and chairman of the management committee of one of the biggest Moscow literary clubs...[and] his young companion...the poet Ivan Nikolayich Poniryov, who wrote under the pseudonym Bezdomny."^[39] These two both deny that the devil exists, and when Ivan first proclaims, "There is no such thing as the devil," it causes Woland to shout.^[40] As Berlioz and Ivan are trying to slip away from their awkward first encounter with Woland, he begs "as a farewell request, at least say you believe in the devil! I won't ask anything more of you. Don't forget that there's still the seventh proof—the soundest! And it's just about to be demonstrated to you!"^[41]

Their denial discomforts Woland, who seems to desire recognition from them. For their impudent atheism, Woland punishes them. It was this punishment that he was referring to as the seventh proof. Earlier in their conversation, they had debated the various proofs for the existence of God offered by Kant. Woland, now, is about to prove something that he had asserted earlier: that man does not control his own fate, but there is another who "rules the life of man and keeps the world in order."^[42] This can be seen, then, as a twist on the old trope the God of the Old Testament: the people of Israel turn away from Him, and so He punishes them. Here, however, the people of Moscow have not turned away from God only, but also from the devil, and it is for this latter offense that each pays dearly (the clothes that the women procured at the show, for instance, all disappeared off of their bodies once they left the theater, rudely exposing the women—in their state of nature—to the people of Moscow). While in the Bible it was the devil seeking to distract people

from God, here, the devil, like God himself, desires to be recognized in his own right.

To return to the Variety Theater, there are several other clues from Woland's behavior which help decode Bulgakov's theology. For instance, when he is evaluating people to see if they are as they used to be, it seems that he is acting as a grand inquisitor, exposing the inner state of Muscovites with his bizarre show. Woland's testing draws an uncanny parallel to the Old Testament book of Job. In the story, God allows the devil to test Job's devotion to God; indeed, no matter how the devil tortured Job by depriving him of wealth, his family, and his health, Job held firm in his commitment to God. The difference in the novel (in addition to the fact that God is nowhere overtly present) is that when Woland tests the Muscovites, luring them with money and luxuries, they do not hold firm. They succumb to the tests and prove to be every part as bad as expected, or as Woland says, "they are people like people."

The problem with this correlation, however, is that while Job is an individual, the Muscovites constitute a mass. The question arises as to whether the Muscovites can undergo temptation in the same way an individual can. The important point to gather in this analogy, regardless of scale, is simply the role of the devil as tempter in the cosmic scheme. In the Bible, God permits the devil to try Job; in the novel, the devil simply tries a handful of the Muscovites, seemingly of his own accord for his own purposes, without divine permission. This creates a deep imbalance in the novel, however, since the Muscovites only seem to have one option: evil or evil. They cannot choose between succumbing to the devil's temptation and following God since the only visible source of power is the devil. He is the one wanting to be recognized and worshiped, and he is the one testing. Unlike Job, the Muscovites have no way out of their trial. Woland searches the hearts of the Muscovites, but there seems to be nothing good to which they could cling that would keep them from falling into this evil. There is no reward for remaining true, because there is nothing good to which they could remain true. There is no God to turn to as an alternative to sin. Woland seems to be serving in the classic devilish role of tempter, but the key difference here is that people seem to have no way of resisting his temptation.

Woland's image as a character replacing God in Moscow develops as the novel progresses. In addition to appearing as a figure desiring recognition and as an inquisitor, he next appears as one capable of enacting resurrection from the dead. At the great Satan ball, we see the dead materialize again from their coffins, an image similar to that described in Ezekiel 37:1-14 in the Old Testament. The prophet Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones, which by the power of God, turn to flesh in front of his eyes—a frightening similarity to the perverted version in the novel. Whether or not Bulgakov had Ezekiel in mind, he certainly had the resurrection of the body in mind—something Christ promises—since the Ieshua character is such an important figure in the novel. But while Christ promised to restore our bodies and elevate them to glory, as discussed earlier, we see the opposite in the novel. The only sort of resurrection we see in the novel is that prompted by the devil himself as a one-night respite from eternal torment in Hell, not a permanent restoration of the body to paradise. Woland offers a deceitful resurrection; he can raise the body, but what he raises it *for* pales in comparison to that aim for which Christ promises to raise the body. Woland's resurrection is a mockery, not a realization of paradise.

After the Satan ball, Woland appears in yet another function typically attributed to God: he is a pardoner. Even though he jokes about pardoning being "in another department," he nonetheless releases Frieda from her punishment per Margarita's request. In the Bible, even though Satan presides over punishment, he is the torturer, not the judge. The question of how the Master and Margarita's fates are determined becomes even more complicated. Up to this point, Woland has filled some roles which traditionally God fulfills—he demands recognition, he resurrects, and he

pardons. But he has also filled the traditional role of the devil by tempting people and revealing their inner states of hopeless sin.

What does it mean when mankind has no redeemer? When there is no clear line between light and darkness? When the devil both tempts and punishes, but also resurrects? Bulgakov was not merely tweaking the gospels, but foundationally reconstructing all of Biblical theology into a system with different implications for mankind. According to *The Master and Margarita* there is no ultimate standard of goodness, but a relative, negotiable spectrum. Sins are pardoned if done out of the right motives (Margarita earned light despite her adulterous lifestyle with the master since they were never officially married). Since there is no absolute goodness—as it must have seemed when Bulgakov looked around him in the Soviet world—the best people can do is to reconcile themselves with whatever power happens to exist and cherish the people they love. Moreover, while memories fade, and time seems even to play games by becoming cyclical instead of linear, one thing remains: the written word. Therefore the Master's project and Bulgakov's project was the same, to create a new tradition in which there would be no condemnation and in which he could rationalize life in a cruel time.

^[1]Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and the Margarita*, trans. Michael Glenny (The Harvill Press, London: 1967), 20.

^[2]Ibid., 20

^[3]Ibid., 286

^[4]S. Lovell, "Bulgakov as Soviet Culture," in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan., 1998), 30

^[5]B. M. Gasparov, *Iz nabludenii nad motivnoi strukturoi romana M. A. Bulgakova "Master i Margarita"* in *Kafelralnaya Biblioteka*

^[6]Ibid.

^[7]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," in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Apr., 1990), pp. 234-256

^[8]Val Bolen, "Theme and Coherence in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Winter, 1972), pp. 427-437

^[9]Joan Delaney, "The Master and Margarita: The Reach Exceeds the Grasp" in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Mar., 1972), pp. 89-100.

^[10]Master, 358

[11]Ibid., 19; Micah 2:5

[12]21; John 18:38

[13]Ibid., 21-22

[14]John 14:6

[15]Psalm 22

[16]Master, 180

[17]Ibid., 176

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 95

[21]A. C. Wright, "Satan in Moscow: An Approach to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," in *PMLA*, Vol. 88, No. 5 (Oct., 1973), 1164

[22]2 Corinthians 4:3-4

[23]1 John 5:17

[24]Master, 358

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid., 378

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Acts 10:42

[31]Surprised by Hope, kindle edition, page 15, location 422 of 5741

[32]*Ibid.*

[33]Ibid., page 18, location 467 of 5741

[34]Master, 357

[35]Master, 24

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., 125

[38]Williams, "Some Difficulties," 242

[39]Master, 3

[40]Ibid., 42

[41]Ibid., 43

[42]Ibid., 10

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