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The Pilgrim's progress: a second Bible

Karim Loveimi Motlaq and Bamshad Hekmatshoar Tabari
Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz.

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ABSTRACT

John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is one of the most important religious texts ever written in English. There are several important factors that have made for the perfect and excellent structure of this seventeenth century work of English literature. What follows is an attempt to analyze these elements in detail in order to find how such a masterpiece has been created and why it has gained such importance in realm of religious writings that has been given the title of Second Bible.

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Introduction

"Apples were they with which we were beguiled,
Yet Sin, not Apples, hath our souls defiled".¹

The Christian Theology is strongly based on the issue of the First Sin, the Forbidden Tree, Man's fall and his Salvation, to an extent that one may credit it as the very heart of Christianity and Bible as the main propagator of such a view in form of a complex series of allegories, exempla and epigrams. Looking historically, this Biblical strategy has become a guide for many writers of different Christian trends in the way of their struggle to fascinate their followers with the grandeur of their own reading of the religion. John Bunyan's *the Pilgrim's Progress* belongs to this category of religious writing or religious literature.

What is very important to be mentioned at this point, is the fact that *the Pilgrim's Progress* is a far cry from any other books of such quality and it excels them from many different prospects, to the degree that it is even considered as a second Bible or a book containing a "hidden Gospel" in it², what "no other Puritan, or, indeed, committed Christian work of any persuasion, has enjoyed such an extensive Readership"³. In order to trace the issue, it is good to focus first of all on the quotation above, so that a clue may be found for the further analyses. This quotation is from the second part of the book where a man named Giaus as the host of a dinner feast gives a preach-like speech and addresses Matthew – the Christian's son. He considers each sin to be like the apples from the forbidden tree; that which put an end to Man's heavenly life and that even though they are not of that material which an apple may be, their very essence beguiles man in the same way and weaken his soul. Christian's son then is wise enough to find the allegorical weight of Giaus' speech as he is exposed to Bible and applies it to his everyday practice in life and finally marries to that man's daughter. The tempo as well as the logic beyond each word and the sequence of events may seem very much absurd when a twenty first century reader tries to make sense of them as he is unable to find why with such a sharpness an ordinary man must be able to know everything about Bible or to differentiate

between the apples that Adam and Eve ate and the sin they committed by doing so. To this reader, nothing but vagueness and oddity is gained and he may even misevaluate Bunyan's masterpiece if he does not find a solution. A good one seems to be found by analyzing the structure of the whole work when the true religious and historical context of its formation is traced and the intentions of the writer are explored in consequence.

The Pilgrim's Progress was written in two parts at the final decades of the seventeenth century – I.1678, II. 1684– and its formation in the context of English Restoration Age according to Isabelle Rivers, is of a primary significance and even of more relevance when studied in consequence with the issue of numerous religious sects that came into being at this age⁴. By the bafflement of the puritan government in 1660, with its dogmatic views of religion, life and conduct, England underwent a metamorphosis and it witnessed new prospects especially in literature: the coronation of Charles II with his strong anti-religious French aesthetic led to the revitalization of the literary genres that had been once dismissed by puritans as unholy or ungodly and the formation of new courtly taste of literature⁵. This new taste in literature not only widened the cleft between the court minority and the mass of ordinary people in society, but also paved the ground for new uproars in result of the attacks from each side to justify their own values. Puritanism had then lost its political power, but it is wrong to claim that by the time of Charles II's reign, the English society had been following the Anglican Church to the greatest extent and that no other religious sect was in propagation. According to Rivers⁶, Non-conformists were one of these important religious sects - those who refused to undergo the Act of Unity that was practiced in 1662; the act of taking oath in church of England and accepting the revised version of the Book of Common Prayers. Among these Non-conformists are Baptists who believed in the idea of Baptism only through immersion – not by sprinkling or any other forms –and not for every children at birth, but for those true adult believers who have reached the state of soul competency – which is a preface to salvation– by believing in the power of Faith and Scripture and the autonomy of the local

congregation. To study John Bunyan and his masterpiece's religious significance, one needs to have his Baptist tendencies in mind.

As a Baptist deacon, John Bunyan in his middle ages had become a popular one, one who was able to gather a community of thousand men in a solitary spot to listen to his fiery preaches, despite all the threats that would come from the side of the government and the Anglican Church; one who spent twelve years of his life in prison solely because of his Non-conformist view, but as a child some thirty years prior to that time, John Bunyan was an unholy man who had been born in a descent family in Bedford - north of London - never "going to school, to Aristotle, or Plato", brought up "in a very mean condition, among a company of poor countrymen"⁷. These paradoxical states or better to say, these two different phases of his life and the way the transition from one to the other, reflects his religious maturity seem to serve well the purpose of studying *the Pilgrim's Progress* as a second Bible.

Bunyan's Childhood is the representative of the life of ordinary people in early seventeenth century England, and the way his religious system of thought was formed, portrays the religious context of his community as a Non-conformist one. Besides, it can be claimed it has affected the theology beyond the formation of *the Pilgrim's Progress* which is manifest in the overall structure of the work as well as each detail according to what Stephen Greenblatt states in his article in the way of giving a more clear cut definition of new historicism and the complex relation that may exist between a work of literature, its artistic and social tones⁸. As a child Bunyan would detest any religious duties and his apathy toward religion is typical of the new puritan society in which the religious dogma was to gain a new political weight. It can be said that all those dogmas resulted in a kind of unfavorable balance in case of religion. But, after a series of mental or better to say theological conflicts, Bunyan finally felt the gap between the true religion of God and what was practiced in his society and embraced the Baptist theology with all its emphasis on one's self-found way of salvation and its much similarity to that of Lutheran sect. In his way toward salvation, he faced many difficulties and had the experience of many epiphanies, dreams and signs – the same as Christian in *the Pilgrim's Progress* – and tried to rescue his soul from the shivering that one Sunday was given to him while hearing the Church Women chanting "Will you leave your sins and go to heaven, or have your sins and go to hell?"⁹: the very apples of Gias's preach.

It was just stated that Lutheran theology affected Bunyan much in his struggles toward salvation. In his biography he himself confesses to this fact and in commemoration of Luther's Commentary on Galatians states that "I prefer the book before all others as most fit for a wounded conscience"¹⁰. According to Luther, by relying on the power of personal Faith and Scripture alone, one can reach the state of true conscience that is the power to train one's soul to become able to distinguish between the right path and that of darkness without the assistance of any mediator whether the church, the pastor or the clergy. Bunyan was in quest of such a conscience and his struggles to reach such a state he found it necessary to oppose the Anglican Church and its politics which finally resulted in his captivity and twelve years of prison. These twelve years are much significant as they gave Bunyan the idea of writing *the Pilgrim's Progress*.

In his twelve years of prison, Bunyan had enough time to look at everything from a good distance, so as to ponder the ordinary people, their need for salvation and the hunger of their soul for true Christianity - what in his viewpoint the established

church was miles away from. In the Prison Meditations, he declares that: "the prison very sweet to me, hath been since I came here, and so would also hanging be, if God would there appear"¹¹. The idea of the presence of God and his witness first of all reflects Bunyan's personal obsession - in fact his own conflicts in search of true faith - and secondly, a soul in search of martyrdom. According to Pastor Phil A. Bunyan was finally successful to witness the result of his "struggles over his soul" and all his speculations and vigils elevated him to a level that "the Lord used the gospel witness of several to bring him to repentance and faith in Christ"¹². Pastor Phil A. here uses Gospel metaphorically and tries to speak about the power of Lord and his words that could pierce the heart of true believers, giving them a confirmation for the true Faith in Jesus Christ. By analogy, it can be said that Bunyan finally felt it necessary to tread in the way of God, to fulfill his new mission that was creating a second Gospel: what could pierce the heart of his countrymen in the same way and was powerful enough to rescue them from the deprivation of the established Church. But, how he did so through *the Pilgrim's Progress* is the question to be answered concentrating on the structure of this work.

The first thing to be mentioned in case of the structure of *the Pilgrim's Progress*, is the matter of allegory. According to Dr. Abjadian, the whole work is an allegory about man and his "Holy War" between goodness and evil in worldly life and his soul's pilgrimage toward the salvation in the other. He finds Bunyan's greatness of the "dream allegory", in his "witticism and actuality"; in the reflection of an ordinary English man's everyday religious practice with the purpose of the elaboration of important "spiritual and theological" matters¹³. He adds that Bunyan does so, by using the method of writing "Spiritual Autobiography"¹⁴, which was familiar to everybody from the Middle Ages. In fact, this was done to enhance the effect of allegory to catch more attention from ordinary people or as another critic believes with an "enticing purpose" to turn their carelessness into passionate, earnest pursuit of the kingdom of Jesus Christ"¹⁵, or looking structurally to insert allegorical images like "Snares, Lines, Angles, Hooks and Nets to catch different readers, some of whom had to be groped for, and be tickled too"¹⁶. In fact, Bunyan's personal intrusion in the work indirectly as the personae gives it an autobiographical weight and makes it very different from any other works of religious literature to an extent that it would even give the ordinary seventeenth century reader - with all his religious concerns - a strong sense of empathy.

Besides allegory and autobiographical aspects, the language of Bunyan's masterpiece is what makes it structurally different from other religious works. According to Sharrock, the language of "*the Pilgrim's Progress* still retains the sense of personal urgency: it is his [Christian's] tremendous need to find a righteousness not his own by which to be saved that we encounter in the very first paragraph, and which is the force irresistibly driving Christian along the road to his final entry into the Celestial City."¹⁷. But how this sense of personal urgency is gained and reflected through what strategies?

The most important strategy seems to be the Biblical tone of the whole work. In fact, Bunyan has tried to make use of Biblical diction, epigrams and allusions to the degree that the seventeenth century reader would be chilled by the feeling that he is reading the book of God.

Here are two examples:

Here is a poor burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, but am going to Mount Zion, that I may be delivered from the Wrath to come; I would therefore, Sir,

since I am informed that by this Gate is the Way thither,
know if you are willing to let me in?¹⁸

Breathes there a man, whose judgment clear
can teach their course to steer, run himself
life's career wild as the waves?¹⁹

The reader will soon find that phrases like “a poor burdened sinner”, “but am going to Mount Zion” and “judgment clear” are very close to what one reads in Bible; phrases that bear a strong preach-like tone. The sentences are also short and balanced, and would catch the attention of the reader as they would provide enough space for him to digest the matters mentioned: this is the strategy used in many places in Bible to create a religious discourse that is effective, pathetic and elucidative simultaneously. Bunyan is successful in this case and excels other works of religious literature by his talent in blending “personal urgency” - as mentioned above and the public religious discourse.

The other issue to be mentioned in dealing with the language of *the Pilgrim's Progress*, is the way Bunyan uses character names to represent types or as it was common in medieval religious writing, to use name symbolism. What Bunyan does there in his book is not an invention, but it has been done in such a plain and direct way that its simplicity and smoothness would beat the illiterate addressee of the seventeenth century; what the heavy Latinate nature of other works would not permit. To bring some examples, names like: Christian, Christiana, Evangelist, Obstinate, Pliable and Mr. Worldly Wise Man can be mentioned. Bunyan's struggle in this case has later been labeled as one of the most effective attempts of the seventeenth century's writers to reach a proper language for religious literature²⁰.

The last thing that shall be mentioned in case of the language and the structure of *the Pilgrim's Progress*, is the issue of Classification and Chapter Names. In fact, Bunyan artistically breaks his allegory into a number of chapters or episodes that are highlighted by capsulated and self-explanatory titles. These titles foreshadow each chapter and reflect on each one as being a centered discourse in which all the elements serve the main purpose of creating a canon: a canon that would reflect the intention of the whole work regardless of the variety or the surface difference that may exist between chapters. For example, when the reader faces “Vanity Fair”, “The Slough of Despond” or “House beautiful”, his mind is directly driven toward a definite issue and the sense of suspense is livened in him. This reader is then to face a straightforward language that would keep him on going line by line to fulfill him. Again this is what an experienced preacher like Bunyan is likely to do, to fascinate his audience. It shall not be forgotten that besides the quality mentioned above, these titles have been much innovative, and Bunyan's diction as well as his strategy in creating memorable titles has affected different discourses²¹.

Now that John Bunyan's *the Pilgrim's Progress*, is analyzed structurally and the religious context around its production has been detected, one can be more confident to confirm it as being a second Bible. Maybe now, he is accustomed enough with the language of the “Interpreter”, and knows his answer to “what meant this?”²², beforehand.

End Notes

¹John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Part II, 215.

²Barry E. Homer, “The Neglected Gospel of John Bunyan in ‘the Pilgrim's Progress’”, *The journal of apologetics*, 3 (2001), 2.

³N. H. Keeble, ed., *The Pilgrim's Progress*, (Oxford: Oxford UP., 1998), ix.

⁴Cambridge Histories, Chap.6. Isabelle Rivers “Religion and literature”, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP., 2008), 462.

⁵David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature: The Restoration to the Present Day*, (Berkshire: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1969), 537.

⁶Rivers, 446.

⁷George Offor, ed., *The Works of John Bunyan*, (Oxford: Oxford UP., 1865), 495.

⁸Jan R. Veenstra, ed., *The New Historicism*, Chap I, “Toward the a Poetics of culture: On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare”, Stephen Greenblatt, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2004), 190.

⁹Offor, 3.

¹⁰Offor, 1.

¹¹John Bunyan, *The Prison Meditations*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2006), 2.

¹²Phil A. Newton, “John Bunyan: A Journey in His Life and Legacy”, (Heritage Conference, Mobile, AL, 2007).

¹³Amrollah Abjadian, *A Literary History of England*. Vol. 6. (Shiraz: Shiraz U.P, 1387), 136-137.

¹⁴Abjadian, 137.

¹⁵Homer, 3.

¹⁶John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. J. B. Wharey, 2nd ed., rev. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 3.

¹⁷Sharrock, 11.

¹⁸John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Part I, 28.

¹⁹John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Part II, 128.

²⁰Rivers, 449.

²¹Galen K. Johnson, “The Pilgrim's Progress in the History of American Public Discourse.” *LATCH* 4 (2011): 2.

²²John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999), Part I, 34.

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