

The Great Influence of *The Bible* on John Bunyan and *The Pilgrim's Progress*

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Abstract

As the very foundation of the western civilization, *The Bible* has been greatly influencing the world, and the publication further broadens this influence. This essay offers a comparative aspect of the western wisdom between *The Bible* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, thus revealing the great influence of *The Bible* on John Bunyan and his *The Pilgrim's Progress* on the aspect of the language style, theme, construction of the narrative and so on.

Key words: *The Bible*; Influence; *The Pilgrim's Progress*; allegorical; Moral

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INTRODUCTION

A. The Bible

The great literary treasure, *The Bible* (*King James Version*), is not only a great Christian masterpiece, but also a world literary work of great importance, which consists of the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. Generally speaking, "Literature is the combination of all oral or written behaviors and works." (Liang, 2007) For hundreds of years, *The Bible* has been playing an immeasurably essential part in world literature, especially in the formation and development of the Western civilization. There is no exaggeration to say that no book has shaped the western culture as much as *The Bible*. Apart from its great literary values, it even has far-reaching consequences

and continues to have a powerful influence on the world's politics, arts, law, ethics, language, and social customs. The influence of the book goes so widely into the western world that people still use the term "Christian civilization" instead of using "Western civilization". No wonder the book is often called "encyclopedia" and even a "library".

B. The Significance in the Formation of the Western Civilization

As a Christian classic work, *The Bible* greatly influences people's lives as well as their thoughts and beliefs. It is accepted that *The Bible* is the very foundation of many people's faith and belief. Being the foundation of the Christian culture, *The Bible*, on one hand, exerts great influence on the concept and conformation of the western culture, and on the other hand, wins over many distinguished people to reinforce its unique contributions by creating their own works. Taking *The Bible* as their endless source of inspiration, many poets, artists and writers created splendid poems, paintings, arts and crafts and novels, which enriches the world literature all the more. Among the many literary works, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan are most typical ones in the western world of the 17th century. Here I just discuss on how *The Bible* affected Bunyan and his work—*The Pilgrim's Progress*.

1. THE BIBLE'S INFLUENCE ON JOHN BUNYAN

1.1 A Brief Introduction to John Bunyan

John Bunyan (1628-1688), an evangelical Baptist preacher, was born poor and uneducated. The exact date of his birth is not known, but on November 22, 1628, no doubt, as an infant only a few days old, he was christened in the Church of England chapel at Elstow in Bedfordshire. Though small money could be made, his father's tinkering provided the family with adequate

living. As a child, little Bunyan was energetic and naughty and also full of dirty words. No children of the same age with him could rival him on this point. A biographer and friend of Bunyan, Charles Doe once said that Bunyan was not only an illiterate, but also a sinner of blasphemer.

In fact, Bunyan did get some schooling, but not much. Anyhow he learned how to read and write, which turned out to be one of his greatest blessings and also opened a new world to him.

As a child, Bunyan was sensitive and often suffered from terrifying dreams. He was tormented by devils and spirits in his dreams and thought constantly about the possibility of going to hell. These dreams and his vivid imagination were truly a source of inspiration in his writings. The year 1642 witnessed the outbreak of the Puritan Revolution. Two years later, in 1644, Bunyan volunteered and was conscripted into the Parliamentary Army. In 1647, Bunyan was discharged from the army and in the same year he got married. His wife's influence over him finally convinced him to attend church regularly and began to read *The Bible*. His wife brought him the seemingly valueless but in fact precious two religious books as her dowry, and thus Bunyan's own Christian pilgrimage began. After giving birth to four children, his wife died, which was a heavy blow to him. However, his second wife proved to be a great comfort and source of strength to him during the long years in prison. He was arrested and put in jail one day in 1660 for preaching without a license. During the imprisonment, *The Bible* was the only book that accompanied him. So people call him "man of one book". It was in the jail that Bunyan began to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the most influential allegorical work in English literature. Harrison remarked Bunyan as "he almost was breathing in the body of God." (Harrison, 1964)

Bunyan was released from prison in 1672, and he became more influential in preaching. In 1675, he was put in jail again. This time his stay was short, lasting only about six months, during which he completed the book that he had started in his first imprisonment—*The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is still a masterpiece of the same kind and has kept Bunyan's name known to this day. The book was published in 1678, and it turned out to be extraordinarily successful, which was a big surprise both to Bunyan and to the whole literary world. So Bunyan began his undying fame as a Puritan writer.

The Pilgrim's Progress, Bunyan's masterpiece and one of the most popular books in the English literature, was written in the form of allegory and dream. In a dream the author tells how he "saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face turned from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. "He looked, and saw the man open the book and read therein; "and, as he read, he wept, and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he broke out with

a lamentable cry, saying 'What shall I do?'" (Bunyan, 2003)

1.2 Influence on Bunyan's Character and Belief

As was stated earlier, Bunyan was regarded as "man of one book", so it is not difficult to deduce how much the only Book shaped his character. A rebellious and wicked child though Bunyan once was, he began seriously worried about the state of his soul after realizing his past misdoings. When playing with youngsters on Elstow village, he would suddenly stop in the middle of the game to wonder whether he was sinning in enjoying himself like this? Should he not have his mind on more serious things, such as saving his soul? But he found no answer.

Time did not cure his sense of sin, but with time passing by, he fell into spells of extreme depression. He was obsessed with doubts, fears and nameless anxieties. He often had terrifying nightmares in which he was put into hell for his sin. To put it simply, he was weighed down by an overwhelming sense of guilt. The great turning point in Bunyan's life came with his imprisonment in Bedford jail, where he managed to live a relative quiet, fruitful inner life by writing down his feelings, thoughts and fancies, for the reason that he could turn to *The Bible* in order to be saved and finally find himself the peace of his soul. So it can be easily imagined how much *The Bible* cast Bunyan's nature. Through reading and praying, Bunyan became quite another person, the first and foremost is religious.

Without any doubt, it is *The Bible* that saved Bunyan from feeling of sin and falling into the general group. It is also the great Book that made him stand out above other writers in the 17th century and made the fame he ever enjoyed till now.

While he was imprisoned, his belief was not as strong as it should be. Sometimes he feared being killed, sometimes he was afraid of humiliating his faith, and sometimes he even a little doubted his firmly-held beliefs, such as "hope to be saved" and "eternal life". Of course, all of these feelings were well expressed in the dialogues and inner descriptions of Christian and the many obstacles he met. From this point, *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be seen as Bunyan's allegorical autobiography. At the end of the book, Bunyan further strengthened his belief, with the help of *The Bible*, by giving the book such an ending: Christian, despite great difficulties, finally entered the Celestial City, where the God dwells, thus forming his strong belief towards "Eternal life".

1.3 Bunyan's Motivation of Writing the Book

Not only Bunyan's character and belief were greatly shaped by *The Bible*, but also his aim of writing the book. Being nearly uneducated, Bunyan never thought of becoming a writer, nor did he dream of leaving anything. He took up his pen sheerly for belief, for the need of his brothers and sisters then. That is to say, Bunyan

interpreted *The Bible* from his own understanding to his fellow men. Only to his astonishment, *The Pilgrim's Progress* became what people call, the “masterpiece”.

1.4 Introduction to the *Pilgrim's Progress*

The Pilgrim's Progress, From This World to That Which Is to Come (usually called *The Pilgrim's Progress* for short.) is an allegorical novel. Bunyan wrote this book when he was imprisoned. In the book, he combined something of the allegorical manner largely dependent upon *The Bible*, with a satiric realism. What made it a spiritual as well as a literary classic is the compelling account of a Christian “clothed with rags and with a Book in his hand”, who journeyed from his hometown, the City of Destruction, to the Celestial City. During his travel, he made him over hazards, such as “the Slough of Despond”, “the Valley of the Death” and the like and all sorts of conflicts and oppositions and many false pilgrims.

The book was an instantaneous success. It was reprinted in colonial American and was widely read in Puritan colonies. *The Pilgrim's Progress* were translated into many languages and became the most astonishingly popular and influential work, only second to *The King James Bible* in the Protestant world. And the popularity of the work, unlike others, reached into all sections of population. It is no exaggeration to say that KJB (*The King James Bible*) is by far the greatest gem of literary art of all the works in the history of English literature, and that it has been exerting great influence upon the written and spoken language of English-speaking people. Great writers influenced by the KJB are too numerous to be mentioned. Here I would like to mention an Englishman, who was immensely influenced by the KJB and is known as “man of one book”, John Bunyan.

2. INFLUENCE ON THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

2.1 The Surface Influence on the Language

It is said that Bunyan read no more than five books in all his life, among which the KJB inspired Bunyan's religious zeal. The spirit of *The Bible* took possession of his thoughts and feelings; it fell upon his imagination as a mantle, it was diffused around his mind as an atmosphere. So it is no wonder that in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the choice of words and language style were greatly influenced by *The Bible* and the influence can be divided into two, one is the surface influence, the other is the deep influence. Let's first focus our attention on the surface influence by *The Bible*. By surface influence, I mean Bunyan's selection of words, the direct and indirect quotations from *The Bible* and some of the key words and also some names of characters and places.

From the title, “*The Pilgrim's Progress*”, we can know the influence immediately. The word “pilgrim”

is originated in *The Bible*, which means “sojourn, who wants to find a home, one that is more beautiful than the real one. That is the home in heaven, a promised land of heaven.” Here Bunyan used the “pilgrim” not out of a mere coincidence, but out of his mastery of the KJB. He portrayed and pointed out a bright road for the Puritans to follow. We can still understand this influence from the examples below; just taking the opening paragraph for example, it reads,

As walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den and I laid me down in this place to sleep and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold that I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a Book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked and saw him open the Book and read therein; and as he read, he swept and trembled; and not being able longer to contain, he broke out with a lamentable cry saying: “What should I do?”

Just from the opening paragraph, we can trace the “wilderness”, “burden” and the question “What shall I do?” back to *The Bible*. The “wilderness” can be found in Chapter 3, Matthew of the *New Testament*, with the original sentence goes as follows, “In those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the **wilderness** of Judea.” As for the “burden”, see Chapter 12, Hebrews, the original sentence goes like this, “Therefore, we also, let us lay aside every **burden** and the sin which so easily ensnares us and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

We can also find the question related by the protagonist, “what shall I do?” in Chapter 2 in the Art of the *New Testament*. It says that, “men and brethren, **what shall I do?**” Examples like the above-mentioned ones are far more than these. In fact, some researchers say that more than eighty per cent of the dialogues in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are quoted or excerpted from *The Bible*.

Larken Lerland remarked that “great number of Biblical quoted passages which are mixed into the story's plot, plot's description, characters' dialogues and characters' producing make clear that the author looked his surroundings and dealt with his writing world by viewing at *The Bible*.” (Larken, 1988) Many places and characters, which Bunyan used in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, are from *The Bible*. Characters such as Beelzebub (means Satan), Morse, David, Solomon, Judah and Jesus Christ, places such as the Palace Beautiful and a wall called Salvation and so on, in fact, first appeared in *The Bible* and borrowed by Bunyan to create his own book. From this, *The Bible's* great impact on Bunyan can be easily seen.

2.2 The Deep Influence on the Language

The deep influence on *The Pilgrim's Progress*, includes the language style, the arrangement of the words and sentences, stops and also the rhythm. As can be seen from the examples below: When Christian and Hopeful wade

into the River of Death, they then addressed themselves to the water; and entering, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend, Hopeful, he said, "I sink in the deep water, the billows go over my head, all the waves go over me. Selah." Christian's remarks is an adoption from Psalms 42 of the *Old Testament*, it writes, "all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." and Psalms 69, "I sink in deep water, where there is no standing; I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me." Maybe the most striking is Bunyan's adoption of the biblical parallelism, which can be explained by the premise that Bunyan knew *The Bible* so well that "*The Bible's* words have become Bunyan's own", as is claimed by John Richard Green, a nineteenth century historian. Bunyan wrote in simple and forceful language, in colloquial and energetic language, all in all, in an instantly comprehensive language. Bunyan's style grew out of his familiarity with *The Holy Bible*.

From the examples listed above, we can have a little knowledge of the language style of Bunyan. He is a faithful reader of *The Bible*, from which he lets fly his imagination, absorbed the language, spirit and rhythm to form his own.

As was mentioned above, Bunyan wrote the book for his brothers and sisters in trouble. Bunyan was regarded as "man of one book", the reason lies not so much in his limited education as in the Book's enormous effects on his life. Bunyan said in *Grace Abounding to The Chief Sinners*, his spiritual autobiography that, "I was then never out of *The Bible*, either reading or meditation, still crying out to God that I might know the truth." In the days he was imprisoned, he started studying *The Bible* in great details. After 12 years of confinement, he completed his masterpiece. It can be said that *the Bible* had supplied him with all the necessities of his deep heart, his imagination, with which he dealt with his "pen world".

2.3 The Theme of the Book

When we compare *The Bible* and *the Pilgrim's Progress*, the similarity of the theme of the two books can be found by witty readers. *The Bible* is concerned with sin, not just your sin, but with everyone's sin. *The Bible* reveals God's great grace for bringing about the forgiveness of our sin and will regard us with eternal life. To put it simply, *The Bible* is about changing from death to life, from destruction to salvation, from being burdened to be free. While, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, from the very beginning, tells us that the pilgrim, living in the City of Destruction and afraid of being burned by the fire from the heaven, wants to go to the Celestial City in order to be saved. These two books share the same theme, that is, salvation from sin and also God's response to those who were wicked and those who were righteous.

2.4 The Plot Structure

In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian's first destination, the Wicked-Gate, was expounded by

Goodwill like this, "There are many ways butt down this; and they are crooked and wide, butt thou mayest distinguish the right from the wrong, the right only being strait and narrow."

Here Bunyan's skill of portraying the gate is greatly based on the KJB. In *The Bible*, in Chapter 7:13 of the *New Testament* Matthew, it says, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: For wide is the gate and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat because strait is the gate, narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life and few there be that find it." Bunyan used the wicked-gate as the core of the Christianity and also the starting-point of the pilgrimage. The gate represents the very start of the Holy way or the "Celestial City." All of these are no accident at all, as we can find the archetype in the KJB.

2.5 The Casting of the Characters

Bunyan's creative ability can be found in his casting of two characters, one is the protagonist, and the other is the antagonist. Christian is, without any doubt, the protagonist of the book, together with hopeful and faithful. It would be more reasonable to regard hopeful and faithful as two of the characteristics of the Christian than to regard them as his friends. The antagonists, all with one goal, to prevent Christian from entering the Celestial City, were produced by Bunyan artfully. Hardly any description on the characters' appearance, Bunyan used their names to illustrate their traits, qualities, using the discourses and contents of the discourses to inspire readers. The characters, though rough in appearance, are all detailed in nature. This can leave the readers enough room to further explore the figures, for example, the casting of "Ignorance" "Talkative" "Flatterer" "Turn-away" and "the Jury" in the Vanity Fair. All these figures created by Bunyan are of biblical style, which is a good show of his mastery of *The Bible*. Bunyan, for example, chose a model or story from *The Bible*, and remodeled it by using his own creativities as his "raw material" of his writing. He then put the moral and implication of *The Bible* into his plot structure or character-building by using simile, metaphor, or symbolism, thus making his stories or characters in accordance with *The Bible*, Apollon, is the best illustration. No wonder John Richard Green could claim that, "in no book can we see more clearly the imaginative force which had been given to the common life of Englishmen by their study of *The Bible*, Its English...is the English of *The Bible*...So completely did *The Bible* become Bunyan's life that one feels its phrases as the natural expression of his thoughts." He lived in *The Bible* till its words became his own (*A Short History of the English People*, 1874, p.627)

2.6 The Moral Instructing Readers

From *The Bible*, we learn how the human race began and how sin first entered the world and continued to be

practiced. We learn about God's response to those who were wicked and those who were righteous. In a word, *The Bible* is God's words to humankind, telling people to distinguish the right from the wrong, and cautioning people not to take the wrong path. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the author expressed man's fierce struggle for salvation. As Christian's journey proves, the road to Heaven is not easy, but the unassisted journey is harder and even more dangerous, a case in point is God's denial to ignorance. Through the Christian's Pilgrimage, Bunyan demonstrated a spiritual pilgrimage from a sinner to a saint. And the happy ending of Christian and Hopeful provides readers with hope, cheer, courage and also power. As long as they are persistent and dedicated, they will finally be granted entry into Heaven. The moral that instructs readers is unanimously the same on this point.

CONCLUSION

For over 300 years since its publication in 1678, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has become a religious masterpiece. It helps to shape the prose form and style of English language and literature. So many phrases from the book have made their way into everyday speech and writing, such as "the Slough of Despond" "Vanity Fair" "Giant Despair" and the like. The author also left us proverbs that instruct us even today, such as "a bird in hand is worth two in the Bush" "Hedges has eyes and little pitchers have ears" and "Penny wise and pound foolish". Bunyan also had a great deal of influence upon a great number of English novelists, W. P. Thackeray, for instance. So there

is no wonder that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the best-loved and most-widely read book in English literature, only second to *The Bible*.

The Bible is not only the very foundation of Bunyan's creation and his belief, but also the source of many distinguished writers, among which Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the most outstanding one. Other works may excel this in depth of thought and knowledge of human nature; other books may rival it in the originality and size; but for the biblical style and its great impact on the Puritan's belief, nothing yet discovered can surpass it except *The Bible* itself. That's the reason why the book still finds numerous pious readers in every passing generation. For 300 years or more, the book is read, translated and circulated from hand to hand.

It is *The Bible* that gave Bunyan the deep thought and created the famous book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The influence can be strongly felt in the eyes of the earnest readers, who will definitely treasure the two masterpieces, one is *The Bible*, and the other is *The Pilgrim's Progress* of course.

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