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John Bunyan and 'Reprobation Asserted

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John Bunyan and the Authorship of “Reprobation Asserted”

REPROBATION asserted: or the doctrine of eternal election & reprobation promiscuously handled, in eleven chapters is, according to its title page, written by “John Bunyan of Bedford, a Lover of Peace and Truth.” The authenticity of this claim has, however, been a matter of dispute since Bunyan’s principal biographer, John Brown, argued that the book was pseudonymous.¹ Subsequent critics have been divided on the issue: Henri Talon and G. B. Harrison rejected Brown’s arguments and instead affirmed Bunyan’s authorship, whereas Roger Sharrock, while rejecting Brown’s arguments as inconclusive, nevertheless concluded after a more intensive analysis that the work was, in fact, not Bunyan’s.²

Reprobation asserted, as the title indicates, is an attempt to prove by logic and biblical argument the Calvinist doctrine of reprobation, which in essence states that men have been predestined by God from eternity to damnation, although this damnation is the result not of God’s act of reprobation but of man’s sin. Divine grace elects only the chosen few, and the remainder are left to be damned because of their sin—helpless and unable to accept the offer of salvation in Christ. The purpose of *Reprobation asserted* is to defend this doctrine against the attacks of the Arminians who contended that God reprobated men only after their refusal of his grace, and not from eternity.

The treatise itself is undated but it has been suggested by Charles Doe that it was published in 1674.³ Unfortunately, Doe, in spite of his personal acquaintance with Bunyan, was occasionally inaccurate in his information. *Christian behaviour*, for example, was also dated 1674 by Doe, when in fact it was first published in 1663. *Come, & welcome, to Jesus Christ* was dated between 1679 and 1683, but was published in 1678. *Mr. Badman* was published in 1680, although Doe dated it 1684. Doe, then, is not a wholly reliable witness.

The first attestation to the existence of the treatise and to Bunyan’s authorship of it is not Doe’s listing of it in his edition of Bunyan’s works (1692), but its inclusion in a catalogue of Bunyan’s works printed in the third edition of *One thing is needful: or, serious meditations upon the four last things* in 1688, by Nathaniel Ponder. The basis on which Ponder regards the various books as genuine is whether or not Bunyan’s name is printed in full. *Reprobation asserted* would therefore qualify, in Ponder’s judgment, as a genuine work of Bunyan. Although his reasoning is not necessarily logical, it is a point in favour of Bunyan’s authorship of the treatise that the publisher of at least eight of his works regarded him as the author. His testimony is additionally important in view of the fact

that he was the publisher of *The pilgrim's progress* (1678 and 1684) and was therefore acquainted with Bunyan's concern⁴ about the imitations of that work appearing pseudonymously.

Reprobation asserted was not included in the (incomplete) edition of Bunyan's works published in 1692, although it undoubtedly would have been had that undertaking been completed. Doe specifically stated that those works listed by him not included in the first "folio" were to be included in the second—which was never published. The first "complete" edition of Bunyan's works, published in 1736-37, did not include *Reprobation asserted*. This does not, however, necessarily imply (although it is likely) that its editor, Samuel Wilson, regarded it as pseudonymous, for his edition did not include *A discourse of the . . . house of God* (which was included in the 1688 catalogue of Ponder), *A case of conscience resolved*, or *Profitable meditations*. *Reprobation asserted* was first included in the edition of Bunyan's works edited by W. Mason and J. Ryland and published in 1780. It has also been published by George Offor in his edition of 1859-62.

The title page of *Reprobation asserted* states that the books were printed for G.L. "and are to be sold in Turn-stile-Alley in Holbourn." The initials almost certainly mean—or were intended to give the impression of meaning—that the book was printed for George Larkin. In the period between 1659 and 1688 there is no record of another bookseller with the initials G.L.⁵ Prior to that period George Latham (d. 1658) sold books in London, but he did his business at the Brazen Serpent or the Bishop's Head, both in St. Paul's Churchyard.⁶ At this time, however, Bunyan's books were being sold by J. and M. Wright (*Some gospel-truths opened* [1656], *A few sighs from hell* [1658], and *The doctrine of the law and grace unfolded* [1659]). Furthermore, if Latham had published *Reprobation asserted*, it would have been, at the latest, Bunyan's fourth book—hardly possible in view of its theological and philosophical context and his lack of education and writing experience. At this date, of course, it is also highly improbable that someone would have used Bunyan's relatively unknown name for a pseudonym. The initials G.L. must, therefore, refer to George Larkin.

Larkin, who sold, among other things, *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners* (1666), *Good news for the vilest of men* (1688), *Solomon's temple spiritualiz'd* (1688), *A discourse of the . . . house of God* (1688), and *The acceptable sacrifice* (1689), usually did business at Two Swans without Bishopsgate. He did, however, sell books at at least three other locations, although none of these was Turn-stile Alley.⁷ Furthermore, it was Larkin's custom to print his name in full rather than to use his initials. According to Brown, therefore, Larkin is not the true bookseller, nor is Bunyan the author.⁸ It must be pointed out, however, that Larkin was prosecuted by the authori-

ties for selling various books,⁹ and it is therefore possible that he temporarily sold books at Turn-stile Alley, using only his initials.

That pseudonymous works were published in Bunyan's name is an established fact. It is also true, however, that, barring the possible exception of *Reprobation asserted*, these pseudonymous works did not appear until after the publication of *The pilgrim's progress* in 1678. If Doe's date of 1674 for the publication of *Reprobation asserted* is correct, the treatise appeared four years before the work which first occasioned the publication of (other) pseudonymous works. If Doe erred in his dating, it is probable that this error would have been like his others in that he dated it too late; which would mean that it appeared even more than four years prior to *The pilgrim's progress*. The description of Bunyan on the title page as "a Lover of Peace and Truth" substantiates the fact that the book was published before 1678, for after that date a pseudonymous author would more than likely have described Bunyan—as he himself usually did—as the author of *The pilgrim's progress*. It would thus seem reasonable to conclude that if the work is pseudonymous something other than one of Bunyan's allegories would have persuaded the author to use Bunyan's name.

Among Bunyan's earlier works were *The doctrine of the law and grace unfolded*, *Christian behaviour*, *The holy city*, *Grace abounding*, and *A defence of the doctrine of justification, by faith in Jesus Christ*—certainly enough major works to have given him some kind of reputation. In the period between 1672 and 1674 he was involved in the controversy on the question of the necessity of baptism for church membership and communion, and the final volume of his trilogy on this subject, published in 1674, was *Peaceable principles and true*. This work must have provided Bunyan—or the pseudonymous author—with the inspiration to describe him(self) as "a Lover of Peace and Truth".¹⁰ It is thus possible that an admirer of Bunyan in this debate (an open-membership, open-communion Particular Baptist), knowing his reputation, wrote *Reprobation asserted* and had it published in Bunyan's name. This would explain the existence of a pseudonymous work prior to the publication of *The pilgrim's progress*. On the other hand, on the basis of the external evidence *in toto* there is no reason to regard the theory of a pseudonymous author as preferable to the idea that Bunyan himself wrote the book. The external evidence neither proves nor disproves his authorship.

Stylistically *Reprobation asserted* is manifestly different from Bunyan's theological treatises and homiletical and expository works. Its logical and well-ordered structure, involving eleven chapters in forty-four pages, is essentially without parallel in any of Bunyan's writings. The customary "use" or "application" with which Bunyan usually concludes his works is also absent. *Reprobation asserted*

is written in a dry and pseudo-logical manner,¹¹ at times distinctly philosophical,¹² and does not display the popular language and illustrative material characteristic of Bunyan's writings. "He writes not long before he either melts with tenderness or glows with fire."¹³ Only when Bunyan was directly embroiled in a theological controversy did he tend to omit somewhat his popular phraseology, his direct appeal to the audience, and his use of colourful metaphors. In *Reprobation asserted* Professor Sharrock has found only one fully developed metaphor¹⁴ and three phrases typical of Bunyan's style: "Lazarus . . . stunk in his Grave"; "the Reprobate then doth . . . run himself upon the Rocks of eternal Misery . . ."; and "How is the Word buried under the Clods of their Hearts? . . ."¹⁵ Bunyan was not the only writer of his period who used such graphic language, and the presence of only three phrases and one metaphor typical of his style in an entire treatise so uncharacteristic of his writing in general provides sufficient reason to doubt seriously his authorship.

The doctrine of reprobation presented in *Reprobation asserted* is essentially harmonious with that taught by Bunyan. There is, for example, the definition of reprobation as non-election (although Bunyan was not nearly so emphatic on this point),¹⁶ the unchangeableness of reprobation, in that the precise number to be elected and reprobated has been determined by God,¹⁷ and the stress on the idea that men are condemned for their sin rather than as the consequence of their reprobation.¹⁸ Mention is also made of God's "Distinguishing Love"¹⁹ and of the offer of salvation and grace to the greatest sinners—the latter being one of Bunyan's favourite preaching themes.²⁰ None of these ideas were peculiar to Bunyan, however, but were, in fact, generally accepted doctrine among contemporary Calvinist theologians and preachers. Yet in general the doctrines of election and reprobation set forth in *Reprobation asserted* are compatible with the statements of those doctrines found in Bunyan's (other) works.

There are, nevertheless, several important discrepancies between the theology of *Reprobation asserted* and that set forth in Bunyan's (other) writings. The most important of these discrepancies is the definite statement of a general atonement in *Reprobation asserted* which is contrary to Bunyan's concept of a limited atonement.²¹ According to the author of the disputed treatise, "Christ died for all [II Cor. v. 15], tasted death for every man [Heb. ii. 9]; is the Saviour of the World [I John iv. 14], and the Propitiation for the sins of the whole World [I John ii. 2]."²² These verses are clearly used in support of a doctrine of a general atonement. Bunyan also quoted Heb. ii. 9 and I John ii. 2 when referring to the extent of the atonement, but he qualified the latter verse by stating that Christ "as a Propitiation" is "not ours only, but also for the Sins

of the whole World; to be sure, for the Elect throughout the World. . . ."²³ Furthermore, the author of *Reprobation asserted* clearly states that

the death of Christ did extend itself unto them [that is, the reprobate]: for the offer of the Gospel cannot, with Gods allowance, be offered any further then the death of Jesus Christ doth go; because if that be taken away, there is indeed no Gospel, nor Grace to be extended.²⁴

According to Bunyan, on the other hand, Christ "died for all his Elect . . .,"²⁵ and "doth but petitionarily ask for his own, his purchased ones, those, for whom he died before, that they might be saved by his Blood."²⁶ There is, of course, the possibility that he changed his mind on this issue in that most of the statements expressing his belief in a limited atonement come from a later period from that when *Reprobation asserted* was written. Yet at least two statements reflecting the concept of a limited atonement were made in 1672 and 1674, so that such a possibility is indeed remote.²⁷

Two other points of doctrinal difference may be noted. The important explanation that sin came into the world by being "offered" to man and "prevailing" over him does not appear (elsewhere) in Bunyan's writings, even when he is discussing the fall and man's responsibility for his sin.²⁸ Secondly, the argument that the divine will is the rule both of mercy and of righteousness is typically Calvinist and therefore compatible with Bunyan's theology, but this was a subject with which he was not particularly concerned.²⁹

In conclusion it must be said that when all the facts are analysed it is possible to argue plausibly either for or against Bunyan's authorship of *Reprobation asserted*. Having stated this, however, it must also be said that the discrepancies in style and theology, coupled with the uncertain external evidence and the distinct possibility that the treatise was written shortly after the publication of *Peaceable principles and true* by an open-membership, open-communication Particular Baptist who admired Bunyan's role in that debate, point strongly to the likelihood that *Reprobation asserted* is a spurious, pseudonymous work.

NOTES

¹ Brown, *John Bunyan (1628-1688): His Life, Times, and Work* (Tercentenary ed.; rev. F. M. Harrison, London, 1928), p. 228.

² Talon, *John Bunyan: the Man and His Works*, trans. Barbara Wall (London, 1951), p. 261, n. 10; G. B. Harrison, *John Bunyan: A Study in Personality* (London, 1928), pp. 125-126; and Sharrock, personal correspondence, March 27th, 1963. I am indebted to Professor Sharrock for his assistance in evaluating the problems of authorship connected with this

treatise. F. M. Harrison, in *A Bibliography of the Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford, 1932), lists the treatise as "repudiable." P. 34.

³ *The Works of That Eminent Servant of Christ, Mr. John Bunyan*, ed. Charles Doe (London, 1692), p. [871].

⁴ See his preface to *The pilgrim's progress* (London, 1684).

⁵ Cf. H. R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Booksellers and Printers . . . from 1641 to 1667* (London, 1907); and *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers . . . from 1668 to 1725* (London, 1922).

⁶ Plomer, *A Dictionary . . . 1641 to 1667*, p. 113.

⁷ *Ibid.*; and *A Dictionary . . . 1668 to 1725*, pp. 183-84.

⁸ Brown, *John Bunyan*, p. 228.

⁹ Plomer, *A Dictionary . . . 1668 to 1725*, p. 184.

¹⁰ It would appear, therefore, that Doe was accurate in his dating of *Reprobation asserted*.

¹¹ The author is "hard and cold in style, thin in scheme and substance, and he is what Bunyan never was—pitiless in logic, without being truly logical"—Brown, *John Bunyan*, p. 228. G. B. Harrison is willing to admit that "Bunyan and his religion at its worst is shown in *Reprobation Asserted*, a piece of cold-hearted casuistry, inspired partly by religious hate [referring to Bunyan's unjust condemnation in the Agnes Beaumont affair, which Harrison describes on pp. 118-22]." Yet he also believes that "the same hard, logical style is to be found in *Questions about the nature and perpetuity of the Seventh-day Sabbath*, wherein Bunyan was again arguing a point of doctrine". *John Bunyan*, pp. 122 and 125.

¹² *Reprobation asserted*, pp. 8-9 and 15. (Hereafter referred to as *R.A.*).

¹³ Brown, *John Bunyan*, p. 228.

¹⁴ *R.A.*, pp. 13-14. Of this metaphor Sharrock observes that it "lacks the colour and the energetic quality that one is accustomed to in Bunyan's imagery. . . ."

¹⁵ *R.A.*, pp. 32, 36 and 39. Sharrock has also examined the scripture references used in *R.A.* for the occurrence of texts concerning promises or threatenings which, because of their autobiographical significance for Bunyan, occur both in *Grace abounding* and in various doctrinal treatises. Only two such examples were found: *Jer. xxxi. 3* (p. 43) and the phrase "to binde them fast in Chains of Darkness, unto the Judgement of the great day . . ." (p. 11). Cf. *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners* (London, 1666), sect. 145 and (in the 1688 edition) sect. 143; and *The doctrine of the law and grace unfolded* (London, 1659), pp. 213-14.

¹⁶ *R.A.*, pp. 4 and 13-14. Cf. Bunyan, *An exposition on the first ten chapters of Genesis, and part of the eleventh*, *Works* (1692), p. 46; and *Saved by grace: or, a discourse of the grace of God*, *Works* (1692), pp. 572 and 575.

¹⁷ *R.A.*, p. 12. Cf. Bunyan, *Solomon's temple spiritualiz'd* (London, 1688), p. 214.

¹⁸ *R.A.*, p. 14. Cf. Bunyan, *The resurrection of the dead, and eternall judgement* (London, c. 1665), pp. 167-68; *Come, & welcome, to Jesus Christ* (London, 1678), p. 163; and *The greatness of the soul* (London, 1683), p. 78.

¹⁹ *R.A.*, pp. 9 and 40. Cf. Bunyan, *A Treatise of the fear of God* (London, 1679), p. 97.

²⁰ *R.A.*, pp. 24-25. Cf. Bunyan, *Good news for the vilest of men* (London, 1688).

²¹ Cf. *R.A.*, pp. 25-26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²³ Bunyan, *The work of Jesus Christ as an advocate* (London, 1688), p. 69.

²⁴ *R.A.*, p. 26.

²⁵ Bunyan, *Work of Christ*, p. 207.

(Concluded on p. 125)