

The Non-Necessity of the Son, or, Christianity as Charade

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Before answering the title question -- "Is *Paradise Lost* a Christian poem?" -- one way or the other the prior question of what makes a poem Christian must be answered. One's answer to that will determine one's answer to the current one. My answer is that a poem is Christian in a meaningful sense if it takes the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Christ to be matters of central importance. One might think that putting the matter this way is unfair to Milton's epic, since its focus is on a period or periods long before the Incarnation. But this is not a valid objection, since the poem treats, one way or another, the whole "race of time" from before the creation to the Apocalypse (*PL* 12.554). So the lack of prominence of the Crucifixion might count as part of an answer. The Crucifixion does, in fact, appear in the poem—for two lines in Book 12.412-13. But the suffering of the figure on the cross is not mentioned, and immediately his power is reasserted—"But to the Cross he nails [God's] enemies" (415). This is seen as bringing salvation to "as many as offer'd Life / Neglect not" (425-26), and the Savior is seen as putting in some brief appearances to the Apostles and then entering into glory to await "When this world's dissolution shall be ripe" (464), so he can reassert his glory and power in the Last Judgment. Meanwhile, on earth, shortly after the Apostles bring their message to "all Nations" (440), corruption sets in and history takes its dark course, dominated by superstition backed up by secular power.

But of course we have been looking in the wrong place for Milton's celebration of the Son's mission and sacrifice (the name Jesus barely appears in the poem). We must look not to Book 12 but to Book 3. My argument for the rest of this piece will be that in Book 3, the Son's willingness to undergo death temporarily is entirely superfluous. I see the Son as no more needed in Book 3 than he is in Book 6. It is clear that in Book 6, the Chariot of Paternal Deity, in which and through which the Son demolishes the rebel angels, could perfectly well be self-steering (and really ought to be so). My claim is that the Son's role in Book 3 is exactly parallel to this in its lack of necessity.

Milton has been, as we all know, much rebuked for having God the Father speak in his own defense in the poem. But it seems to me to have been quite predictable, even inevitable that Milton would do so. He greatly admired Zeus's speech at the beginning of *The Odyssey*, and that speech—on why mortals are wrong in blaming their problems on the gods—is clearly the model for God's speech in *Paradise Lost*. Zeus claims that mortals bring about their fates through their own sins, and do so even when they are warned about committing the sins in question (Aegisthus was told to leave Agamemnon and his wife alone, and warned that Orestes would in turn kill him if he did not do so [Homer, *Odyssey* 1.48-62]). Milton wanted to give his own version of this, with more explicit moral reasoning. He sets up for what might be seen as the presumption of writing a speech for the Almighty

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by preceding God's speech with the magnificent proem on light, blindness, and the inner light. God's speech becomes something to which the prophetic Milton has special access.

After reminding us (ostensibly the Son) of where the narrative has gotten, God gets to the point—Satan's goal: the destruction "or worse" (*PL* 3.91), the perversion, meaning the moral perversion, of mankind (on Milton's "or" constructions, see Herman, Chapter 2). He does not explain why perversion is more wicked than destruction, but I suppose that Milton thinks it obvious that corrupting a potentially higher power is more wicked than a mere exercise of overwhelming physical force. Satan will succeed; "Man" will fall and his progeny will also somehow be involved as well (this is taken for granted but unexplained). God's point in this section of the speech is exactly that of Homer's Zeus: with regard to mankind as with regard to Aegisthus, "Whose fault? / Whose but his own?" (96b-97a). I think that Stanley Fish is right that the tone of this speech is meant to be neutral rather than peevish (86). This can be maintained if "ingrate" in the second half of line 97 is read as an adjective rather than a noun. God is not calling man names; he is describing man's behavior. The meter bears this out; after the caesura that follows "his own," the rest of the line falls into perfect iambic if "ingrate" is stressed on its second syllable (i.e. "ingrate, he had of me").

But unlike Zeus, God explicitly provides the philosophical underpinnings to his judgment of responsibility. Man's fall was in his own power, since he had the capacity not to do so. But here the speech takes a bit of a turn, one that is little remarked but proves to be of crucial importance. God widens the topic of the discussion. It now includes all morally conscious beings, not merely human ones—"Such I created all th' Ethereal Powers" (*PL* 3.100). The discussion that follows concerns why God created these powers in this way. He wants obedience to be chosen, not to be a matter of the creature's nature. God assumes that acting according to a good nature is not in itself praiseworthy, and that he would take no pleasure in witnessing such. Necessity, God explains, negates moral value (110). Only consciously and explicitly chosen behavior is admirable.¹ God wants "proof" of good will (103). He asserts, oddly (though parenthetically), that "reason also is choice" (108). He wrestles with the problem that foreknowledge causes for this framework. In a strangely hypothetical formulation, God says, "if I foreknew / Foreknowledge had no influence" (117-18). He concludes the thought by wittily using the language of predestination to describe freedom—"they themselves *ordain'd* thir fall" (128; and see "they themselves *decreed* / Thir own revolt" [116-17]; emphases mine).

The next section introduces God's second major point. Freedom is the first, but the new sentence reminds us that in all the lines about freedom and allegiance and praise, God has been speaking of "th' Ethereal Powers" who failed at obedience. "Man" was left behind in *PL* 3. 99 ("sufficient to have stood though free to fall"). "Thir ... revolt" should have made it clear which group God has been speaking of. Thinking in ontological terms and recalling that "Man" is supposed to be the focus of the speech, God then continues, somewhat opaquely, "The first sort by thir own suggestion fell" (129). This must refer to the fallen angels, since man has been presented as falling victim to the adversary's "glozing lies" (93). Man, apparently unlike the rebel angels, has been misled—"Man falls *deceiv'd* / By th' other first" (130-31a). This is presented as a major distinction, and its consequences are enormous: "Man therefore shall find grace, / The other none" (131b-132a). This conclusion explicitly satisfies "Mercy and Justice both" (132). It provides mercy to men, justice to the fallen angels. Both will manifest God's glory (133), though God concludes, without explanation or clear logical foundation, that "Mercy first and last shall brightest shine" (134).

So the matter is settled. Man will find grace (not yet defined; here it suggests that all mankind will find it). The rationale for this is purely in the realm of moral philosophy. There are problems with this—it would seem to imply universal human salvation and would also seem also to imply the salvation of all the fallen angels except Satan, since they fell, as we know and will come to know further, at Satan's suggestion, not their own. Milton may have wanted to believe these things, or perhaps should, logically, have believed them (other people in the period did [see Walker; Hart]). But putting those issues aside, the point is that nothing further needs to be done or said to assure that man shall find grace. The justice of the differentiated results, given the premises, is explicit. The Son sees this: "O Father, gracious was that word which clos'd / Thy sovran sentence, that Man shall find grace" (*PL*

3.144-45). God then clarifies what man finding grace means. It turns out to describe an opportunity, not a given—or rather, an opportunity as a given. Those who accept the offered grace and persist “to the end” (197) will be saved; those who neglect and scorn the offered gift do not receive the benefit of it. This all seems perfectly clear and is within a normal freedom and responsibility framework. As the Son recognizes, Justice is at work throughout—with regard to man and to the rebel angels (154-55). God’s justice and his mercy are really the same. They are both shown in his mercy to the virtuous.

What follows this is a kind of afterthought. The syntax enacts this. Everything seemed clear. Yet suddenly, “But yet all is not done” (204a). Somehow Justice has still not been done, even though it has been explained to us at length that it has been. Suddenly moral philosophy is not enough, and there must be some other reason for mankind to find grace. God indulges in some tendentious rewriting. He had characterized the human transgression as failing at a test that was meant to be arbitrary, and had described the event as happening “easily” (94-95)—which I take to mean something like “without deep forethought.” The Son speaks of man’s fall as “folly” (152). But suddenly God switches the register into darkly political terms. Man will break his fealty and become a traitor (205-08), a description that applies much better to Satan than to man. This is clearly meant to make the Son’s offer seem less unnecessary. But “Die hee or Justice must” (210) remains a non-sequitur. And when we get to the mechanics of the distinctively Christian narrative, there is some nervousness about Incarnation—“Nor shalt thou by descending to assume / Man’s nature, lessen or degrade thine own” (303-04), and the focus is much more on the Son’s future reascent to glory and future prime position among “th’ Ethereal Powers” (314-22) than on his descent into an earthly body. The happy ending of the Son’s task is not the establishment of Christianity on earth but the Apocalypse in which “the world shall burn” and be replaced by an impeccable version of itself (334-35). In that final period, “God shall be All in All” (341). But it is pretty clear that he could have been so all along, and that the whole machinery of Christianity is a kind of charade. Critics often say that there is something inauthentic in Satan’s offer to undergo hardships for his community, while that of the Son is truly authentic. I think this has the matter exactly backwards. Moreover, the related idea that the Son *argues with* the Father in response to the Father’s speech is incorrect (for a classic statement of both views, see Samuel 601-11; rpt. in Barker 233-45). When the Son says that the Father’s goodness would be questioned (165-66), the Son is speaking counterfactually. It would be questioned if the Father had not said what he did. The lines are a continuation of the Son’s praise for the Father’s graciousness. Finally, to return to the poetry of Book 3, I think that Milton wrote much more beautifully about “th’ Arch-chemic” physical sun (609) and the metaphysical one (“Bright effluence of bright essence” [6]) than the theological son.

But the foregoing requires a coda. Stanley Fish’s favorite question is: “what if you are right?” If I am right, and the whole “machinery” of Christianity is actually unnecessary to the soteriology of the poem, an obvious question arises: why did Milton include it (after the “But yet”)? I can imagine two answers, both of which seem plausible to me: 1) Milton was protecting himself and did not wish to reveal the true radicalism of his religious thinking, especially in the post-Restoration era; or 2) Milton was unwilling to fully acknowledge, even to himself, the full radicalism of his thinking. I favor the second but would not argue against someone who held the first view. Like Tillyard, I would posit conscious and unconscious meanings to Milton’s great epic.²

ENDNOTES

¹ I have drawn attention to this moral scheme and an alternative to it (present in the poem) (196-97). An abridged and updated version appears in Herman and Sauer 25-48.

² Tillyard 234-44. The chapter on “Paradise Lost: the Unconscious Meaning” begins: “A close study of the text would reveal many instances of Milton’s betraying what he will not admit or does not realise he feels” (234). Tillyard saw Milton’s fundamental belief as “so utterly incompatible with Christianity that it was out of the question for Milton to admit it.” The result of this is the weakness with which Milton treats “what to most Christians are the central facts of their religion” (238).

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