

A STUDY ON MILTON AND THE BIBLE

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Introduction

Paradise Lost and other major poems by Milton (Samson Agonistes, Paradise Regained, On the Morning of Christ's Nativity) dramatise stories from the Bible. But references to the Bible are much more pervasive in Milton's work than just in those works whose storyline obviously comes from the Bible. Phrases and images from the Bible are everywhere in both his poetry and his prose. If you really want to understand references and allusions in English literature, not only in Milton, the Bible is one of the most important sources to get to know (another being Greek and Roman mythology).

The Bible is not just relevant to Milton as a 'literary' source. As we've seen in the page on Milton's Religious Context, in the seventeenth century the Bible was used in all sorts of different contexts. In particular, it was often used to back up points of view on controversial matters, since the Bible was accepted by most people as an authoritative source. Milton quotes heavily from the Bible in his pamphlets against bishops governing the Church, his pamphlets in favour of divorce, and his writings defending the execution of the king. The storyline of the Bible can be summarised in many ways. A useful way to view it for the purpose of studying Milton is to see it as a progression from Creation, through the Fall and the Redemption, and finally towards Consummation.

Creation

According to the Bible, God made the world, and everything in it, perfect. He created humanity, male and female, to look after and develop the world, living in perfect harmony with God and the rest of creation. In Paradise Lost, the creation of the world is narrated by Raphael in Book VII, and the creation stories of man and woman are told by Adam and Eve in Books VIII and IV respectively. The relationship of our first ancestors to the rest of creation is described in Book IV of Paradise Lost, ironically through the eyes of Satan:

*Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honour clad
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious maker shone. (IV.288)*

In the words of theologians Graeme Goldsworthy and Vaughan Roberts, Adam and Eve here are 'God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing'.

Fall

The first humans, Adam and Eve, are tempted by the serpent to rebel against God by putting themselves in the place of God. They give in to this temptation. Because of this, the whole of creation comes under a curse which brings evil, pain and death into the world. Milton, along with John Calvin, one of the main Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century, saw the Fall as leading to a corruption of human thinking as well as of human moral choices. Along with other seventeenth-century thinkers, Milton linked this to a corruption of language as well, so that our words no longer communicate knowledge in the way they should.

In Genesis, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent, but it not clear how the serpent became evil. Other parts of the Bible seem to suggest that the serpent is a representation of Satan. Most Christians believe that God created all things good but that there is a being that brings evil into God's good creation. Putting these statements together, many Christian theologians have settled on a theodicy (a justification of the divine in view of the existence of evil) in which evil originates with the rebellion against God by some of the angels. These angels, including Satan himself, were originally good but became evil by rebelling. There are a few passages in the Bible (Isaiah, 14:9-15; Luke, 10:18; Revelation, 12) which can be read as referring to this, though each of these instances present interpretative difficulties. Milton followed and elaborated on this interpretive tradition of the 'fall of the angels'.

Redemption

God, as soon as humanity has fallen, begins to put in motion a plan to rescue his creation and restore it to what it ought to be, starting to hint at a chosen king who will come to rescue God's people and defeat the powers of evil. In Genesis chapter 3, this is a fairly cryptic clue, but in *Paradise Lost* Milton dramatised this decision in Book III and related the historical outcome in the long narrative by the archangel Michael in Books XI and XII which summarises much of the rest of the Bible.

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Over a long period of time God reveals himself to different people and makes an agreement (covenant) with them, that they will be his people representing him to the world, and that he will be their God, protecting and providing for them. Over time, these people become the nation of Israel, and, despite their frequent rebellion against God, he stays true to his covenant. Milton, along with other thinkers of his time, used the history of Israel to debate the pluses and minuses of different political systems.

Eventually, after the nation of Israel had fallen under Roman control, God's Son, Jesus, is born into the people of Israel as the promised chosen king (Messiah/Christ). When he reaches adulthood, Jesus teaches about God's reign and performs miracles for a few years before he is executed by the political and religious authorities. However, by his death Jesus takes the fallenness of the world into himself and so defeats it, showing his victory by coming back to life from the dead. Milton (especially in *Paradise Regained*) tended to focus on the teaching of Jesus more than on his death and resurrection.

Consummation

The victory Christ has accomplished is not yet fully visible. Christians believe that one day, Christ will return to enforce his victory and destroy the powers of evil. In between, God is shaping a people, the Church, to be a sign and a foretaste of this. Milton, as Christians still do today, lived in this period of expectation.

Many Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth century argued that the institution of the Church had become corrupt, and that the True Church was not the 'visible' Church which has its presence in this world, but an 'invisible' church, made up of all true believers and known only to God. As many other Protestants did at the time, Milton identified the Pope and the Catholic Church as being the focus of the powers of darkness described in the book of Revelation (e.g. the dragon and the city of Babylon). Some of the Parliamentarians and Puritans saw the Royalists and bishops of the Church of England as also being on the side of evil.

Milton saw the fallenness of the world and the loss of Eden described in *Paradise Lost* as leading to a fragmentation in our lives, our relationships and our understanding. In *Areopagitica*, Milton's book in defence of the freedom of the press, Milton expresses this metaphorically by depicting Truth as a beautiful virgin who has been hacked to pieces by deceivers. In this in-between time in history we need to try to put these pieces back together, and this, in Milton's view, was the main purpose of education. Yet we have to wait until the second coming of Christ to see these fragments of Truth put back together into a beautiful whole body:

***We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons,
nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming;
he shall bring together every joynt and member, and
shall mould them into an immortal feature of lovelines
and perfection. (CPW, II.549)***

Milton tells us that it is our responsibility to seek the truth, but that we will not see it in its wholeness until God's final victory reverses the loss of paradise. This is the paradox of living in the in-between time.