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The Duality of Christ in *Paradise Regained*

by Chad O'Neill

Paradise Regained is an illustration of Milton's concern for the theological implications presented by Christ's dual role as God and man. Milton viewed the episode involving Satan's temptation of Christ as more instrumental in humanity's salvation than the passion narratives on the basis that it was during this episode that Jesus fully realized the Messianic identity, its role in humanity's salvation, and the course of action needed in order to fulfill that purpose.

The dramatic irony that Christ is not recognized by Satan as the Son of God who expelled him from Heaven during Milton's previous epic, *Paradise Lost*, is coupled with the theological irony that the Son of God in corporal form is unaware of His previous Heavenly existence as well. This choice seems to be evidence of Milton's preference in gospel tradition. While the Son in *Paradise Lost* is derived mainly from the Johnine tradition of Christ as the existing Word during the creation, Milton is forced to follow the synoptic gospels for most of the content in *Paradise Regained*. The temptation scenario is absent from the Gospel of John, as are nearly any examples of the human element in Christ, excepting the passion narrative. The theology John found more suitable to follow was that of Christ's divinity. The synoptic gospels, however, paint a descriptive picture of Christ's birth, mention his childhood briefly, and most importantly, incorporate the temptation episode as a prerequisite to his Messianic mission. Hence, the theological question rises as to whether Jesus suffered the temptations as man or God (Pope 13-26).

Many exegetes have found it hard to believe that Christ could not have cast Satan out or controlled His corporal needs at any time during the wilderness episode, if it had been His wish to do so (Pope 19). This would make Christ's resistance to the temptations a divine act for the sake of exemplifying proper conduct for human beings. Opposing theologians have asserted that this view fails to give Christ's act its due merit. Pope states that:

since [Christ] is said to have been tempted "in all points like as we are," he must have been denied any special advantages of prescience or power

which might give the ungodly occasion to argue that his temptations were noticeably easier to bear than our own. (19)

Milton seems to force these opposing theologies into congruence by displaying the growth of the divine through the testing of the human.

Fortunately, such a task was to the poet's advantage dramatically. Satan plays the foil for Christ with the intention of retaining the feigned sovereignty of his current position on earth (PR 1.58-63). He sets out on his mission with a spirit of mischief that echoes that seen in the fiend during his excursion with Eve in *Paradise Lost* (PR 1.100-05). He does however, have the secondary motive of discovering Christ's identity and relationship with God (PR 1.91-3).

Milton's rendering of Christ also works well against the backdrop of Messianic mystery. The wilderness passage gives Milton the opportunity to present the human aspects of Jesus while enhancing His realization of His divinity. As Lewalski points out, Christ must "be able to fall, must be capable of growth, and must be genuinely (not just apparently) uncertain of himself" (135). If not, the conflict between Satan and Christ loses any sense of exigency.

The very human element of confusion is present in Jesus even after his baptism by John and the proclamation from heaven:

O what a multitude of thoughts at once
Awakn'd in me swarm, while I consider
What from within I feel my self, and hear
What from without comes often to my ears,
Ill sorting with my present state compar'd.
(PR 1.196-200)

The austerity of the Messiah's office and the loss of childhood are sacrifices Milton's Christ broods over, hoping to find some meaning to His fate:

When I was yet a child, no childish play
To me was pleasing, all my mind was set
Serious to learn and know, and thence to do
What might be publick good; my self I thought
Born to that end, born to promote all truth,
All righteous things:

(PR 1.201-06)

The poet even goes so far as to give Jesus heroic aspirations as a child. Though actually Messianic in content, they are, I think, not unlike the average child's heroic fantasies:

. . . Victorious deeds
 Flam'd in my heart, heroic acts, one while
 To rescue Israel from the Roman yoke,
 Then to subdue and quell o're all the earth
 Brute violence and proud Tyrannick pow'r,
 Till truth were freed, and equity restor'd:
 (PR 1.215-20)

These fantasies are quickly replaced, however, with Jesus's Messianic ideals of using "winning words to conquer willing hearts, / And make persuasion do the work of fear" (PR 1.222-23).

Christ's revelation of full divinity and His triumph over the temptations of the human will, then, are the key components leading to humanity's salvation. To cope with the dilemma of when Christ actually became aware of His Messianic role, Milton invents a scenario in which Jesus's mother relates to Him the story of His birth. Milton takes incidents of the nativity from Luke and Matthew (PR 1.242-58). Upon learning of His divine origin, Jesus begins to study the scriptural texts for instruction in performing His duties as Messiah (PR 1.259-67). Though aware that He is meant for some great purpose, Jesus remains in a state of expectation and bewilderment until wandering into the desert (PR 1.290-93). It is in this setting Milton places the revelation:

The while her Son tracing the Desert wild,
 Sole but with holiest Meditations fed,
 Into himself descended, and at once
 All his great work to come before him set;
 How to begin, how to accomplish best
 His end of being on Earth, and mission high:
 (PR 2.109-114)

The theological notion that Christ realized his destiny during the wilderness episode is reinforced by Milton's decision to create extensive, beautiful and revelatory verse for Christ, rather than to follow the gospels' accounts of the Messiah responding in succinct scripture to the temptations. Thus, rather than show Christ's majesty as grace through simplicity, Milton defines the Messiah's identity as it reaches Christ's mind. In the fullness of religious experience, enlightenment ensues. As Christ is repeatedly approached and tempted by Satan, the doubt and urgency of the man in Him is dispelled. As the psychologist Abraham Maslow might say, a more self-actualized Messiah comes into being. The confidence and fluency in Jesus's poetic responses exhibit his awareness of what the Son of God is to be.

Know therefore when my season comes to sit
 On David's Throne, it shall be like a tree
 Spreading and over-shadowing all the Earth,
 Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash
 All Monarchies besides throughout the world,
 And of my Kingdom there shall be no end:
 (PR 4.146-51)

Christ, in effect, is explaining Himself to himself. It is my contention that, through His response to each temptation, Jesus comes to a better understanding of who and what He is.

Though Satan's role is to extract the divine from the human Christ, as preordained by God (PR 1.141-43), he escapes sympathy via Milton's definition of predestination. In Book One, Chapter Four of *The Christian Doctrine*, Milton explains that individuals act of their own accord, regardless of the fact that their actions are preordained in Heaven (Elledge 313). Christ reinforces this theory while rebuking Satan for feigning obedience to God:

But thou art serviceable to Heaven's King.
 Wilt thou impute to obedience what thy fear
 Extorts, or pleasure to do ill excites?
 (PR 1.421-23)

Satan's role, however, remains no less instrumental in Humanity's salvation than it was in his fall. The attack on Christ's humanity, and His subsequent resistance to it, defines the example for men and women to follow (Pope 14).

The two adversaries, upon meeting, proceed to engage in a battle of wits, with truth in Christ's company and guile in Satan's. Satan loses his charm gradually, with each stunning defeat, and the cunning serpent from Milton's preceding epic is, through the grand and painfully truthful rationale of the Messiah, transformed into an exhausted and desperate fiend, unable to compete at the spiritual level of Christ's arguments. As the old tricks continue to fail, Satan becomes more preoccupied with Christ's identity. By the final temptation, he is at his most frightening. In a fit of rage, the tempter throws off all pretense, and in great conflict, tells the truth:

All men are Sons of God; yet thee I thought
 In some respect far higher so declar'd.
 Therefore I watch'd thy footsteps from that hour,
 And follow'd thee still on to this waste wild;

Where by all best conjectures I collect
Thou art to be my fatal enemy.

(PR 4.520-25)

What is most striking about the final temptation is the sense of urgency created by Milton's poetic choices. Rather than saturating the scene with his own poetic verse, Milton relies almost solely on the scriptural accounts. Satan is beyond the wily or subtle and in his urgency attempts to turn Christ's faith in scriptural truth against him, only to find the Messiah ready again. The effect of quick action due to the characters' taciturnity heightens the dramatic effect of Satan's second fall and, subsequently, Christ's victory.

Christ's final response also takes on a dual meaning under the theological concept Milton follows. As this culmination of testing occurs, so does the realization of God in Christ. As Christ utters the scriptural message, "Tempt not the Lord thy God" (PR 4.561), he reaffirms his faith in the Father as well as condemns Satan for tempting the Son, now fully realized as God (Lewalski 135). Therefore, Milton portrays Satan falling in Christ's stead, taking the punishment he had hoped to befall the Messiah (PR 4.562).

It is a mistake to see Christ as God rather than human after these events. Milton makes it clear that Jesus is still also a man. The Angels minister to his corporal needs by feeding him the food of immortals (PR 4.581-93). Thus, the duality is not ended by the divine revelation of Christ; rather, it is fulfilled. The man had been raised to be God, but the two could not exist apart, as Milton displays through the final lines of the poem when the son, after undertaking the Father's office, returns to his mother's home (PR 4.636-39).

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