

The Dual Reading of *Paradise Regained*

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In discussing the incarnate Christ in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton argues that Christ was at the same time completely human and completely divine, and that while these two natures were individually distinct, they were also indissolubly united. This doctrine, he says, 'is generally considered by theologians as, next to the Trinity in Unity, the greatest mystery of our religion'.¹ It has continued to perplex critics of *Paradise Regained*. Some have seen the Christ of the poem as fluctuating between the two natures, or as being supported by his divinity at moments of crisis; others have seen him as exploring his own nature, and coming to realize or assert his divinity on the pinnacle of the temple, in the utterance 'Tempt not the Lord thy God'; there is a general tendency to look at least for some kind of psychological progression in the poem, with Christ 'undergoing a genuine adventure of testing and self-discovery'.²

I wish to argue in the first place that the Christ of *Paradise Regained* experiences the entire action in his human nature alone. While theologically he never ceases to be divine — and how this

- 1 *De Doctrina Christiana*, l.xiv (Columbia edition, xv, 263). Subsequent references are by volume and page to the Columbia edition. I use 'two natures' in Milton's sense as meaning 'two essences', 'two substances', and 'two persons' (xv, 271). I assume Milton's authorship of the treatise, although this is currently a matter of debate.
- 2 The quotation is from Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic* (Brown University Press, 1966), p. 109. Don Cameron Allen has Christ crossing and re-crossing the boundaries from one personality to the other in *The Harmonious Vision* (Baltimore, 1954); C.A. Patrides finds theologically and dramatically compelling 'the gradual awakening in Jesus ... of his divine nature' in *Milton and the Christian Tradition* (Oxford, 1966, p. 147); the temptation on the tower is interpreted as leading to Christ's realization of his divinity by E.M. Pope, Douglas Bush, A.S.P. Woodhouse and others.

My own approach to the poem has been much reinforced — reinforced, as I had reached the same view independently — by Hugh MacCallum, *Milton and the Sons of God* (Toronto, 1986).

can be so is 'the greatest mystery of our religion' — we are to abandon any notion that the Christ undergoing the temptations in the wilderness has his divinity as a resource to call upon, that he need only snap his fingers to convert from the one nature to the other. He is the second Adam whose perfect obedience is to repair the deficiencies of the first, and it is only in his human nature that he can do this, with only the same equipment as other men.

The first objection to this approach might seem to occur when we have hardly read thirty lines. When Christ is baptised at Jordan

Heav'n op'ned, and in likeness of a Dove
The Spirit descended, while the Fathers voice
From Heav'n pronounc'd him his beloved Son.³

The poem seems to begin by identifying Christ as the son of God. So it does: but what does the title mean? This is the problem for Satan, who points out that the angels are sons of God, and so are men. That is, the title 'son of God' does not mean that those to whom it is applied participate in the Godhead, or possess any divinity themselves. It is the special acknowledgment of Christ as the son of God at his baptism which has alerted Satan to the possibility that there might be something different about him:

I among the rest,
Though not to be Baptiz'd, by voice from Heav'n
Heard thee pronounc't the Son of God belov'd.
Thenceforth I thought thee worth my nearer view
And narrower Scrutiny, that I might learn
In what degree or meaning thou art call'd
The Son of God, which bears no single sense;
The Son of God I also am, or was,
And if I was, I am; relation stands;
All men are Sons of God; yet thee I thought
In some respects far higher so declar'd.
Therefore I watch'd thy footsteps from that hour ...
(IV. 511-22)

3 *Paradise Regained*, I.30-32. All references are to *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, Volume 2, ed. Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1955).

Or as he puts it more succinctly, in another context:

Be not so sore offended, Son of God;
 Though Sons of God both Angels are and Men,
 If I to try whether in higher sort
 Then these thou bear'st that title ...

(IV.196-9)

This is the one sense in which the 'identity' of Christ is a preoccupation of the poem. Satan's fear, expressed to the council of fallen angels in Book I, is that Christ must be 'the Womans seed' (I.64) who had been foretold as inflicting the fatal wound upon his head, and bringing to an end Satan's reign on earth. He undertakes his second mission in order to avert this danger. It is interesting that he does not relate the Christ in the wilderness to the Christ who defeated him in the war in heaven. God's actual Son (so to speak) he knows full well, but who is this man baptised at Jordan?

His first-begot we know, and sore have felt,
 When his fierce thunder drove us to the deep;
 Who this is we must learn ...

(I.89-91)

I can find no indication in the poem that Christ is uncertain of his identity. With 'the spirit leading' (I.189) he goes into the desert to meditate, and there he recalls his childhood, with the visit to the Temple, and the aspiration 'to rescue *Israel* from the *Roman* yoke' (I.217). He recalls what his mother has told him of his high parentage, with the prophecy that he should 'sit on *Davids* Throne' (I.240), and the Wise Men affirming that 'they knew thee King of *Israel* born' (I.254). When she told him also how Simeon and Anna had proclaimed him in the Temple, Christ went to search the Law and the Prophets for what was written of the Messiah. The Messiah and his role are 'to our Scribes/Known partly', but Christ himself

soon found of whom they spake
 I am.

(I.262-3)

This is quite decisive, like all of Christ's actions and speeches in the poem. He knows he is the Messiah.

This is the identity Christ holds to through the poem. Three aspects of it should be noticed. The Messiah is in the first place the temporal King, the deliverer of Israel from the Roman yoke, the heir to the throne of David whose kingdom will last forever. Although Christ is aware of this role, he seems from the beginning to subordinate it to the second one, the role of the suffering servant, the saviour and redeemer:

my way must lie
 Through many a hard assay eev'n to the death,
 Ere I the promised Kingdom can attain,
 Or work Redemption for mankind, whose sins
 Full weight must be transferred upon my head.
 (I.263-7)

The third aspect of the Messiah is as he is perceived by Satan, as 'the Seed of *Eve*' (I.54) who will administer the fatal wound, in fulfilment of the prophecy in the Garden.

It is crucial to recognize that none of these roles requires the Messiah to be divine. This perspective is of course inescapable after the crucifixion and the resurrection, but *Paradise Regained* is concerned with events before that. The Messiah as deliverer of Israel is a secular figure, a warrior and a king. Christ's study of the Law and the Prophets leads him to envisage his role 'chiefly' (I.263) as that of the suffering servant; it does not lead him to believe that he is divine. Satan knows that his own reign on earth will be brought to an end through God's agency, but he does not know that the agent is God's 'first-begot', who drove him and his legions into the deep. The role of the Messiah was to become divine once Christ assumed it, but it had not itself been formulated in those terms. As Milton points out in the *De Doctrina Christiana* (XV, 281), the Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to appear.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish in *Paradise Regained* the perspective of the dramatic action from the perspective of the narrative voice. The narrator belongs to the time after the crucifixion and the resurrection, and he consistently refers to Christ as 'our Saviour', and uses the title 'Son of God' as conferring divinity. Within the poem, which takes place before the concept of the Messiah had been transformed, 'Son of God'

is still used in the other sense: the human and the divine nature of Christ are both kept present.

Satan's mission is still to probe Christ's identity and to deny the fulfilment of the prophecy. Disguised as 'an aged man in Rural weeds' (I.314) he approaches Christ after he has spent forty days in the wilderness, with the temptation

if thou be the Son of God, Command
That out of these hard stones be made thee bread.
(I.342-3)

In refusing this prospect, and also the banquet which Satan offers in Book II, Christ might be regarded as conquering the sin of gluttony which had contributed to Adam's fall. The real temptation, of course, is that he should distrust providence, presume to take things into his own hands, denying the principle which has guided him hither:

now by some strong motion I am led
Into this Wilderness, to what intent
I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know;
For what concerns my knowledge God reveals.
(I.290-93)

Some elements in Christ's rebuttal of Satan have been fixed upon by critics as disclosing his divine nature. Thus his reply to the first temptation:

Why dost thou then suggest to me distrust,
Knowing who I am, as I know who thou art?
(I.355-6)

'I know who thou art' leads Satan to admit that he is leader of the rebel angels who were driven 'from bliss to the bottomless deep' (I.361). 'Knowing who I am' is explicable as Christ's awareness that he is the Messiah, the woman's seed who shall bruise the serpent's head. Neither speaker gives any sign that they have met before.

In responding to the temptation of the banquet, Christ observes that he has no need of Satan's good offices, and at this point might seem to be claiming divine powers himself:

Said'st thou not that to all things I had right?
 And who withhold's my pow'r that right to use?
 Shall I receive by gift what of my own,
 When and where likes me best, I can command?
 I can at will, doubt not, as soon as thou,
 Command a Table in this Wilderness,
 And call swift flights of Angels ministrant
 Array'd in Glory on my cup to attend.

(II.379-86)

The first part of this answer takes up Satan's taunt

Hast thou not right to all Created things,
 Owe not all Creatures by just right to thee
 Duty and Service

(II.324-6)

and rebuts his argument by adopting its premises. If indeed I have right to all created things, why do I need your banquet? Christ's further assertion, that he can command a table in the wilderness and summon angels to attend his cup, also takes up Satan's reference to the 'gentle Ministers' (II.375) who have provided the banquet. But the assertion goes beyond that to call on a Messianic text: 'For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways' (Ps 93:11). This is the text Satan himself will try to rely upon in the last temptation; Christ's words have already cut away some of his ground. But none of his statements shows him exceeding his role as Messiah.

As Satan goes on to offer the temptations of riches, of glory, of empire, *Paradise Regained* shows more of the attributes of the minor religious epic, for which Milton found a model in the Book of Job.⁴ There are earlier examples in Drayton's *Noah's Flood* and *Moses in a Map of His Miracles*. Poems in this tradition do not rely on 'characterization' so much as on orations from a given moral standpoint. Satan offers the temptation of riches; Christ in reply gives an ordered statement of the correct moral principles which apply. In other poems in the genre, marginal notes may be given to signalize such key passages. In

4 See G.A. Wilkes, 'Paradise Regained and the Conventions of the Sacred Epic', *English Studies* XLIV (1963), 35-8, and Barbara Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning and Art of Paradise Regained* (1966).

du Bartas' *Judith*, one speech may have the marginal gloss 'The Oration of a subtil worldling', and the response to it 'A zealous godly answer'.

Paradise Regained does not have the marginal comments, but it is directed by the same principle. C.S. Lewis, in his lectures on Milton at Oxford, used to remark on the choice of the adverbs and adverbial phrases which introduce Christ's speeches. It is interesting to tabulate them:

To whom our Saviour sternly thus reply'd (I.406)
 To whom our Saviour with unalterd brow (I.493)
 To whom thus Jesus temperatly reply'd (II.378)
 To whom thus Jesus patiently reply'd (II.432)
 To whom our Saviour calmly thus reply'd (III.43)
 To whom our Saviour answerd thus unmov'd (III.386)
 To whom the Son of God unmov'd reply'd (IV.109)
 Whom thus our Saviour answerd with disdain (IV.170)
 To whom our Saviour sagely thus repli'd (IV.285)
 So talkd he, while the Son of God went on
 And staid not, but in brief him answerd thus. (IV.484-5)

There is one instance which seems exceptional, but really is not:

To whom our Saviour fervently reply'd (III.121)

What this record shows unmistakably is that Christ is invincible to Satan's persuasions. Critics who argue for a drama of self-conquest in the poem have scanty evidence to rely upon. Christ is being tested, but he is shown to be immovable: Milton makes the point with a series of hammer blows. It cannot be otherwise, as Christ's obedience must be perfect if paradise is to be regained. His imperviousness draws an exasperated response from Satan at IV.369-73:

Since neither wealth, nor honour, arms nor arts,
 Kingdom nor Empire pleases thee, nor aught
 By mee propos'd in life contemplative,
 Or active, tended on by glory, or fame,
 What dost thou in this World? the Wilderness
 For thee is fittest place ...

This may reflect some readers' impatience with the static quality of the poem, and it also denies the romantic assumption that any

ordeal must bring deeper insight and self-knowledge. The Christ of *Paradise Regained* is both decisive and immovable.

Given the failure of all his persuasions, Satan decides on a change of tactics for the final test:

to know what more thou art then man,
Worth naming Son of God by voice from Heav'n,
Another method I must now begin.

(IV.538-40)

What is this new method? It may be that whereas in Christ's previous aerial flights (allowed by Providence) he remained physically secure, and that while the storm was sent to intimidate rather than to inflict physical harm, Satan now decides to place Christ's life at risk. He is carried from the wilderness to the city of Jerusalem, and placed on the pinnacle of the Temple.

There stand, if thou wilt stand; to stand upright
Will ask thee skill; I to thy Fathers house
Have brought thee, and highest plac't, highest is best,
Now shew thy Progeny; if not to stand,
Cast thy self down; safely if Son of God:
For it is written, He will give command
Concerning thee to his Angels, in thir hands
They shall up lift thee, lest at any time
Thou chance to dash thy foot against a stone.

The response is immediate and clear:

To whom thus Jesus: also it is writt'n,
Tempt not the Lord thy God; he said and stood.

(IV.551-61)

Critics have variously claimed that at this point Christ asserts his divinity, or that here the human and divine natures converge, or that at this moment God speaks through him.⁵ 'Tempt not the Lord thy God' is taken to mean 'Do not tempt me'.

What Christ says is 'it is writt'n,/ Tempt not the Lord thy God'. The reference is to Deuteronomy 6:16: 'Ye shall not tempt

5 The last interpretation is that of Arnold Stein, who sees Christ being 'inspired', as Samson was by the 'rouzing motions'. See *Heroic Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1957), pp. 128-9, 224-5.

the Lord your God, as ye tempted him in Massah'. This refers in turn to Exodus 17, when the children of Israel complained to Moses that there was no water to drink, and 'Moses said unto them, Why chide ye with me? wherefore do ye tempt the Lord?' (17:2). Moses calls the place Massah 'because of the chiding of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, is the Lord among us, or not?' (17:7).

To tempt God in this sense is to put God on trial, make him subject to human behests. The OED defines 'to tempt God' as 'to put to the test, or experiment presumptuously upon, His power, forbearance etc.; to try how far one can go with Him; hence sometimes passing into "to provoke, defy". So "to tempt providence", etc.' Deuteronomy 6:16 is cited as an example. In the history of rationalism, men have stood in the village square denying the existence of God, and challenging him to send a thunderbolt by 5 p.m. if he exists. This is 'to tempt God'.

It is the same sin to which Satan would expose Christ. He may cast himself down with impunity,

For it is written, He will give command
Concerning thee to his Angels, in thir hands
They shall up lift thee ...

Christ's reply is strictly 'also it is writt'n/ Tempt not the Lord thy God'. The 'also' means that he is answering one text with another. The ministering angels are not denied, for they have been accepted already (II.285-6) as part of the Messianic scheme. The sin would be to call upon them frivolously, and the essential import of Christ's reply is that it *is* a refusal, with the emphasis falling on the last two words in the line:

also it is writt'n,
Tempt not the Lord thy God; he said and stood.

Christ still speaks and acts in his human nature, come what may. To have him reveal his divinity here, at Satan's behest, would mean that Satan had won the contest.

The action is not yet complete. The vanquished Satan falls, bringing 'Ruin, and desperation, and dismay' (IV.579) to his crew which sits consulting; the angels carry Christ away to a

celestial banquet, and sing anthems of his victory over 'the Tempter proud' (IV.595). The victor of the contest in the wilderness is here identified with the victor of the war in heaven, and the 'Son of God' who has undergone the experiences of the poem is the same as 'His first-begot'. Although the anthem thus is a celebration of Christ's triumph, there is no indication that Christ himself hears it. He may be addressed as 'thou', but so is Satan, who is absent. The angelic quire probably belongs to the same level in the poem as the narrative voice and the supervisory comments of God in Book I, that is, a level of information in which Christ does not participate. It is not of great moment at this point in the poem, but this reading is reinforced by the carefully modulated conclusion. The celebration over,

hee unobserv'd
Home to his Mothers house privat returnd.

So far I have been arguing that the action of *Paradise Regained* can be understood as being undergone by Christ in his human nature alone. Theologically his divine nature can never be laid aside, but we must abandon any notion that Christ can get on the telephone to his higher nature when difficulties occur. He achieves the ideal of perfect obedience with only such resources as are available to other men.

But I believe a further step in interpretation is possible. Milton would probably have subscribed to the orthodoxy of the second of the Thirty-nine Articles, that in the incarnate Christ 'two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God, and very Man'. But in the *De Doctrina Christiana* he is particularly aggressive in arguing that the incarnate Christ possessed his human nature in completeness, his divine nature in completeness, and that the union of the two is also complete. He also insists more than once that as the mode of union is unknown, there is no point in speculating about it, and that theorists have wasted time in trying to discuss one nature in separation from the other. If we would simply accept the mystery, how many 'prolix and preposterous arguments' might be dispensed with, how many 'ponderous volumes of dabblers

in theology' might be cast out, and how much 'occasion of heresy' might be removed? (XV, 265). Although he goes on to correct misunderstandings himself, Milton constantly interrupts his own discourse with remarks that 'it is best to be ignorant of what God wills should remain unknown' (XV, 271); that whether the incarnate Christ 'retains his two-fold will and understanding, is a point respecting which, as Scripture is silent, we are not concerned to inquire' (XV, 275); and that 'as to the subject of his two natures, it is too profound a mystery ... to warrant any positive assertion respecting it' (XV, 279).

It is not conceivable that Milton, with these pronounced views, could write a poem in which Christ alternates between his two natures, or is engaged in a transition from one to the other, or is granted spasmodic illuminations in the process. The two natures are complete and distinct, and at the same time their union is absolute. Since 'God has not revealed the mode in which this union is effected, it behoves us to cease from devising subtle explanations, and to be contented with remaining wisely ignorant' (XV, 273). The reading which I have offered of Christ undergoing the temptations in his human nature alone is a partial one. It applies to the transaction between Christ and Satan, and to Christ's meditations preceding. In the commentary of the narrative voice, and of God and the angels, the divine nature of Christ is simultaneously upheld. This allows for a 'dual reading' of the poem. But the interpretation must be even stricter, to accord with Milton's theology.

Within the transaction between Christ and Satan, there is no place where the divinity of Christ is denied. The only exception appears to be that he has no memory of events prior to the incarnation, and so does not recall the earlier encounter with Satan in the war in heaven. This is explained by the reading of Philippians 2:7 that Christ 'emptied himself' (*sese exinanivit*, translated as 'made himself of no reputation') at the incarnation,⁶

6 This is the modern theory of kenosis. Milton discusses Philippians 2:7 in the *De Doctrina* (XIV, 343) and also Luke 2: 52 (XV, 275), texts which are concerned with Christ having 'emptied himself', and having 'increased in wisdom'. Although Christ might 'develop' in this way — and his opening soliloquy proceeds in these terms — he still could not be thought to be growing towards divinity.

a doctrine perhaps attractive to Milton because he saw the Son as subordinate in the Trinity, and not of the same essence as the Father. The Christ of *Paradise Regained* has 'emptied himself' to assume the more limited human nature, but theologically his divinity remains unimpaired (however it might appear to common sense).

In discussing the Trinity and the Incarnation in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton constantly attacks those who would evade theological difficulties — or in his view, the truth of the gospels — by interpreting Christ's utterances as coming now from one of his natures, and now from another. Defining the relationship of the Son to the Father, he assails 'the advocates of the contrary opinion' who use 'the twofold nature of Christ developed in his office of mediator, as a ready subterfuge by which to evade any arguments that may be brought against them':

What Scripture says of the Son generally, they apply, as suits their purpose, in a partial and restricted sense; at one time to the Son of God, at another to the Son of Man, now to the Mediator in his divine, now in his human capacity, and now again in his union of both natures. (XIV, 303)

Milton's own view is emphatic:

Whatever Christ says of himself, he says not as the possessor of either nature separately, but with reference to the whole of his character, and in his entire person, except where he himself makes a distinction. Those who divide this hypostatical union at their own discretion, strip the discourses and answers of Christ of all their sincerity; they represent every thing as ambiguous and uncertain, as true and false at the same time; it is not Christ that speaks, but some unknown substitute, sometimes one, and sometimes another ... (XIV, 229)

When the separate categories do exist — Christ's human nature, Christ's divine nature, and the union of the two — is it hardly possible to avoid referring to them. If we study the single entity *Paradise Regained* attending primarily to the contest between Christ and Satan, the poem offers a coherent presentation of Christ in his human nature, in the record of which there is nothing inconsistent with his divine nature. If we study the same entity attending chiefly to the discourse of the narrator

and the supervisory presence of God and the angels, the poem offers a coherent presentation of Christ in his divine nature, in the record of which there is nothing to conflict with the human nature being simultaneously shown. This is a kind of 'dual reading'. But for Milton 'whatever Christ says of himself, he says not as the possessor of either nature separately, but with reference to the whole of his character, and in his entire person'. It is not possible then for any utterance of Christ in *Paradise Regained* to be reserved to one nature alone. This I believe is the essential intention of the poem. Although we may attend to this aspect of it or that, the two natures are designed to be indivisible within it, and the poem itself to be the embodiment of their union. One might debate whether Milton has achieved this, or whether it is possible to achieve it in a literary presentation (or in any other presentation that one might think of). But he could hardly have attempted anything else.