

CHAPTER 13

MILTON'S CORRUPT BIBLE

NEIL FORSYTH

LIKE most other serious Christians of the early modern period, Milton knew quite well that the text of the Bible was untrustworthy. That was why Catholics argued for a parallel church tradition alongside the holy word. As Thomas More pointed out in his argument with the Bible translator, William Tyndale, some of the scripture has been lost, and we cannot know how much; parts of what we have are 'corrupted with mysse wrytyng'.¹ This argument generated a lot of heat and strength of feeling. Thomas More is often given credit for being the more polished writer, but he rather loses his polish when attacking Tyndale in less-than-saintly mode: 'Judge, good Christian reader, whether it be possible that he be any better than a beast, out of whose brutish beastly mouth cometh such a filthy foam of blasphemies against Christ's holy ceremonies and blessed sacraments.'² The reason for More's venom is evidently Tyndale's distrust of priests as transmitters of the Gospel and consequent insistence on *sola scriptura*, that only the written word of the Bible has any authority. For More, the faith of Christ came to the Apostles by preaching: it was written by his holy hand in men's hearts, or rather 'in the lively minds of men than in ye dead skins of beasts'. That part of Christian faith was not in question, he argued, but what had come down as 'the Bible' certainly was. It needed a priesthood to explain it.³

One only had to open a Bible to recognize how much corruption there was. Bibles were soon being printed on cheap paper, with the result that many errors were mass-produced: a notorious example is the 1631 King James Bible known as 'The Wicked Bible' because it made the seventh commandment 'Thou shalt commit adultery'. Another, also sometimes known as the Wicked Bible, omits a 'not' before the word 'inherit', making 1 Corinthians 6: 9 read 'Know ye not that the unrighteous shall inherit the kingdom of God?'⁴ Edward Leigh, an

¹ Thomas More, 'Dialogue Concerning Heresies', ed. Thomas M. C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius, in *Complete Works of St Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963–97, 1981), vi. 115. See further R. I. Lakowski, 'The Dialogue Concerning Heresies', *Interactive Early Modern Literary Studies* (1995), <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/ie/mls/work/chapters/heresy1.html#BT4>>, and Matthew DeCoursey, 'The Thomas More/William Tyndale Polemic', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, Texts Series, 3 (2010), <<http://purl.org/emls/moretyndale.pdf>>.

² More, 'The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer' (1532–3), ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, and James P. Lusardi in *Complete Works* (1973), viii. 38.

³ More, 'Dialogue', vi. 144.

⁴ These and similar examples are quoted in Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

MP and lay theologian, worries about all this in his 1646 *A Treatise of Divinity Consisting of Three Books* where he says that because of this sort of thing ‘the Papists stile the Scripture ... the black Gospell, inky Divinity’.⁵ Protestants, that is, following the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, turn the Bible into an idolatrous divinity made of ink. Leigh was aware that many doubts about the authority of scripture persist ‘till we be taught it of God, till the Holy Spirit of God have inwardly certified and sealed it’.⁶

Conservative churchmen like Thomas Edwards in his venomous *Gangraena*, also of 1646, denounced such statements, although in practice many of his opponents were even more radical. Puritans like William Walwyn, Gerrard Winstanley, George Fox, Samuel Fisher, and Clement Wrighter exemplified a crisis of confidence in the scriptural basis of faith.⁷ The revolutionary ferment of mid-seventeenth-century England encouraged radical ideas to flourish and circulate. Isaac La Peyrère, for example, claimed that ‘men had existed for countless aeons before Adam’ and that the Bible story was just about Jews.⁸ Stephen Nye, a Socinian, was soon arguing that the God represented by the creation narrative has ‘the *just* Character of an Almighty Devil. For if the Devil had Supream Power, what worse could he do?’⁹

There are many contemporary instances of such anxiety about the text of the Bible. A friend of Milton’s, John Goodwin, in his *Divine Authority of the Scriptures Asserted* (1648), attacked ‘Antiscripturism’ for destroying the faith of many. Yet he stood by the claims made in his *Hagiomastix or the Scourge of the Saints* (1647) that the scriptures were not the foundation of Christian religion: neither English translations nor the extant Greek and Hebrew manuscripts were the word of God, ‘great benefactors unto the world’ though they were. The translations differed among themselves and so must also differ from the original texts, no longer extant. The impeccable Word of God could not be identified with imperfect texts, although they might, he suggested in a brilliant phrase, be considered as the cup that contained the wine of the Gospel. ‘The true and proper foundation of Christian Religion’ was not ‘inke and paper’ but the substance of the Gospel.¹⁰

⁵ Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity* (London, 1646), 23–4, G4^v. The phrase is quoted in Joshua Calhoun, ‘The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper’, *PMLA* 126 (2011): 331.

⁶ Quoted in John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 157.

⁷ Clement Wrighter e.g. was ‘an anti-Scripturist, a Questionist and Sceptick, and I fear an Atheist’: Edwards, *Gangraena* (London, 1646), i. 96, quoted in Coffey, *John Goodwin*, 154.

⁸ Isaac La Peyrère, *A Theological Systeme upon That Presupposition, That Men Were before Adam* (London, 1655), 2.10.112–17, quoted in Jeffrey L. Morrow, ‘Pre-Adamites, Politics and Criticism: Isaac La Peyrère’s Contribution to Modern Biblical Studies’, *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies*, 4 (2011): 9–11. La Peyrère’s work was circulating in manuscript in 1640s, and may have influenced Hobbes. He writes in a similar vein: ‘Moses is there read to have died. For how could Moses write after his death? They say that Josuah added the death of Moses to Deuteronomie. But, who added the death of Josuah to that book which is so call’d; and which, being written by Josuah himself, is reckon’d in Moses his Pentateuch?’ *Theological Systeme*, 4.1.205. La Peyrère also anticipated the theory that there were two creation stories in Genesis: see Philip C. Almond, ‘Adam, Pre-Adamites, and Extra-Terrestrial Beings in Early Modern Europe’, *Journal of Religious History*, 30/2 (2006): 166–8; and *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53. Many such opinions are collected in William Poole, *Milton and the Idea of the Fall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), this one on 4–5.

⁹ Stephen Nye, *The Trinitarian Scheme of Religion Concerning Almighty God; and Mankind Considered Both before and after the (Pretended) Fall* (London, 1692), quoted in Poole, *Milton*, 17.

¹⁰ Goodwin, *The Divine Authority of the Scriptures Asserted* (London, 1648), a4^v quoted in Coffey, *John Goodwin*, 156–7. Coffey shows that Goodwin was relatively orthodox in his own views: he did not doubt the authorship of the Pentateuch, nor the great age of the Patriarchs, nor the young age of the earth. He thought

The most far-reaching of these critiques was that of Thomas Hobbes. He shows in chapter 33 of *Leviathan* (1651) that the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, could not have been written by Moses. Hobbes queries, for example, how Moses could write that his own tomb had not been found, as he does in the last chapter of Deuteronomy, 'wherein he was yet living'. Genesis 12: 6 says that Abraham passed through when 'the Canaanite was then in the land; which must needs be the words of one that wrote when the Canaanite was not in the land; and consequently, not of Moses, who dyed before he came into it'.¹¹

Milton knew but did not like Hobbes, and as usual went his own way. If its introductory epistle to the reader is to be believed, he spent much of his adult life writing at various times an immense theological treatise, *De doctrina Christiana*. Although he never makes the more radical kind of Hobbesian argument questioning the authorship of the biblical narratives, he was clearly aware of the controversy. He shows for example that, because of the mention of the Sabbath at Genesis 2: 2–3, Moses must have written the book of Genesis long after the giving of the law on Sinai.¹² Elsewhere in *De doctrina*, he writes as follows: 'Apparently not all the instructions which the apostles gave the churches were written down, or if they were written down they have not survived', and he then goes even further, to argue that scripture, 'particularly the New Testament, has often been liable to corruption and is, in fact, corrupt (*saepe corrumpi potuit, et corrupta est*). This has come about because it has been committed to the care of various untrustworthy authorities, has been collected together from an assortment of divergent manuscripts, and has survived in a medley of transcripts and editions'.¹³

This is the process that leads to transcription errors: one amusing passage in the 1612 Bible, Psalm 119: 161, which ought to read 'Princes have persecuted me without a cause', is made to read 'Printers have persecuted me without a cause'. Or there is another (in a 1611 printing) in which, in Gethsemane, it is Judas, not Jesus, who says 'Sit ye here while I go yonder and pray'.¹⁴ So Milton had good reason to be aware of textual muddle. He refers explicitly to the textual irregularities and corruptions uncovered by Erasmus or Théodore de Bèze. Heretic that he was, Milton was ready to exploit such textual problems against the orthodox view of the Trinity, or to show that the soul is subject to death.¹⁵ He was also ready to offer his own Latin versions, rather than the standard Junius-Tremellius translation, of the biblical proof-texts he used, as when he demonstrated that Elohim, the plural word for *God*, can be

Matthew had begun writing his Gospel just eight years after Christ's ascension, and defended the Trinity and the torments of hell.

¹¹ Noel Malcolm discusses this emerging critical scholarship on the Bible, including Isaac La Peyrère, Baruch Spinoza, and Richard Simon, in 'Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea', *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 12.

¹² *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. Maurice Kelley, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, gen ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), vi. 354 (I x). Hereafter *CPW*. For a full discussion, see Jason Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in 'Paradise Lost'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 71–135.

¹³ *CPW* vi. 586–8. In the Latin text printed in *The Works of John Milton*, general ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–40), this remark occurs in vol. xvi, ch. 30, pp. 270–4.

¹⁴ Campbell, *Bible*, 3, 112.

¹⁵ For Milton's Latin of Lev. 21: 11, 'animas mortuas' (dead souls) the first translator, Charles Sumner, substituted 'dead body', which is the KJB reading, making nonsense of Milton's point. The Sumner translation is the one reproduced in the Columbia Milton (and now in the recent Oxford edition of Milton's prose), whereas the Yale edition prints the more dependable version by John Carey. For Milton's 'mortalism' see Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

given to angels in scripture, and cited Psalm 8: 5 as *minorem diis*, less than gods, even though Tremellius has *minorem angelis*, and the King James Bible also reads ‘lower than the angels.’¹⁶ Recognizing these irregularities, Milton, like many other Protestants, was driven to argue for ‘a double scripture’, to distinguish the external scripture of the written word from the internal scripture of the Holy Spirit engraved upon the hearts of believers.¹⁷ This separation will produce in the reader of scripture both great confidence, and gnawing anxiety, probably in equal measures.¹⁸ It helps to account for the poet’s complex relationship to his Heavenly Muse (‘May I express thee unblam’d?’¹⁹), it allows for Eve’s rereading and misreading of what became scripture, and it establishes the gap between meaning and significance²⁰ that Satan fills, or exploits.

Milton arrived quite early at this view of the Bible. His first extant poem is ‘A Paraphrase of *Psalm* 114’, composed, he says, at the age of 15. This may be seen as prophetic in that he was later to write the great poems which are, in a sense, paraphrases or extrapolations from the Bible, not only *Paradise Lost*, but *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.²¹ Like his fellow Protestants he always scrupulously followed the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, but he put special emphasis on ‘the right and responsibility of every Christian to read and interpret scripture for himself.’²² In his early anti-prelatical tracts, Milton confidently asserted that the scriptures protest ‘their own plainness, and perspicuity’, so that not only the wise but ‘the simple, the poor, the babes’, can be usefully instructed.²³ Soon, however, he came to see that this principle encouraged readers to think that unexamined interpretations were ‘clear’ just because they were ‘commonplace.’²⁴ When he came to write his tracts in favour of divorce in the years 1643 to 1645, he faced a major problem: at Matthew 19: 3–9, Christ appears to forbid divorce except for fornication.²⁵ And, even more problematically, Christ appears to argue that the Law of Moses, which was less rigid, has been surpassed: a man who remarries is now said to commit adultery himself. How was Milton to get round this prohibition?

His strategy in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is to put the particular text in what he regards as the context, that is to say, the whole Bible read with one principle in mind—charity, ‘called the *new Commandment* by St John’ (CPW ii. 331).²⁶ If you read the

¹⁶ Harris Francis Fletcher, *The Use of the Bible in Milton’s Prose* (New York: Haskell House, 1929), 76–7, prints the two versions side by side. Carey calls attention to the verse in his ‘Translator’s Preface’, CPW vi. 15.

¹⁷ ‘De doctrina’, CPW vi. 587–90, quoting 2 Cor. 3: 3.

¹⁸ William Kerrigan, *Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1974), 125–61, discusses some of these anxieties.

¹⁹ *Paradise Lost*, 3.3. *Paradise Lost* (PL) is quoted from *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) throughout.

²⁰ For these terms see E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Textuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1–13, 79–81; for a critique, Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 256–80.

²¹ James H. Sims, ‘Milton and the Bible’, in William B. Hunter et al. (eds), *A Milton Encyclopedia* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1978–83), i. 147.

²² Barbara Lewalski ‘Milton, the Bible and Human Experience’, *Topoi*, 7 (1988): 221–9.

²³ ‘Of Reformation’, CPW i. 556.

²⁴ Dayton Haskin, *Milton’s Burden of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 184.

²⁵ On this word, as Haskin shows (69), Milton in a later divorce tract, *Tetrachordon*, turns philologist, moving across Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, arguing that it means not only trespass of body but ‘any notable disobedience, or intractable carriage of the wife to the husband’ (CPW ii. 672).

²⁶ See Regina M. Schwartz, ‘Milton on the Bible’, in Thomas N. Corns (ed.), *A Companion to Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 42.

prohibition on divorce in the light of Christ's overriding principle of charity, it can't mean what it says. 'There is scarce any one saying in the Gospel, but must be read with limitation and distinction, to be rightly understood; for Christ gives no full comments or continu'd discourses, but scatters the heavenly grain of his doctrin like pearle heer and there, which requires a skilful and laborious gatherer' (CPW ii. 338). So although Christian liberty means that Christ 'frees us from the slavery of sin and thus from the rule of the law', that is, the Law of Moses, he cannot have meant to rescind the Mosaic permission to divorce and remarry, which is 'a grave and prudent Law, full of moral equity, full of due consideration toward nature' (*De doctrina*, CPW vi. 537). Comparing the two texts makes clear that one is to be read in the light of the other. And the words 'grave and prudent' are obviously designed to appeal to his puritan readers. The Mosaic law of Deuteronomy 24: 1 ('let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of the house'), far from being abrogated by Christ, becomes the central focus of the argument. God even becomes a precedent, in that his method of creation was to make the world rise out of chaos 'by a divorcing command' ('Doctrine and Discipline', CPW ii. 272).

Milton's radical interpretation of Christian liberty here allowed him to adopt a variant of what was called the 'experimental' method.²⁷ The emotional impact of the knowledge acquired from the scriptures was given great importance: it is a serious misinterpretation of scripture by an obstinate *literality* (CPW ii. 279) to imagine that it requires us to endure loveless sex, what he calls, with characteristically frank language, a grinding 'in the mill of an undelighted and servil copulation' (ii. 258). What Milton calls earlier in the treatise 'the spur of self-concernment' (ii. 226) has prompted him to reconsider what others still argued were 'the statutes of God'. In fact Christ had often been required by the close-mindedness of his Pharisaic auditors 'to perplex and stumble them with contriv'd obscurities', so that the biblical text became 'not so much a teaching as an intangling'.²⁸

Milton continued to put this method into practice, so that in the theological treatise, he constantly compares texts with texts. He called *De doctrina Christiana* 'my dearest and best possession' ('quibus melius aut pretiosius nihil habeo'), and he seems to have worked on it a lot while composing *Paradise Lost* (from 1658).

Like its models among Reformation theologies *De doctrina* is in Latin, and thus addressed to a learned and European audience. Every argument is supported by scriptural citation, sometimes copiously, though often slanted to fit Milton's own heterodox views. His method as he prepared the work was 'to list under general headings all passages from the scriptures which suggested themselves for quotation' (CPW vi. 127. And that is also the final form of the treatise. The effect is to disrupt the reading of the Bible, for citations are listed all together as having the same weight and not usually referred to their context (except when it suits him, as in the part about divorce). Those 'general headings' give chapter titles such as 'Of God' or 'Of Predestination' or 'Of the Special Government of Angels'. As he gained confidence, he tells us in the epistle, he read many longer works of theology and was seriously disappointed. Often they defended as truth what was manifestly false, and ignored the arguments of their

²⁷ Haskin, *Milton's Burden*, 15–24; Karen Edwards, *Milton and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68–71.

²⁸ *Tetrachordon*, CPW ii. 642–3. The phrase is the title of the first chapter in one of the most influential books on Milton: Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (London: Macmillan, 1967; 2nd edn, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

opponents. So whenever Milton finds himself in disagreement with his models among the many Reformation theologians who wrote similar treatises, he produces long and elaborate arguments to persuade us (for he did intend to publish the book) that his heterodox views are correct. The longest section of all is book 1, chapter 5, 'Of the Son of God', for this is where he contests the Trinity. It even gets its own little 'Preface'. He takes far less space to defend polygamy, however unorthodox it may be, since it is much less important.

Given this experimental, even personal, attitude towards the Bible, it is not surprising that Milton could permit himself to develop it so radically in *Paradise Lost*. Any doubt he might have about retelling the story so thoroughly can be resolved by the device, several times repeated, of calling upon the Holy Spirit to be his Muse. And the retelling is major. The story of Adam and Eve is tersely told in three chapters of Genesis with little exploration of character or theological complication. Adam names all the creatures in Genesis 2: 19–20, but Milton gives Eve the role of naming the flowers (11.273–9). It is not clear in Genesis where Adam is when Eve takes the fruit and eats it: Milton invents an elaborate scene, a kind of marital tiff, to separate Eve from Adam before the serpent makes his approach. And in a sharp break from orthodox Christian tradition, Adam and Eve have a kind of sanctified sex before the Fall.²⁹

Indeed the story of Adam and Eve was potentially subversive as soon as anyone began to examine it seriously. Take Genesis 3: 22: 'Behold the man is become as one of us to know good and evil'. If God was not being ironic here, as many, including Luther, were forced to argue, then he admits the force and truth of the serpent's discourse. The fruit did indeed contain real wisdom. So why was it banned? One justification, common in the Eastern Church, is that Adam and Eve were still like children, not yet ready for the knowledge contained in the fruit. Milton rejected such a view, following Augustine, on the grounds that it makes Adam an 'idiot'. And yet an originally perfect, or even a mature, adult Adam, raises the problem of how he fell at all. Augustine had great difficulty with this, given his exalted conception of Adam and Eve, and eventually found himself insisting on an inherent weakness of the will, predating the serpent's temptation. Here is the origin of Raphael's warning to Adam in *Paradise Lost* that 'God made thee perfect, not immutable' (5.524). Augustine's followers before Milton did not find the problem any easier to solve. No wonder Gibbon could later describe the Western Church's adoption of Augustine's views as conducted 'with public applause and secret reluctance'.³⁰ Milton's brilliant solution to the problem was to insist on what is traditionally called 'uxoriousness', that is, to make Adam too much in love.

In *Paradise Lost* there are many places where Milton subtly alters the text. Genesis 3: 22, for example, following on from the words just quoted, 'Behold the man is become as one of us to know good and evil', continues (in the King James Bible): 'and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden.' The narrative logic of this is inescapable. Before he reaches out and eats the other tree as well, and lives for ever, we must get him out of there! Generations of theologians had tried to cope with this, and many decided, like Luther, that God was being ironic. Milton's God, though capable of irony, is less subtle at this point. Here is what he says:

²⁹ See Achsah Guibbory, 'Bible, Religion, Spirituality in *Paradise Lost*', in Angelica Duran (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 128–43.

³⁰ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London: Methuen, 1896–1902), iii. 407.

Lest therefore his now bolder hand
 Reach also of the tree of life, and eat,
 And live for ever, dream at least to live
 For ever, to remove him I decree. (11.93–6)

God, and the text of Genesis, is thus saved by a few extra words—‘dream at least to live for ever’—from what would otherwise appear to be a hastily contrived and theologically unacceptable afterthought.

Another example, less overtly transformative, is the words associated with the creation of hell. Most scholars recognize that Milton's hell, if not its chief inhabitant, is a Vergilian place (with some Dantesque additions). But where does this hell come from? That is not a question Vergil asks, or needs to, but Milton does, and answers it. In doing so he faces the key theological question of whether the Christian God creates evil: in *Paradise Lost* he does, but in a subordinate clause. The important (and famous) passage follows the council scene in book 2, when the more adventurous devils take off to explore hell, their new habitation, and do not much like what they see:

through many a dark and drearie Vale
 They passed, and many a Region dolorous,
 O'er many a Frozen, many a Fiery Alpe,
 Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death,
 A universe of death, which God by curse
 Created evil, for evil only good,
 Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds,
 Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,
 Abominable, inutterable, and worse
 Than Fables yet have feigned, or fear conceived,
 Gorgons and Hydras, and Chimaeras dire. (2.619–29)

The key line about ‘evil’ (‘Created evil, for evil only good’), in which the word is repeated, and which seems a bit short, visually at least, is actually, as Flanagan points out, too long by one syllable and requires an elision across the repetition in ‘for evil’. That means that the final word, ‘good’, is supernumerary: ‘good’ is the word that is ‘extra’ in Hell.

The whole passage is suitably dotted with unpleasant bits of the natural world, including those oddly fiery Alps, but also the classical monsters, Gorgons, Hydras, and Chimaeras, who threatened Aeneas during his underworld journey.³¹ But the most important allusion by far is not to Vergil but to a biblical text that attributes evil to God, Isaiah 45: 7. In the King James Bible it reads: ‘I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things.’

Now Christians have generally wanted to avoid the conclusion that their God is directly responsible for evil. In his Latin theological treatise, Milton cites this unsettling Isaiah text in the Latin of the Protestant Tremellius-Junius Bible: *facientem pacem et creantem malum*.³² He then explains it as follows: ‘that is, what afterwards became and is now evil; for whatever God created was originally good, as he himself testifies, Gen. i.’³³ So the stark statement of the biblical text is avoided, partly by a further citation, partly by introducing a narrative time

³¹ *Aeneid* 6.288–9.

³² *The Works of John Milton*, xv. 66; *CPW* vi. 330.

³³ The translation is that of John Carey, *CPW* vi. 330.

scheme—‘afterwards’ (*postea*). This is indeed the orthodox Christian narrative, as developed by Origen and Augustine: good and evil are not coeval principles, but evil comes into being only afterwards, once the Devil, and then man, decide to sin. And the passage from Milton’s *De doctrina* shows how useful that invented narrative could be. Of course, the narrative is not there at all in Isaiah, where God is the one who creates evil, and in the present tense at that. Indeed he sounds proud of it.

Commentators on Isaiah tie themselves in knots over this language, but the most common move is to argue that God is asserting his omnipotence, and in the most persuasive way he can. Given that the addressee of this claim is Cyrus the Persian, some have seen a buried polemic against Zoroastrian dualism, since the passage begins: ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God’ (Isaiah 45: 5). Milton justifies his *postea* by quoting other biblical texts than Isaiah, and making the assumption that they all tend in the same direction, as is clear to a properly reading spirit. Of course, if one assumes, as most commentators still did, that God was the ultimate author of the Bible, then all such problem texts could be interpreted in the light of others less problematic.

That ‘afterwards’ idea is important for Milton. He repeats it, for example, when explaining why the tree of knowledge of good and evil is so called: *ab eventu*, ‘in the event’, ‘because of what happened afterwards’.³⁴ Milton argues for a reversed time-scheme in this passage: we know good only by the later evil, but also, by a twist of divine logic, God brings good out of that evil. ‘For where does virtue shine, where is it usually exercised, if not in evil?’ (CPW vi. 353). Curiously, in view of his own heresy, Milton also cites here Paul’s words about tolerating heresies, 1 Corinthians 11: 19: ‘There must be heresies among you, that those who are righteous among you may be clearly shown.’

Elsewhere in *De doctrina Christiana*, the grounds on which Milton defends God become more explicit. It has to do with freedom, with Milton’s Arminian arguments against Calvin.

It is sufficiently clear that neither God’s decree nor his foreknowledge can shackle free causes with any kind of necessity. There are some people, however, who, struggling to oppose this doctrine through thick and thin, do not hesitate to assert that God is himself the cause and author of sin If I should attempt to refute them, it would be like inventing a long argument to prove that God is not the Devil. (CPW i. 3, 166)

Witty or casual as that may sound, it is in fact deadly serious: it is what *Paradise Lost* sets out to do, though all it actually claims is ‘to justify the ways of God to man.’ Milton knew that a God who needed to be justified might seem very like the Devil.³⁵

The King James translation of that key Isaiah verse ‘make peace and create evil’ has usually been avoided by more recent English-language versions. The Hebrew word *ra* does in fact cover most of what the English word ‘evil’ means. In the Hebrew Bible *ra* occurs 663 times, and 431 times it is translated in the King James Bible as ‘evil’. The Hebrew word can refer to moral evil, and often does have this meaning in the Hebrew scriptures. The primary meaning of *ra* is worthless or useless, hence bad or ugly. As a metaphysical entity there is not much about *evil* in Judaism, except for a brief flurry in the intertestamental or Second

³⁴ *Works*, xv. 114, CPW vi. 352.

³⁵ I have discussed these texts at greater length in *The Satanic Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 8–9, and *John Milton: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 141. See n. 9 of this chapter for the Socinian view of Stephen Nye.

Temple period. And there is no entry for *evil* in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. All the more recent translators of the Isaiah verse choose a word like 'calamity', 'disaster', or 'woe' (as in the RSV). It has been precisely that kind of issue that generates the call for new translations. The Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, has *kaka*, the most common Greek equivalent. So neither of the original languages makes the distinction between moral and natural evil that the later translators settle on to avoid the issue.

Milton clearly does not avoid the issue in *De doctrina Christiana*, although he introduces a narrative time-scheme in order to explain it, but his solution in *Paradise Lost* is different. Of course in a sense the whole of the epic is a narrative to include the 'afterwards' that Milton adds in his theological treatise, but when he repeats the Isaiah phrase 'create evil' in the poem (2.624, in the long passage already quoted), he sails much closer to the wind. He makes the important grammatical modification that *evil* is an adjective in the phrase 'which God by curse created evil', and only then becomes an abstract noun in the extension through apposition, 'for evil only good'. The first use of the word is a predicative adjective agreeing with the pronoun 'which', and so referring to 'a universe of death'. No question, then, but that God himself creates this dreadful place, and by curse at that. Milton's language game with *good* and *evil* makes the theological relation of good to evil quite muddy. We may well have to read twice to see that these syntactic niceties do not actually make God directly responsible for evil, at least not evil as a nominal and metaphysical abstraction. But he clearly makes something—hell—that is itself unequivocally called evil.

There is no biblical text Milton can cite which confirms God's creation of hell. In the section on the Special Governance of Angels, 1.9 of *De doctrina Christiana*, Milton cites the various passages which announce the punishment of the bad angels, including 2 Peter 2:4, 'he thrust them down to hell and chained them in dark chains, to be kept for damnation'; Jude 6, which more or less repeats those words; Revelation 20: 10, 'they shall be tortured for ever and ever', as well as Revelation 20: 2–3, 'he seized the dragon and bound him, he threw him into hell (*abyssum*) and closed it up' (CPW vi. 348–9). Matthew 25: 41 comes closest, yet the verb is passive: 'into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels'. Yet God's making hell follows logically from Milton's insistence, in citing the Isaiah 45 passage, on the supremacy and uniqueness of God. 'I am the Lord, there is no other ... I the Lord do all these things'. In the poem, Milton can have his God curse to create hell; as a poet he allows himself much more freedom than he can in a treatise that is so strictly tied to the method of Bible quotation.

Plato, we may recall, had condemned Homer and the tragic poets in the *Republic* 2.379–82, and argued (in the mouth of Socrates) that the gods were good and thus could not be responsible for evil.³⁶ Milton appears implicitly to be taking the side of the narrative poets in that quarrel with philosophy, and thus increasing the moral ambivalence of his God. The unforgettable impact of hell in the poem is partly because that is where Milton makes the narrative begin. It is linked to what is perhaps the most radical change from the text of

³⁶ Plato's various and naïvely optimistic discussions of evil (or evils) are at *Gorgias* 477e, *Theaetetus* 176a, *Politicus* 269c–d, 273b–c, *Lysias* 221a–c, *Cratylus* 403e–f, *Timaeus* 42d, 48a, 53b, 86b–c, *Laws* 10.903b–905d. His general solution is that either evils are not the work of god, or they are not really evils but deserved punishments. We call things evil, runs the argument in *Laws* 10, out of ignorance. For further discussion, see Neil Forsyth, 'Paradise Lost and the Origin of Evil', *International Journal for the Classical Tradition*, 6 (2000): 516–48.

Genesis, though anticipated by centuries of commentary: the serpent is an instrument for the overwhelmingly powerful character of Satan.

A key moment in Milton's retelling of the Genesis story comes when, during the temptation scene in book 9, Satan, disguised as the serpent, teaches Eve to read the Bible—or rather, how to interpret the spoken words that would later form part of the written Bible.³⁷ In particular he shows her that the apparently stark prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge is actually more complicated: he explains what it really means. There are several things about the serpent that attract Eve during their meeting. He is very beautiful, for example, even sexy, but what impresses Eve above all is that the serpent talks. He imposes his own language on the text.

Milton's treatment of this necessary theme is interesting in several ways. Adam and Eve have been warned to beware of Satan—they have been told all about the rebels' war in heaven, but they have not been told to look out for talking snakes. An explicit warning would spoil the story. Earlier interpreters had tried to explain why the Eve of Genesis is not suspicious of a snake that speaks. All the animals could talk before the Fall, ran one Jewish line of thought, but this was not popular among the church fathers, since there is no biblical evidence for it.³⁸ More hesitantly, Thomas Browne, among others, suggested that Eve might still be so new to life in Eden that she 'might not yet be certain only man was privileged with speech' (*Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 5.4). Calvin, however, had argued that, although Genesis doesn't mention Eve's surprise, no doubt she perceived this speaking serpent to be extraordinary—and 'therefore she greedily received that whereat she wondered'.³⁹

Milton adopted Calvin's version, as he often did, but with a clever variation. When she hears him address her, Eve is amazed and asks:

What may this mean? Language of Man pronounc't
By Tongue of Brute, and human sense exprest?
The first at least of these I thought deni'd
To Beasts, whom God on their Creation-day
Created mute to all articulate sound. (9.553–57)

Satan manages to turn this surprise to his advantage. Eve asks him how he learned speech—and to do so she uses a new word in the English language—'How camst thou *speakeable* of mute?' (9.563). Satan responds, with typical cunning, by telling a mini-narrative, a little myth on its own, about how he acquired the new power, remarkably enough from eating the fruit of one of the trees hereabouts. Once she asks 'where grows the tree, from hence how far?' (9.617), Satan 'blithe and glad' (9.625) knows she is hooked. He offers in his elaborately formal language to show her: 'the way is readie, and not long / ... if thou accept / My conduct, I can bring thee thither soon' (9.626–30). She agrees to follow him.

³⁷ Dayton Haskin has shown how these terms could be virtually interchangeable: 'even in Paradise Adam and Eve were living under an injunction to increase and multiply the knowledge of God's proliferating writing' (*Milton's Burden*, 229). That writing was not scripture yet, but rather what was widely known as the Book of the World. See further Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

³⁸ 'The Book of Jubilees', 3: 28, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), ii. 60. For this argument, see J. M. Evans, 'Paradise Lost' and the Genesis Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 31, 275.

³⁹ *A Commentarie of John Calvin upon the First Booke of Moses, Called Genesis*, tr. Thomas Tymne (1578), 3.3, quoted in Evans, 'Paradise Lost', 276.

When they reach the tree, Eve says, showing herself as capable as Satan of an appropriate pun, 'Serpent, we might have spar'd our coming hither, / Fruitless to mee, though Fruit be here to excess' (9.647–8). She explains that they are not allowed to eat just that particular tree. Her disappointed and personal 'fruitless to me' is quickly followed by an implied accusation against nature: the tree has fruit 'to excess'.⁴⁰ So the serpent's command of human language is the key to the whole temptation. Eve is already, because of Satan's wily words, in a state of frustrated expectation, ready to listen further to his discourse.

Milton's Eve has heard peculiar voices before, so we can understand her confusion: not only did Satan tempt her in a dream with a seductive speech ('I rose as at thy call, but found thee not', 5.48), but her first experience of language was hearing a mysterious voice, warning her to turn away from her own image in the lake and seek him 'whose image thou art', that is, Adam.⁴¹ The voice had told her, like the serpent's now, to 'follow me,' and she commented at that time: 'what could I doe, / But follow strait, invisibly thus led?' (4.467–76). The source of this voice is not explicitly identified at that point, and Eve clearly does not know to whom it belongs. The poem is equally cagey about the serpent's voice and where it comes from: he speaks either 'with Serpent Tongue / Organic, or impulse of vocal Air' (9.529–30). Biblical commentators indeed frequently discussed the problem of how it was possible for the serpent to speak.⁴² No wonder Eve can be so easily led by a mysterious voice.

Indeed the poem itself is uncertain not only about the serpent's voice but also about the source of that first voice she hears, with its directive to 'follow me'. Later in the poem, at 8.485–6 Adam somehow knows the voice belongs to 'her Heavenly Maker', but at 4.712, it is explicitly a 'genial angel' that brings Eve to Adam for the first time, 'More lovely than Pandora'. This is one of those discrepancies of which there are surprisingly few in a poem composed by a blind man. It is interesting to note, nonetheless, that one of the others, even more important for the outcome of the story, also concerns what Eve hears: did she or did she not hear Raphael's story about Satan's rebellion and the war in heaven, a story that is told with the sole intention of warning Adam and Eve that they have a serious enemy? At 9.275–8, she says she knew about the enemy both from Adam himself and from overhearing the conversation with the 'parting angel' as she returned from her flowers. Yet at that point, the end of book 8, Raphael said nothing about Satan, and more to the point, Eve was in fact present during the whole story of the war in heaven in book 6: 'He with his consorted Eve / The story heard attentive' (7.50–1).

Why then does Raphael feel he has to say 'Warn / Thy weaker' (6.908) in summarizing the story, as if he is speaking only to Adam? How strange that there should be these discrepancies, even contradictions, around what Eve actually heard, given how everything that is to happen supposedly turns on this warning! It is the reason for Raphael's descent in the first place, to

⁴⁰ For discussion of the pun, see Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 73–4, and R. A. Shoaf, *Milton, Poet of Duality*, 2nd edn (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1993), 144–53.

⁴¹ See esp. Diane McColley, *Milton's Eve* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 77, on Eve at the lake.

⁴² N. P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin* (London: Longman, 1927), 116–17. In the Christian tradition, quite often, the Devil occupied the serpent or spoke through his mouth rather in the way that demons might speak through a possessed man—one among many instances of how the New Testament affected reading of the Old. On the scientific options for the 'serpent tongue / Organic', see Edwards, *Milton and the Natural World*, 25.

warn mankind and so liberate God from any responsibility: they know the story of Satan, and they are free to do as they will within that knowledge (5.235–45). Yet even at that moment, God speaks to Raphael only of conversing with Adam. Perhaps this is because, in the end, everything depends on whether Adam himself will eat. Yet surely, in Milton's version of the story at least, it also turns on whether Eve has grounds to resist the serpent's voice. Satan knows quite well that Adam will eat once Eve has done so, and does not wait to see what happens.

Satan first gets the idea of using reason and knowledge to tempt Adam and Eve when he overhears them discussing the prohibition on the tree and learns it is 'One fatal Tree ... of Knowledge call'd. He reacts with apparently genuine indignation (in soliloquy):

Knowledge forbidd'n?
Suspicious, reasonless. Why should thir Lord
Envie them that? can it be sin to know,
Can it be death? and do they onely stand
By Ignorance ...?
... Hence I will excite thir minds
With more desire to know. (4.514–23)

And he does not change that part of his strategy on finding Eve alone. She is assumed, like Adam, to be eager for knowledge.

The means of Satan's temptation is rhetorical persuasion, a logical argument including but by no means limited to flattery, not (as it was in other versions) sexual seduction. Eve says to Adam afterwards that he could not

have discern'd
Fraud in the Serpent, speaking as he spake;
No ground of enmitie between us known,
Why hee should mean me ill, or seek to harme. (9.1149–52)

This is a serious point. Indeed it is Satan who teaches her to *discern*, as the course of the scene shows. True, he uses some of the weapons of magic, such as the tradition of forbidden knowledge—to tempt her—but notice how he puts it: the tree gives power, he claims, to 'discern things in their causes' (681–2). This impresses Eve—as her own musing confirms. Watch for the word 'discern' in the following passage, at the climax of a rising series:

... In the day we eat
Of this Fair Fruit, our doom is, we shall die. How dies the serpent? hee hath eat'n and lives,
And knows and speaks and reasons and discerns
Irrational till then. (9.762–6)

So what has most impressed her is the serpent's ability to develop rational arguments, in particular rational arguments about words, to *discern* or *discriminate* their meanings. God said, 'In the day ye eat thereof ye shall surely die'—and by showing Eve he is not dead himself, though he has supposedly eaten it, Satan has propelled her to think about the terms of the prohibition (as so many biblical commentators had already done), to interpret and divide its meanings, to rewrite it.

So shall ye die perhaps, by putting off Human, to put on Gods, death to be wisht, Though
threat'nd, which no worse than this can bring. (9.713–15)

She now refers the power of the word to Satan rather than God—or reads God's word via Satan's interpretation.

So Satan as serpent teaches Eve to use language in a new way, for herself. She thinks through the sacred injunction and makes it mean something different from what it had originally seemed to mean. Yet the fault for these discrepancies is not entirely Satan's. Look at the original text in Genesis. There God says, in the King James Bible: 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die' (2: 17). Commentators had long had difficulty with this text, especially with the word 'day', since clearly in the Genesis narrative, neither Adam nor Eve dies on the day they eat. But there were other problems. For one thing, the pronoun is singular. God is addressing only one person, Adam. Eve in fact is not there yet. She is actually created only in the subsequent verses (2: 18–25).

Nonetheless she somehow hears about the prohibition, since she repeats it to the serpent, but with minor variations.⁴³ Not only does she turn it into a plural form of address, thus including herself, but she exaggerates it. 'God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.' Some misogynist commentators, including St Ambrose, the medieval rabbi Rashi, and Thomas Browne, thought that in Genesis 3: 3 she was unwarrantably adding to God's precept: 'We can't even touch it.'⁴⁴ Many also thought that with her phrase 'lest ye die' Eve was hedging. God had said to Adam, after all, 'Ye shall surely die.' At this point the Vulgate has *ne forte moriamini*, 'lest by chance you should die', an even more striking variation.⁴⁵ Fowler's excellent note on 9.663 adds that her phrase about the 'fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden' was also seen as an evasion of that 'morally definitive "tree of the knowledge of good and evil"'. She is simply pointing to the position of the tree rather than announcing its properties.

What does Milton do with the ambiguities of this verse (Genesis 3: 3) that generations of theologians had pored over? First of all, as often in the poem, he resists the misogyny. He is not using these two Genesis versions of the prohibition to undermine Eve: at 9.925 Adam too speaks of the 'ban to touch' (when it is too late), and so does the epic voice at 7.46 ('Charged not to touch the interdicted Tree'). But Milton does seize the opportunity of the biblical variation to make the focus of Eve's attitude clear. In saying she must not even touch the tree, repeating her exact words from Genesis, Eve is temporarily reinforcing her determination, but she is also admitting the attraction.

⁴³ On the basis of these variations, some rabbis deduced that when Adam told Eve about the command he deliberately exaggerated the terms, and thus unwittingly caused Eve's downfall. Having heard that the prohibition includes touching the tree, not just tasting it, the serpent 'took her and thrust her against it. "Have you then died?" he said to her.' Thus 'by proving that one part of the command as transmitted by Adam was unfounded, [the serpent] led her to believe that the prohibition as a whole was groundless': Evans, *Paradise Lost*, 49.

⁴⁴ Browne accuses her of 'two mistakes, or rather additional mendacities', and adds that 'therefore although it be said, and that very truly, that the Devil was a liar from the beginning, yet was the woman herein the first express beginner: and falsified twice before the reply of Satan, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 1.1, in *Thomas Browne: Twenty-First-Century Oxford Authors*, ed. Kevin Killeen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100–3. Cheryl Fresch, 'Milton's Eve and the Problem of the Additions to the Command', *Milton Quarterly*, 12 (1978): 83–91, explores the commentators on this discrepancy, citing the rabbi Rashi as also accusing Eve of lying.

⁴⁵ Fresch, 'Milton's Eve', 84, shows that while Ambrose believed Eve added to God's words in order to express her hatred and disgust by exaggerating the rigours of life in Eden ('ex taedio et odio ... , itaque invidiose exaggerasse duritiam praecepti'), Cornelius's *Commentaria in Pentateuchum*, the most frequently printed Catholic commentary of its kind in the seventeenth century, argued her stipulation against touching evidenced her respect and reverence for God.

By the time she does eat the fruit, however, God's word has lost its authority for Eve. She has been talked into believing that the words cannot possibly mean what they say: how could God be so cruel? No, rather he will praise your 'dauntless virtue'—a word which etymologically contains the Latin for 'man' (*vir*), and which may thus refer more specifically to courage or manliness. As Empson puts it, Eve 'feels the answer to this elaborate puzzle must be that God wants her to eat the apple, since what he is testing is not her obedience but her courage'.⁴⁶ If the first variation on the prohibition is in the text of Genesis itself, the Miltonic Satan's further variation is much more radical. 'Death' does not mean death, but rather putting off the old life to put on a new, just as he has in becoming a talking snake. And besides, knowledge is good. How could it not be? Be bold and taste. Milton's Satan is so impressive not simply because he challenges the authenticity of God's word, but because he builds on the discrepancies in Genesis itself, and he does so on rational grounds: Eve finds his arguments 'impregnd / With Reason, to her seeming, and with Truth' (9.737–8). Even 'if what is evil / Be real', he says (a major concession), 'why not known, since easier shunnd?' (9.698–9).

Christianity is the religion of the word, and so Satan's subversive strategy is to put distance between the key terms, the relationship of God to word. In so doing, he has undermined the word itself. The text may be God's, but, as we have seen even for non-Satanic interpreters, it can shift its meaning, and so is not always to be trusted. Milton, in his role as the narrator, fears that, without the constant and sustaining presence of the Heavenly Muse, he may fall (a vital word throughout the poem) from his flying steed, 'Erroneous ... to wander and forlorn' (7.19–20). The anxiety is obvious, and necessary if you separate the word from the spirit. Yet it is also what allowed for the kind of creative freedom from textual dogma to which we owe *Paradise Lost*.

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