

“Matters Hid”: Demonic Possession and Milton's Sons of God

CHRISTOPHER D. SCHMIDT

The spare and enigmatic narrative that begins chapter 6 of Genesis, in which the “sons of God” couple with the “daughters of men” and beget a race of giants, had by John Milton's time already inspired a wealth of contentious commentary. The passage reads as follows:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.¹

In the scheme of the Genesis narrative, this story is a parenthetical digression between the genealogy of Seth, a righteous son of Adam, and the carnage of the flood brought about by human wickedness. The structure of the narrative suggests a connection between the “mighty men” of verse 4 and the “wickedness” of verse 5—and therefore between the union of the sons of God with the daughters of men and God's eventual decision to drown all of humanity.

Biblical commentators have differed as to the precise identities of the sons of God and daughters of men, and their divergent interpretations of these titles have had significant consequences for their understanding of who is most to blame for the flood. The most common reading—espoused by Josephus, Clement, Chrysostom, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and

¹ Gen. 6:1–5 (Authorized Version).

Calvin—identifies the sons of God as righteous descendants of Seth and the daughters of men as evil descendants of Cain.² The sons of God sin by abandoning the godly hope of their family to follow the lust of their eyes. They choose licentious unions with the “fair” daughters of Cain over godly marriages to women from their own community.³ This reading, considered orthodox for most of Catholic and Protestant history, has always been set against the less conventional suggestion that the sons of God are not men at all. Philo and Eusebius think they are sylvan spirits or demons, while Justin, Irenaeus, Cyprian, Athenagoras, and Lactantius all claim that they are heavenly angels who fall into lust with female humans.⁴

Milton alludes to this controversy four times in his epic poetry: three times in *Paradise Lost* (3.460–65, 5.445–50, 11.556–97) and once in *Paradise Regained* (2.174–81). In the first allusion, Milton’s narrator depicts the giants of Genesis 6 as having been confined to the Limbo of Vanity (also called the Paradise of Fools)—the abyss through which “all things transitory and vain” must float “till final dissolution” (3.458):

Hither of ill-join’d Sons and Daughters born

First from the ancient World those Giants came

With many a vain exploit, though then renowned. (3.463–65)⁵

The giants are confined in Limbo both because they are among those “who in vain things / Built thir fond hopes of Glory or lasting fame, / Or happiness,” and because they are “unaccomplisht works of Nature’s hand, / Abortive, monstrous, [and] unkindly mixt” (3.448–50, 455–56). Both their own vanity and their unnatural origin are to blame for their unhappy end. However, the narrator deliberately avoids the question of the precise identities of their “ill-join’d” parents. He mentions angels and “middle spirits” in the immediate context, but he does not say how they are related to the giants. He mentions neither Seth nor Cain.

The second allusion focuses on the moment of attraction between the sons of God and the daughters of men. Like the first allusion, it preserves the biblical ambiguity regarding the identity of the sons of God, but it hints that Milton’s narrator is open to the possibility that these paramours are angels. In book 5, while describing Eve’s graceful service of Adam and Raphael at table, the narrator interrupts his story with an apostrophe to her Edenic dignity:

2 See, for example, Augustine, *City of God* 15.15–18, 23. For a detailed account of the history of interpretation of Genesis 6, see Allen, “Sons of God,” 73–76.

3 See Kim, “Sons of God,” for a detailed exposition of the culpability of the sons of Seth.

4 Allen, “Sons of God,” 74.

5 All quotations of Milton are from *Complete Poems*.

O innocence

Deserving Paradise! if ever, then,
 Then had the Sons of God excuse to have been
 Enamour'd at that sight; but in those hearts
 Love unlibidinous reign'd, nor jealousy
 Was understood, the injur'd Lover's Hell. (5.445–50)

The phrase “if ever, then” implies that the sons of God from Genesis 6 are present or at least alive at the moment when Eve's dignity inspires this eulogy; but at that moment, Adam is the only human male in existence. Perhaps the lauded “love unlibidinous” rules both Raphael's and Adam's hearts; Adam's later discourse, however, suggests that he is in fact “enamour'd at that sight” since he admits that the sight of Eve overwhelms his reason and other faculties with “passion” and “commotion strange” (*PL* 8.530–31). Regardless of Adam's state, that the narrator praises plural “Sons” for such love implies that he is referring at least in part to the angels' sinless charity. He is moved by the irony that angels in Heaven and on Earth can watch Eve's majestic beauty with pure hearts, but that the “Sons of God” will later be enamored with the sullied and tawdry sensuality of her fallen progeny. This comparison would work best if Milton's narrator were juxtaposing righteous angels with fallen ones, both of whom were alive. It would be absurd, on the other hand, to chide the sons of Seth for being enticed by the daughters of Cain rather than by their own ancestor, whose unfallen beauty shone before they were even born.

Why, then, does Adam's prophetic vision in book 11 represent the sons of God as human sons of Seth rather than as angelic beings? As Adam watches, men from the house of Seth descend into a valley inhabited by the industrious and artful offspring of Cain; there, they are enticed into libidinous unions by women “richly gay / In Gems and wanton dress” (11.576–77, 582–83). At their weddings, they invoke the god Hymen rather than the God Jehovah. This vision represents the Genesis passage just as Josephus, Augustine, and Luther interpret it: as a history of men from a righteous family forsaking their calling and subsequently mixing in marriage with pagan women. There is no mention, in Adam's vision or in Michael's commentary, of angelic or demonic beings. So while this vision is consonant with the traditional theological interpretation, it seems to render the exclamation of book 5 nonsensical.

Paradise Regained complicates the identification of Milton's “Sons of God” even further. In this later epic, Satan gives his own account of the Genesis 6 story while rebuking the incubus Belial for suggesting that Jesus

might be tempted by women. Juxtaposing Jesus's perfect continence with Belial's intemperance, Satan reminds Belial how

Before the Flood thou with thy lusty Crew,
False titl'd Sons of God, roaming the Earth
Cast wanton eyes on the daughters of men,
And coupl'd with them, and begot a race. (2.178–81)

Satan suggests here, in blatant contradiction of Adam's vision, that the sons of God in Genesis 6 are not men at all, but rather demons masquerading as men. This reading of Genesis 6 seems consistent with the description of the giants in book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, and with the narrator's exclamation in book 5; yet it seems irreconcilable with Adam's vision in book 11.

For the past two centuries, most Milton scholars have assumed that Milton simply altered his interpretation of the biblical passage for dramatic purpose.⁶ Such critics take Adam's vision to be the reigning interpretation in *Paradise Lost* and Satan's story to be the reigning interpretation in *Paradise Regained*, assuming that no reconciliation on this point between the two poems is possible or necessary. Yet the apparent correspondence between Satan's narrative and the first two passages of *Paradise Lost* precludes such a simplistic dismissal of the problem. Further, Christ's victory in *Paradise Regained* forms a narrative unity with Adam's fall in *Paradise Lost*. His victory constitutes a full realization of the meaning and implications of his own status as the archetypal Son of God. This title is theologically and thematically central for Milton, and it carries a precise and consistent meaning throughout both poems. It is inconceivable that Milton would equivocate as to its meaning in his treatment of Genesis 6. In short, Milton's dramatic and theological purposes require that Satan's statement to Belial be consistent with Adam's vision.

With an eye to preserving consistency between the two poems, two influential critics have tried—each in his own way—to reconcile Adam's vision with Satan's declamation. Neither makes any attempt to explicate the two earlier allusions to the sons of God. The first critic, Don Cameron Allen, recalls that the version of the story told by Michael has been considered orthodox ever since the end of the patristic age, whereas the other interpretation, involving sexual congress with fallen angels,

⁶ See, for example, Masson's note on *PR* 2.178–81 in Milton, *The Poetical Works*, 2:436. According to West, "Sons of God," nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editors of *PR* were nearly unanimous on this point; he cites Thomas Newton, Henry John Todd, and Merritt Y. Hughes. Following the publication of West's *Milton and the Angels*, however, Hughes changed his note to agree with West that there is no contradiction. His new note, citing West, appeared in every edition of Milton's *Complete Poems* after 1956.

has been considered superstitious by every major commentator since Augustine. "The unorthodox interpretation," Allen says, "was placed in the mouth of Satan [because this] remark is artistically suited to the greatest of heretics."⁷ Milton's inclusion of contradictory identifications of the sons of God, he says, highlights the distinction between the truths of Heaven and the lies of Hell.⁸

Allen's simple discounting of Satan's statements to Belial as factually inaccurate, though, ruins the dramatic credibility of Milton's scene. Satan's persuasiveness both in *Paradise Lost* and in *Paradise Regained* depends on his lies being partially true. Satan cannot create; he can only corrupt. He needs true facts as raw material.⁹ When he tempts Eve, for example, he admits that God has prohibited her from eating the fruit while cleverly trying to reinterpret the meaning of the interdict. When he tempts Jesus, he acknowledges the facts of Jesus's life and office: his hunger, his mastery of nature, his royal ancestry, his wisdom, and his divine parentage. He designs each temptation not to deny but to pervert a truth about Jesus's nature. Denying the essential facts instead of bending them to his own purpose would make Satan an absurdly ineffective liar.

Thus, Satan cannot possibly be silencing Belial by paraphrasing a heretical and factually inaccurate interpretation of Genesis 6—as if to remind Belial of an event that never occurred outside the manuscripts of a few confused biblical commentators. Attributing such a mistake to Satan and Belial would make them victims of human error, not the other way around; or it would perhaps suggest that Satan had fabricated a story about Belial and then convinced Belial it was true. It is hard to imagine how either of these transmissions of false belief could have occurred. Allen's reading renders the context and rhetorical strategy of Satan's speech unintelligible.

Opposed to Allen's view is Robert H. West, who argues that there is no contradiction between the two epics because Michael in *Paradise Lost* and Satan in *Paradise Regained* are speaking of different events. Adam's vision and Michael's comments refer clearly enough to the Genesis passage, in which humans mated with humans; but Satan mocks Belial for exploits unrelated to that episode. Belial and his crew have, indeed, seduced human women—and their exploits are recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where they disguise themselves as "Apollo, Neptune,

⁷ "Sons of God," 76.

⁸ Allen's reading has been credited recently in a controversy over so-called remnants of misogyny in Michael's vision; both Juhnke, who sees *PL* as misogynistic, and Kim, who does not, accept Allen's reading of Michael as orthodox and Satan as heretical.

⁹ See Lewalski, *Brief Epic*, 281; and Lewis, *A Preface*, 96–97.

Jupiter, or Pan" (PR 2.190). It is not surprising, West argues, that they have also masqueraded as sons of God, a title that Satan reminds them is "false." Perhaps with Belial's prodding, scholars like Philo and Eusebius will later confound the pagan myths with their own scriptures, thinking that Genesis speaks of a demonic seduction of the daughters of men; but Milton, West says, never presents this interpretation of Genesis as one held by the devils themselves.¹⁰

This neat resolution, though, is actually less credible than Allen's in light of the details of the text. Satan makes clear in his speech that the incident with the sons of God and daughters of men (PR 2.178–81) is a spate of attacks separate in time and place from the Ovidian rapes and seductions (PR 2.182–91). He locates the former in a specific and easily identifiable era of human history: "before the flood" (2.178). In the Genesis narrative as represented by Milton, this is a time before human industry has created the "Courts and Regal Chambers" that provide part of the setting for the Greek and Latin myths related in the latter part of Satan's tale:

Have we not seen, or by relation heard,
 In Courts and Regal Chambers how thou lurk'st,
 In Wood or Grove by mossy Fountain side,
 In Valley or Green meadow to waylay
 Some beauty rare, *Calisto, Clymene,*
Daphne, or Semele, Antiopa,
 Or *Amymone, Syrinx,* many more
 Too long, then lay'st thy scapes on names ador'd,
Apollo, Neptune, Jupiter, or Pan,
 Satyr, or Faun, or Silvan? (2.182–91)

"Before the flood" must mean a time like that seen by Adam, in which even the most luxurious and cultured of human societies still lived in tents. Satan's transitional clause "have we not seen, or by relation heard" underscores the separation in place and time of the biblical antediluvian incident from the later Ovidian ones (2.182). Milton may or may not mean to conflate the biblical and the Ovidian floods; a typical Miltonic interpretation of the two texts would posit the flood in *Metamorphoses* as a demonic corruption of the true story in Genesis. Such a conflation would fit neatly with the reading above, since the demonic exploits recounted in *Paradise Regained* all occur, in Ovid, after the flood.¹¹ Yet whatever the

10 See "Sons of God" and *Milton and the Angels*, 127–30.

11 *Metamorphoses* 1.628, 1.956, 1.1048, and 3.330; the account of the flood begins at 1.336. See also Smith, *Classical Dictionary*, 46, 56, and 70.

relationship between the two flood narratives in Milton's understanding of history, the account provided in *Paradise Regained* makes clear that Satan is remembering two separate sets of events.

By far the most obvious reading of Satan's comments is that a band of demons seduced some unsuspecting women before the flood, and that Genesis is referring to them—perhaps ironically—as sons of God. This straightforward reading is shared by David Masson, Thomas Newton, Henry John Todd, and Roy Flannagan. Flannagan even expresses disappointment in his review of Hugh MacCallum's *Milton and the Sons of God* that MacCallum's book is not about “fornicating fallen angels” (as, he says, the title implies).¹² According to Flannagan, Milton applied the term “sons of God” both to the sons of Seth and “ironically to the legion of fallen angels who roamed the earth.”¹³

If Satan and Michael are both giving accurate representations of the Genesis narrative as understood by Milton, and if the narrator's oblique allusions to Genesis 6 early in *Paradise Lost* are intelligible, then the sons of God must be both men *and* fallen angels. Only one hypothesis can account for all of these facts: Belial and his “lustful crew” mate with the daughters of men by possessing fallen humans. The sons of Seth have abandoned the “lives religious” that once earned them the title “sons of God” (*PL* 11.621–22), and as a result have made themselves vulnerable to demonic possession. This hypothesis cannot, of course, be demonstrated conclusively, since neither Michael nor Satan mentions any such indwelling. Nevertheless, it seems to be the only reading that preserves the integrity of all four allusions explicated above. Further, there is ample evidence to suggest that Milton and his audience would consider demonic possession a probable explanation for the events of Genesis 6; and the dramatic structure of *Paradise Lost* makes it likely that Michael would hide this decisive fact from Adam.

MILTON AND DEMONIC POSSESSION

One of Milton's first poetic successes was his *Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634), commonly known as *Comus*. In many ways, this poem is a dress rehearsal for *Paradise Lost*: it represents the children of the Earl of Bridgewater (inhabitants of Ludlow) passing through a dark forest and encountering various apparitions of magic, reverie, and violence—most notably a troop of satyrs who tempt young Alice to give up her virtue.¹⁴ As Barbara Breasted relates, the children played themselves when the

¹² “Two on God,” 113.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For an analysis of *Maske* as a precursor to *Paradise Lost*, see Lewalski, *Life*, 76–81.

masque was presented, and Alice stole the show by pretending to have been actually bewitched by an enchanter.¹⁵ This ruse no doubt frightened all those present, especially her mother; for two years earlier, “the Bridgewater children had complained of demonic possession” and had been treated for it at her mother’s request by the noted physician John Napier.¹⁶ For the Earl of Bridgewater and his family, then—and perhaps for Milton’s audience generally—demonic possession was a literal, physical ailment that could be diagnosed and treated. It was believed to be common enough that a physician could build a career on his putative skill at exorcism.

The seminal treatise in English on the topic of demonic possession is King James’s tract *Daemonologie*, which identifies four categories of demonic intrusion in human affairs: haunting “some houses or solitarie places,” following a chosen person to trouble him, entering a person to possess his body, and taking the form of a fairy or sprite. James insists that “one kinde of spirites”—Satan and his fallen angels—are behind all four of these manifestations of dark power, with demons assuming these different visages to obscure their purposes.¹⁷ Cotton and Increase Mather, Puritan colonists and contemporaries of Milton, taught the same doctrine during and after the Salem witch trials, even going so far as to claim that devils may impersonate innocent humans. Their treatise *The Wonders of the Invisible World* is actually intended to counteract the witch-burning hysteria of New England churches by narrowing the field of evidence that can be used to convict a witch or demoniac; but even in a work aimed at such moderation, Cotton Mather entreats “every Man to maintain an holy Jealousie over his Soul . . . and think; May not the Devil make me though ignorantly and unwillingly, to be an Instrument of doing something that he would have to be done?”¹⁸ Cotton Mather consistently and repeatedly refers to such demonic possession and shape-shifting as the work of Belial.

Both sources agree that such possessions and transformations often have a sexual purpose. Increase Mather recalls one incident in which “a certain Virgin” repulsed the “Amours” of a young man, who thereupon “prevailed with a Magician to send an evil Spirit into her, by means whereof she was strangely besotted.”¹⁹ King James tells of “*Incubi* and *Succubi*” who have their own amorous intentions, insisting that “this

15 “Another Bewitching,” 411.

16 Flannagan, *Short Introduction*, 56–57.

17 *Daemonologie* 3.1 (book 3, chapter 1); originally published 1603.

18 *Wonders*, 23; originally published 1692.

19 *Farther Account*, 258.

great kinde of abuse"—the insemination of a woman by a devil—can occur only if the demon borrows the sperm or possesses the body of a human male.²⁰ And the speculations of these Protestant writers appear to have Catholic antecedents as well, since Thomas Aquinas reaches similar conclusions in his own comments on Genesis 6.²¹

Milton himself explicitly narrates only one incidence of demonic possession: the case of the serpent, whom Satan uses as his

Fit Vessel, fittest Imp of fraud, in whom
To enter, and his dark suggestions hide
From sharpest sight: for in the wily Snake,
Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark,
As from his wit and native subtlety
Proceeding, which in other Beasts observ'd
Doubt might beget of Diabolic pow'r
Active within beyond the sense of brute. (*PL* 9.89–96)

Satan's motive for possessing the snake, however, is paradigmatic for all demonic possession: he wants his misdeeds to be attributed to an earthly creature, not to a devil. Possession of earthly bodies—in Milton's poems, as in James's and Mather's treatises—affords demons the opportunity to indulge their tastes for rampant evil with some measure of secrecy.

In some ways, Satan's fraud succeeds: Adam and Eve never suspect a demonic agent to be animating the serpent's body, and Milton's narrator (following the language of Genesis) often uses the serpent as a metonymy for Satan, not bothering to remind his audience of the demon inside (1.33–34, 9.784–85). The Son of God, however, is not deceived. Watching from Heaven, he distinguishes between the two, claiming that "the third [i.e. Satan] best absent is condemn'd, / Convict by flight, and Rebel to all Law," but that "Conviction to the Serpent none belongs" (10.82–84). Nevertheless, when Eve blames the serpent for her infidelity, God judges the beast and not the devil:

without delay
To Judgment he proceeded on th' accus'd
Serpent though brute, unable to transfer
The Guilt on him who made him instrument
Of mischief, and polluted from the end
Of his Creation. (10.163–68)

²⁰ *Daemonologie* 3.3. Cf. *PR* 2.150–52, which describes Belial as the "fleshliest Incubus" after Asmodai.

²¹ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 51, a. 3, ad 6.

It is important to read the adjective “unable” as modifying the serpent, not the judge: the serpent, blamed by Eve, cannot speak to transfer blame on the one who inspired him to tempt her. Here, West sees an injustice: in what sense and for what reason, he asks, is the serpent cursed, given the Son’s earlier statement that the animal is not culpable? The narrator’s gloss gives the answer: the serpent cannot understand speech anyway. The audience for this curse is Adam and Eve:

more to know
 Concern’d not Man (since he no further knew)
 Nor alter’d his offense; yet God at last
 To Satan first in sin his doom appli’d,
 Though in mysterious terms, judg’d as then best:
 And on the Serpent thus his curse let fall. (10.169–74)

The Lord God seems to think it prudent to leave Satan’s part in the temptation hidden, at least for now—apparently since an awareness of the devil’s wiles might distract from Man’s repentance. Satan’s presence does not alter Adam’s offense; but Adam might be tempted to think it does.

In fact, Adam and Eve, both before and after their fall, blame anyone at hand for their weaknesses and mistakes. When Adam confesses his inordinate passion for Eve, he blames Nature—and, by implication, the Creator—for making him susceptible to pleasure (8.534, 561). Then, after the pair taste the apple and wake in shame from their intemperate passion, they fall immediately to blaming one another. Adam blames Eve for insisting that they divide their labor, leaving herself vulnerable (9.1134–36). Eve blames Adam for allowing her to follow her own will (9.1155–61). Adam exclaims, “thou wert lost, not I,” and he blames himself only for the foolish act of trusting her (9.1165). When asked by God whether he has eaten the forbidden fruit, he blames Eve again and implicates God (10.137–43, 888–92). When God turns to Eve, she immediately blames the serpent (10.162).

It is a blessing that Adam and Eve do not know enough to blame Satan, too. They wonder several times how the snake could have learned to speak (9.867, 1067–69, 1149–51), but in their distemper they do not pursue this inquiry. If they were to see themselves pitted against Satan, the king of Hell, they would of course privately think themselves unwitting victims of his deception rather than responsible agents under a clear and simple interdict. The identity of the speaking serpent has thus become one of the “matters hid” about which Raphael has warned them: a fact that they are not prepared to manage responsibly (8.167). The Son curses the serpent in their presence, and Adam and Eve hear his words and

think the guilty party has been punished. Satan also hears, and rightly interprets the figure as referring to him; but the Son does not interpret it for the guilty pair because such predictions do not yet concern them. Only after their full repentance and resolution of fidelity (10.1060), followed by Michael's careful revelation of God's providence through the coming ages, does Adam receive the revelation that the seed of Woman is the Messiah, and the serpent, Satan (12.386–95).

Satan's success in masking his own identity thus redounds to Adam and Eve's benefit. What would have been an impediment to their repentance is hidden from them until the right time, when an angel of God himself reveals to Adam the scale and scope of their rebellion and of the coming redemption; and Adam is humbled to pray, rather than emboldened to justify himself. If Satan's comments to Belial reveal that the so-called sons of God were possessed by demons when they descended into the valley of Cain, then it should come as no surprise that Michael hides this fact from Adam. The lesson of Adam's vision is that pious men ought not to be tempted by sensual passion—a lesson that Adam needs to learn after having chosen union with Eve over obedience to God. Demonic presence or absence does not alter human culpability (10.171). Michael is teaching Adam to exercise his own will in free obedience, Satan and Belial notwithstanding; and for such a lesson, it is best that the demons, with all the questions of agency and culpability that their presence raises, remain hidden.

FAITH, HEROIC KNOWLEDGE, AND DIVINE SONSHIP

The salutary effects of hidden knowledge also bear on the meaning of the title "sons of God," whether it is applied to Adam, Jesus, angels, demons, or the sons of Seth. As Hugh MacCallum's book *Milton and the Sons of God* has proved, the title in Milton's work is endowed with specific conceptions of identity, duty, and freedom, and it always includes a willingness to act in obedience with imperfect knowledge. Adam's maturation during and after Michael's vision is a gradual education in divine sonship, as is Jesus's long trial in the desert. Their success in understanding and claiming this title provides a healthy contrast to the failures of Belial and the sons of Seth, who are now "sons of God" only ironically.

As Marilyn Arnold notes, Milton represents the Father as the God of Heaven, distant from mundane affairs, and the Son as the God of Earth, the Father's vicar; and through the Son, the Father "is made accessible to man."²² For Robert J. Wickenheiser, this mediating office is part of an

²² "Role of the Son," 65.

emerging “pattern of a Christian hero”: a dramatically credible rival to the tribal heroes of Homer and the national hero of Virgil.²³ But MacCallum seems to have been the first to develop in any detail the observation that Milton extends this heroic office potentially to all God’s rational creatures:

All heroes, divine and human, serve to unify God and his creation. The Son of God in *Paradise Lost* acts as the image of the Father through acts of creation and retribution, as well as atonement, and without his Word the Father would not be manifest. Other characters in the poem also perform acts of mediation. Eve apprehends God partly through Adam; unfallen man is the link between heaven and the lower creatures; Raphael and Michael communicate God’s instructions to man, accommodating heavenly truth to human powers.²⁴

Thus, Raphael promises to revise and reframe the story of the fallen angels to accommodate human sense, “By lik’ning spiritual to corporal forms, / As may express them best” (5.573–74). Michael removes the film of sin and passion from Adam’s eyes, “Which that false fruit that promised clearer sight / Had bred” (11.413–14), so that he can see the vision of the future aright. He also explains for Adam what practical lesson he should learn from each scene, lest he beguile himself with the sweetness of knowledge as he had with Raphael (8.1–13). Michael claims that the purpose of his visit is not merely to strengthen Adam’s will or sharpen his prudence, but rather to give evidence that “God is here, and will be found alike / Present” throughout Adam’s life, “still following thee, still compassing thee round / With goodness and paternal love” (11.350–53). Michael’s presence, in other words, reminds Adam of God’s presence. This mediator’s office was to be Adam’s, too, when Raphael reminded him to “warn / Thy weaker” of coming temptation (7.908–9). And when Adam falls, Eve mediates God’s love to him by soothing his passion and drawing him back into her fellowship (10.914).

In Milton’s poems, a character must spend time and effort amid gradually heightening trial to attain the status of mediator, or fully to recognize his identity as a son of God. This trial is the central drama of *Paradise Regained*, as Barbara Lewalski has argued.²⁵ At the beginning, Jesus can only speculate as to the meanings of cryptic prophecies about his Messianic mission (1.290–93). He then endures a series of physical, mental, and spiritual tests, proving his filial fidelity with the limited

²³ “The Son in *Paradise Lost*,” 1.

²⁴ *Sons of God*, 7.

²⁵ *Brief Epic*, 213, 221, 260, and 316.

knowledge granted to him, and receiving a new revelation about his own identity as a reward for each triumph. Jesus's "heroic knowledge," in Arnold Stein's phrase, includes the discipline not to presume upon divine providence by making claims of entitlement to special protection, patronage, or revelation.²⁶ Jesus trusts throughout *Paradise Regained* that "what concerns my knowledge God reveals" (1.293). This contentment with limited knowledge, wedded to zeal for filial obedience, contrasts sharply with Satan's exasperated demand to know

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. (4.516–20)

The ungodly intent of Satan's quest for knowledge is discernible primarily in his impatience. The proper method for such a quest is to undergo a trial like Jesus's, sustaining faithfulness to God's edicts and faith in God's providence despite uncertainty about one's own future. Satan's chance to do so came when the heavenly Son of God was revealed, and he failed this test when he rebelled. Adam had a similar trial and failure: before the fall, he was to abstain from eating the fruit, moved by love of his Creator despite his limited knowledge about the consequences of obedience or disobedience.²⁷ After the fall, having sought knowledge intemperately, he must begin the lesson again by maintaining faith in God's bright promises despite an ever darkening course of human history as revealed by Michael. Michael's choice to hide the identity of the serpent encourages this trust by focusing Adam's attention on human agency rather than on demonic influence.

The fall of the sons of Seth, as Sung Ryol Kim has demonstrated, occurs before the men descend into the valley, and cannot be blamed either on the seductive daughters of men or (in my account) on the indwelling demons.²⁸ It is true, as Michael says, that at one time their "lives / Religious titl'd them the Sons of God" (*PL* 11.621–22); but by the time Adam sees them, they only retain the semblance of that fidelity: "by thir guise / Just men they seem'd" (11.576–77). They have made themselves vulnerable both to demonic influence and to the seduction of the daughters of Cain by leaving the righteous traditions of their families. Their seeming justice is a test for Adam, similar to the banquet offered

²⁶ *Heroic Knowledge*, 128–29.

²⁷ Alvis, "Philosophy as Noblest Idolatry," 265.

²⁸ "Sons of God," 65–66.

Christ. Adam must learn to distinguish between reality and appearance: a seemly human visage can hide an evil human soul (11.603–6). These sons of God, like Satan and his devils, have belied their title by approving sensual pleasure, self-governance, and independent industry as goods separable from and superior to divine sonship—rather than as the proper fruits of such fidelity. Satan’s gloss on Genesis 6—that the demons are “false titl’d Sons of God”—applies just as appropriately to the sons of Seth, and it proves that Satan understands the meaning of this fall from filial status, whatever exasperation he may feign over the title’s supposed ambiguity. The Belial scene represents Satan’s surprisingly accurate knowledge not only of the incident of seduction but also of the meaning of divine sonship. He interprets the Genesis 6 appellation correctly: that is, ironically.

Milton thus represents God and his mediators as wise and discriminating disseminators of truth. They reveal facts progressively, careful of their auditors’ readiness to hear. The scene in the demonic court in *Paradise Regained* reminds Milton’s readers that there are some truths still hidden, some matters about which God has chosen not to speak. Adam may never learn that the sons of Seth were possessed; and when Milton makes his readers privy to that hidden fact, he leaves open the possibility that some matters are hidden from us, too. The victories of Adam and of Jesus, won always with (and not despite) imperfect knowledge, give hope that unavoidable ignorance need not interfere with human excellence. Obedience to God in faith, hope, and charity is possible, and indeed required, for God’s sons, however much or little has been revealed about the circumstances in which they must practice these defining virtues.

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