

# Lordship Through Renunciation Biblical Resonance in the "Nativity Ode"

捨身成聖：《基督誕生頌》中聖經典故之應用

Steven Hake

## Abstract

*A careful attention to Milton's relationship to his biblical sources in his first specifically Christian poem can shed light on the Ode and resolve some interpretive difficulties. Milton's theme can be more specifically focused around the the lordship of Christ over all creation--nature (in all its aspects), man, unfallen spirits and fallen spirits. A new structural pattern can also be discerned via this lordship. In addition, the place of Nature in the poem can be better understood as parallel to the Old Testament law, willingly yielding to the Infant Christ as its true and final fulfillment. Finally, an understanding of Milton's use of the progressive nature of biblical revelation enables us to resolve several interpretive difficulties in the poem regarding timing, the binding of the Dragon and the foreshadowing of disaster in innocence.*

## 摘要

仔細探究米爾敦第一首基督教詩篇中之聖經典故和詩人的關係，對解決詮釋此頌詩的若干問題，頗有助益。吾人讀此詩時，不妨以基督君臨天地萬物為詩人之主題；萬物包括一切自然、人類、墮落與未墮落之精靈。在基督君臨之下，新的階層結構於焉形成。此外，吾人更可將詩中之自然，看成舊約裡頭之律法：悅服宗遺基督聖嬰，以其為真正圓滿之境界。瞭解了聖經式啓示充滿進展色彩，米爾敦詩中關涉時間性、魔鬼被禁錮、及純真時期的禍難陰影等問題，就不難解決了。

Hughes gives the theme of this poem as "the triumph of the infant Christ over the gods of paganism" (42), yet the theme involves more than this. We see in the poem the lordship of Christ over all creation--nature (in all its aspects), man, unfallen spirits and fallen spirits; but this lordship is achieved not through direct force, but rather through humiliation.<sup>1</sup> This paradox of the Incarnation is one of the central paradoxes of the Bible. The seed that dies is the one that bears much fruit. The one who loses his life keeps it. He who humbles himself is exalted. A careful attention to Milton's relationship to his biblical sources can shed light on the Ode and resolve some interpretive difficulties. Not only can Milton's theme be more specifically focussed and a new structural pattern discerned. But the place of Nature in the poem can be better understood, as well as Milton's use of the progressive nature of biblical revelation.

\* 作者現任教於國立中山大學外文系

<sup>1</sup> David Daiches has observed that "Milton hurries over [references] to the Crucifixion, a theme on which he never preferred to dwell. It was not the suffering Christ but the heroic Christ which aroused his imagination" (43-44). Yet it must be recognized that Milton demonstrates in this Ode the many ways in which Christ's very triumph was possible only through suffering.

Paradox is bound up with the theme of the poem and is used effectiely throughtout. Critics have sometimes wondered why Milton did not do more with paradox in this poem without realizing all he has done with it. In addition to the more obvious "wedded Maid" and "Virgin Mother" of the proem, the poem contains many examples of paradox. In stanza one it is paradoxical that this "Heav'n borm child" should be "meanly wrapt in the rude manger", and that Nature, described as wild and powerful, should be awed by a Baby. In stanza sixteen "smiling Infancy" and "bitter cross" are linked. In stanza twenty five "dreaded" describes an "infant's hand" and "Our Babe, to show his Godhead true, /Can in his swaddiing bands control the damned crew." In the concluding stanza we see a mighty king surrounded by great armies ready to do his will--yet this king is a sleeping infant son of a poor Jewish girl. The strength through weakness implicit in all these paradoxes inverts the wisdom of this world and drives home the theme with greater power.<sup>2</sup>

Arthur Barker has analysed the structure and unity of the poem along the lines of the three stages of auditoyr imagery. The lordship theme also suggests a division. Seen fromn this standpoint the poem divides itself into four interlocking sections (albeit one very brief). In the first seven stanzas we see Christ's lordship over nature (with the mention of soldiers and kings in stanza foru looking forward to section two). Sectrion two then treats Christ's lordship over humans (stanza eight). Christ's lordship over unfallen spirits is demonstrated by their hymn of praise in section three (stanzas nine through eighteen--with the glad yielding of nature to her Master in stanza ten and the "music of the spheres" accompaniment to the anglic choir in stanza thirteen looking back to section one). Finally, the lordship of Christ over fallen spirits is clearly seen in the final section (stanzas ninieteen to twenty foru). The final three stanzas show us fallen spirits vanquished and nature, men, and angels all gathered round the Babe to render him service.

The poem treats the lordship of Christ over nature in a biblically sensitive way fully appreciated. The mandate given to Adam and Eve in Genesis one to subdue the earth and rule over it has sometimes been misinterpreted to justify the ruthless exploitation of nature, Milton's poem, however, clearyl sees nature as a friend, not a slave to be abused and exploited. Nature was cursed, at least in part, because of human sin and will participate in human redemption. This is seen in a passage sometimes quoted by critics in this regard:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of Good to  
be revealed. For the credtion was subjected to frustration, not by its

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<sup>2</sup> Another paradox is found in the chiasmatic arrangement of the visual images in the proem. This imagery is dominated by a light and darkness motif. The light images in stanza two ("Light unsuffer able", "far-beaming blaze") are climazed in line 13 where the glory of heaven is described as "the Courts of everlasting Day." All this the light of heaven and descending into the darkness of this earth; yet for the earth the coming of the Son meant the dispelling of darkness and the dawning of the light. This is shown in stanza three in the implied Sun/Son comparison as the earth awaits the advent of both of these light-bearers.

own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

(Romans 8: 19-21)<sup>3</sup>

Just as unfallen spirits are seen in the poem (and in the Bible) as helpers to humans ("ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" Heb.1: 14), so also is nature. This is so in a passage relevant to our poem. In Revelation 12 a woman (she has been understood either as Mary, the Old Testament Church or both) gives birth to the Savior and is attacked by Satan, who tries to drown her. Verse sixteen reads, "But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of its mouth." In the same way nature in Milton's Ode serves both Mary and the Christ ("Heav'n's youngest-teemed Star /Hath fixt her polish'd Car, /Her sleeping Lord with Handmaid Lamp attending" lines 240-242).

The lordship of Christ over nature is found throughout the poem, though it is the focus of section one. Critics have noticed that nature thumbles herself in stanza one just as Christ humbled himself in stanza two of the poem. It has not been noted, however, that the green olive shoot of the turtle dove of peace in stanza three recalls the dove sent out of the ark by Noah after the flood (Gen.8: 11) and specifically the context of peace not simply between God and humans, but also between Good and nature in the post-flood covenant of Genesis 8 and 9. The flood affected nature as well as humans and the turtle dove in Milton's poem is sent to allay the fears of nature specifically.

Stanza five is reminiscent of the gospel accounts of Christ calming the wind and the waves in a demonstration of his lordship. In the climax of section one even the sun, as crown of all subhuman creation, acknowledges his inferiority to Christ (stanza seven) in a passage otherwise puzzling to many critics. The angelic music of section three is assisted by nature in two significant ways. The air echoes the music ("The Air such pleasure loath to lose, /With thousand echoes still prolongs each heav'nly close" lines 99 and 100), and the music of the spheres gives an instrumental accompaniment to the angelic choir (stanza thirteen).

Stanza ten (along with with seven) climaxes the lordship of Christ over nature theme and presents some special problems of interpretation in this connection. The picture presented is one in which nature willingly yields her sovereignty to the Infant Christ: her reign is finally fulfilled in him. This language recalls what Paul has said not of nature, but of the law. "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come we no longer under the supervision of the law" (Galatians 3: 24 and 25). If you substitute the word "nature" for the word "law" in these two verses you

<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* c 1978 by the New York International Bible Society and are used by permission.

come very close to the thought of Milton's poem. Perhaps what bridged these two concepts in Milton's mind is what Paul calls the "basic principles of the world" in this same context:

So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of this world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons

(Galatians 4: 3 and 4)

The Greek word translated "basic principles" is *stoicheia*. Liddell and Scott give as one meaning of this "the simplest component parts: in physics, the primary matter, elements." It seems very possible that what Milton is doing in stanza ten of his poem is seeing nature as part of the *stoicheia* that Christ came to relieve of rule and to fulfill. This is suggested also by some similar verses in Colossians:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles [*stoicheia* again] of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules (2: 20). These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (2: 17). He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (1: 15). He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (1: 17).

In a bold imaginative move Milton thus links nature and the Old Testament law as "tutors" or "schoolmasters" who willingly gave way to the Infant Christ as their true and final fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

This points to another important structural aspect of the poem: Milton's sensitivity to the progressive unfolding of redemptive history. The Bible's plan of salvation does not spring full-blown from the head of Jehovah (as it were), but rather unfolds gradually over many centuries from the tiny bud seen in the book of Genesis to the fully opened blossom of the New Testament. The law/nature schoolmaster of the Old Testament yielding sway to the Infant Christ of the New is one instance of this.

Another is found in stanzas twelve to eighteen. The beauty of the angelic music recalls the music of creation (stanza twelve); this is entirely appropriate, as the redemption brought by Christ is described in the New Testament as a new creation. In the gathering enthusiasm of the song it is thought for a moment that the song itself can wipe away all the tragic effects of the Fall and restore man again to Eden (stanza fourteen). This is of course precisely why the Son of God is coming into the world. So God Himself checks the forward motion

<sup>4</sup> William A. Oram, noting the various ways in which critics have seen nature in the poem, concludes that "alternating versions of Nature's capacity for redemption oppose one another throughout the Nativity Ode . . . . The speaker shifts from one view to the other, never finally opting for either [e.g. seeing Christ as both mediator and judge]" (50). Seeing nature as helper gladly yielding her sway to the Infant Christ suggests a reconciliation between these two views.

of the song in stanza sixteen, reminding everyone that while it is indeed his ultimate intention to wipe away all the tragic effects of the Fall, it is not the song but the Son who is to accomplish this, and it cannot be done in a moment. The poem then traces the steps that must first take place in the divine plan before the ultimate end envisioned by the song can become actual reality. The crucifixion, second coming, and final judgment are all telescoped in stanzas sixteen to eighteen: "And then at last our bliss/Full and perfect is, /But now begins" (lines 165-167). Milton shows a fine sense of the timing involved in the plan of redemption. The joy inspired by the heavenly choir is but a beginning whose full realization awaits the consummation of the new creation at the end of human history. At the same time it reminds us of the pristine joy of the original creation.

A third example is found in stanza eighteen, which describes the present (partial) binding of the Dragon. Woodhouse and Bush cite the well known passages in Revelation dealing with the binding of Satan and then note that Milton in his *Christian Doctrine* (Book I, Chapter 33) interprets these passages as applying not to the present, but to the future. They go on to say: "Here, however, he [Milton] applies the imagery of the binding of the dragon to the partial limiting of his sway effected by the advent of Christ" (94).

There is a passage in the gospels in which Christ uses this same binding imagery in a story generally taken to refer to his own present binding of Satan that Milton might well have had in mind (Matthew 12: 29ff.) Christ speaks of the impossibility of plundering the house of a strong man unless a stronger man first binds the strong man. In context this seems to refer to Christ as the stronger man binding Satan as the strong man and plundering his house (casting out evil spirits, for example). Milton also speaks of the Dragons usurped sway (line 170). The house Christ "plunders" rightly belonged to him in the first place and has been usurped by Satan.

Related to Milton's sense of timing in the unfolding of redemption is a matter sometimes noticed in the study of *Paradise Lost*—the way that Milton foreshadows disaster even in innocence. Critics have noticed anticipations of the Fall even in paradise. We can see these also in this poem and this observation clears up a problem in line 74 noted by Woodhouse and Bush:

Brooks and Hardy (98) find a trace of irony in the fact that Lucifer 'was also another name for Satan,' who would wish 'that stars and men pay as little attention to the great event [e.g. the Incarnation] as possible.' The reviewer of Brooks and Hardy in *TLS* (12 July 1957, 428) raised a critical question of some importance: 'Now, poetically, the intrusion of Lucifer-Satan into this part of the "Nativity Ode" is just what is not wanted; it detracts from the charmed air of peace the poet is in the act of creating. And it is hard on a poet if critics, in their eagerness for an ambiguity at all costs, thrust on him a secondary meaning which, though possible theoretically, he never intended.' (Hughes 76-77)

Poets must always take into account as many meanings of a word as possible and use as many of these meanings as they can. If Milton deliberately did not want us to make the obvious connection between Lucifer and Satan in this "peaceful" context his use of the word is a definite flaw in the poem. However, there are a number of other indications in the poem that Milton is deliberately anticipating in subtle ways the later sufferings of Christ even in this peaceful section. The use of the word "vein" in line 15 suggests not only the sacred song of the Muse, but also the sacred blood shed by the Savior. The white robe put on nature (stanza two) anticipates the robe of righteousness Christ gives to his followers. We can even say that the Roman spear in stanza four anticipates the Roman spear that pierced Christ's side, the "hostile blood" the later "innocent" blood, and "Trumpet" the trumpet of judgment. So also Lucifer as both peaceful morning star, yet also rebel angel reminds us of death even in the context of birth, and strife even in the context of peace in a way analogous to what T. S. Eliot does in his poem "Journey of the Magi":

This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was Hard and bitter  
agony for us, like Deathe, our death. (lines 34-39)

The young poet in the poem wasts to arrive at the manger with his hymn of praise even before the Magi. This need not be taken as an indicating Milton's arrogance. This stanza (four) alludes to Isaiah 6, which portrays the humbling of the prophet before the awesome holiness of God as he is taken into God's service. John Spencer Hill has said of Milton's Ode that it is his "formal dedication of his poetic talents to God's service and the first-fruits of his pledge to become a specifically Christian poet"(59), and Arthur Barker has seen it also as marking Milton's conversion itself (29ff.) Paul urges us to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12: 10 Revised Standard Version), and this is exactly what we see the young poet doing, as he, like the young prophet Isaiah, offers himself and his biblically resonant poetry to God.

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