

Spring 2020

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Jacob R. (Spring 2020) "Cosmological Models and the Christian Faith in John Milton's Paradise Lost," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 9, Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol9/iss1/11>

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Jacob Taylor is a Junior at Harding University who will graduate in May 2021 with an Interdisciplinary Studies degree in Bioscience and Philosophy. He will be the SA Vice President for the 2020-21 school year and has been a student reviewer for The Tenor for the past two publications. He is also a member of the Maple House community ministry as a tutor, neighbor, and friend. He plans to minister, write, and profess the truth in whatever positions the Church and the University have capacity for in the future, as well as work with his hands as a steward of God's creation.

COSMOLOGICAL MODELS AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

By Jacob R. Taylor

In John Milton's time, the mid-17th century, there was intense debate over the order of the universe. Though the medieval image of nature seemed to be quaint and unfit for the new astronomy of Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo, and (soon) Newton, Milton includes it in his epic *Paradise Lost*. But more than merely including, he showcases the medieval. Milton invokes Dante. He writes in the medieval picture of the universe as his foremost cosmological structure. He does this because his natural philosophy, the way he sees the intelligible world around him and orders into a communicable form, is driven by the primacy and singularity of the Christian faith. The Christian faith endures though modern science crumbled the medieval model. The faith of the Church is not tied to one singular cosmology or natural theology. It is the primary science and the ultimate philosophy. It is the singularity at the center of the human mind and experience. Christ is the fountain of wisdom from which all rivers of human wisdom, understanding, and knowledge flow. Pouring out from this heart is whatever model is most fitting, which is therefore the best explanation up until now of the way the natural world appears to be and work.¹ In all that ambiguity about the revolutions of the spheres of power, heavenly and earthly, this singularity of Christ triumphs over the multiplicity of those cosmological models. It elucidates them, reorders them, and transforms them. Though Milton writes with three astronomies, the Copernican, Epicurean, and Ptolemaic, he emphasizes that the faith is a far surpassing beginning than any astronomical remodeling. In the epic, Milton describes the universe in these models as both narrator and through characters like Raphael and Michael. It is primarily through

John Milton



¹ "To save the appearances." –Plato

these angelic servants of God that he admonishes humans to seek faith and obedience first, then to pursue a model of the scientific knowledge informed by that faith.

Lovejoy, Tillyard, Lewis, Curry, and Svendsen are all 20th century ‘modern’ scholars who argue for Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to be understood as fundamentally informed by medieval science. Lovejoy wrote the seminal work in understanding the hierarchy of the universe in a history of the idea called *The Great Chain of Being*.² Tillyard argues that the early modern era’s works are like dramas on a stage with a curtain of hierarchical order called *The Elizabethan World Picture*, and in *The Miltonic Setting*.³ This backdrop places God atop, humanity in the middle-earth, unformed matter or chaos at the bottom, and all manner of creation between those levels, each appropriate to their kinds.⁴ C.S. Lewis succinctly sums the creation of this poetic idea of *The Discarded Image* of the Heavens, the Earth, and the Inhabitants therein all properly ordered.⁵ He also writes of this in “Hierarchy” and “Conclusion” within his *Preface to Paradise Lost*.⁶ Interestingly, Curry argues that *Milton’s Cosmogony, Ontology, and Physics* are Milton’s own emergent theory arising from his conglomeration of ancient and newly emerging ideas of science, theology, and history.⁷ Svendsen defends that the relationship between *Milton and Science* is strictly medieval.⁸

Calloway and Martin are two current scholars who assert that Milton is both a scientific reformer, thus versed in modern science, as

² Lovejoy, A.O., *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Harvard, 1936.

³ Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Chatto & Windus, 1948. Tillyard, E.M.W. *The Miltonic Setting*. MacMillan, 1949.

⁴ Adequaetio or Felicity, a certain fittingness for each according to genus and species, category and slot.

⁵ Lewis, C.S. *The Discarded Image*. Cambridge, 1964.

⁶ Lewis, C. S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. Oxford University Press, 1963.

⁷ Curry, W.C. *Milton’s Ontology, Cosmogony, and Physics*. University of Kentucky Press, 1957.

⁸ Svendsen, Kester. *Milton and Science*. Harvard, 1956.

well as a natural theologian who prioritizes knowing God first rather than grasping at a feigned God-like knowledge of nature.⁹ Additionally, Martin reassesses Svendsen's claims of Milton being medieval in his science, saying that Milton is possibly the most Baconian early modern poet and who has been greatly misunderstood in the story of modernity.¹⁰

Most scholars have debated whether Milton is a modern or a medievalist in science. That seems a false dichotomy and ignorance to the poetic form. The cosmological epic *Paradise Lost* is not concerned with the intellectual act of choosing Copernicus over Ptolemy. Rather, the story bridges the gap between the waning medieval and the waxing modern worlds with this natural conclusion: the faith of Christ triumphs over all human models and dictates what is most true.

A certain preoccupation of modern Christian Milton scholars has been apologetics. They have sought to use save the historical tie of the faith from doubts after the revolutions of modern science and criticism and use *Paradise Lost* to do so. For instance, J.E. Duncan's work *Milton's Earthly Paradise* is written to defend the historicity of Eden, and not to describe faith in Christ as contained in a storied tradition of the virtues and practices of a people from Genesis to Revelation.¹¹

Paradise Lost is fundamentally an epistemological epic. It deals with questions of questions, inquiry into inquiry itself, and knowledge about knowledge. Adam's discussions with Raphael and Michael and the irony of plot pieces like Satan's stealing into the garden under the angel Uriel's nose all depend on characters possessing differing degrees of

⁹ Calloway, Katherine. " 'His Footstep Trace': the Natural Theology of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies*. Vol. 55. ed. Laura L. Knoppers. Dunquesne University Press, 2014.

¹⁰ Martin, Catherine Gimelli. " 'What if the Sun Be the Centre to the World?' Milton's Epistemology, Cosmology, and Paradise of Fools Reconsidered." *Modern Philology*. Vol. 99, No. 2. The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

¹¹ Duncan, J.E. *Milton's Earthly Paradise*. University of Minnesota Press, 1972. For this sentence I am indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. MacIntyre's *After Virtue* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* are the works that informed me most.

knowledge. But the epic is not filled with fruitless inquiry. Remember those first lines. It is primarily “Of Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit,” and this fruit is the fruit of knowledge of good and evil (1.1). The fruit signifies the grasp of humans at Godlike knowledge against His will. The grasp initiates the fall “till our greater Man / Restore us, and regain the blissful seat” (1.4-5). From the starting block the epic is sprinting forward in a story of redemption based on the faith of the Redeemer who is Christ. The sequel will be *Paradise Regained*. Knowledge is all relativized to the theme of obedience and faithfulness.

Leaving behind the passages of Satan’s rebellious fall, the next emphases on proper knowledge or science come in the passages of Adam. Instead of grasping at this knowledge against God’s will, Milton says that the humans should, “sleep on...happiest, if ye seek / no happier state, and know to know no more” (4.771-773). Adam and Eve are already in their most blissful state of natural and heavenly knowledge. They should not seek any more than what is already appropriately given to them. They are called to be first and foremost obedient and faithful, not contemplators of the heavens and the earth.

When that time for contemplation comes, Adam is not in sin, but he does surpass what is good by asking too much from Raphael. Before the fall, Adam seems to be grasping at knowledge (like at the fruit) in his inquiry to Raphael. Rather than describing Adam as grasping though, Milton describes Adam as asking the right person—a servant of God, “the empyreal minister,” in the right setting—Eden before the fall in the presence of God (5.460). Adam asks Raphael what order are created things under? He focuses on cosmological and astronomical knowledge because these are the heights of scientific and philosophical inquiry in Milton’s day. The result is that Raphael exhorts Adam to “be found obedient, and retain / unalterably his love entire, / whose progeny you are” (5.501-3). Adam responds to the “Favourable Spirit, propitious guest,” by thanking the angel for teaching “the way that might direct / Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set / From center to circumference; whereon, / In contemplation of created things / By steps we may ascend to God” (5.507-512). It does seem to be possible for

knowledge to form stepping-stones for ascending to God. Adam believes in the hierarchy in the scale of nature. Raphael doesn't affirm or deny this truth, he allows Adam to inquire and wonder. Raphael's most important words to Adam are: "to love or not; in this we stand or fall" (5.540). Raphael tells Adam that although he would like to know the secrets of the Heavens and the Earth and what's between, what comes first is faith in loving obedience to God.

After Raphael recounts the wars of heaven and hell, Adam's inquiry "Led on, yet sinless, with desire to know / what nearer might concern him, how this world / Of Heaven and Earth conspicuous first began; when, and whereof created; for what cause" (7.61-64). To this question of first causes, reminiscent of a classical philosophical challenge of causes,¹² Raphael responds to Adam to pursue not the causes of the Heavens and the Earth, "yet what thou canst attain, which best may serve / to glorify the Maker" is to have

Of knowledge within bounds; beyond, abstain to ask;
nor let thine own inventions hope
things not revealed, which the invisible King,
Only Omniscient, hath suppressed in night;
To none communicable in Earth or Heaven:
Enough is left besides to search and know.
But knowledge is as food, and needs no less
Her temperance over appetite, to know
In measure what the mind may well contain;
Oppress else with surfeit, and soon turns

Wisdom to folly, as nourishment to wind (7.120-130)

Knowledge then should be limited for humans. Scientific inquiry should stop at a certain point. There is a virtue of temperance or moderation involved in inquiry. What Raphael relates then is the knowledge of good and evil, not the knowledge of hubristic contemplation. The primary

¹² Aristotle, Aquinas, etc.

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things that Adam and Eve should know are not the first causes of things, but rather the faith and obedience and love.

When Adam inquires why the nobler body, the Sun, revolves around the inferior earth, he is invoking a classical-medieval idea of hierarchy of nature. Raphael does not accuse Adam of reaching by asking, but he does turn him back to what is more important. Raphael uses the overt example of astronomical models to argue for faith first, then a fitting model of the universe.

Whether Heaven move or Earth,
Imports not, if thou reckon right; the rest
From Man or Angel the great Architect
Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge
His secrets to be scanned by them who ought
Rather admire; ...
Hereafter; when they come to model Heaven
And calculate the stars, how they will wield
The mighty frame; how build, unbuild, contrive
To save appearances; how gird the sphere
With centric and eccentric scribbled o'er,
Cycle and epicycle, orb in orb: (8.70-75,79-84)

Here Raphael makes clear reference to the Ptolemaic system when he says cycle, epicycle, centric, and eccentric. He says that it will be foolish for humans when they think they've capture all of knowledge of the cosmos into a single model under one man's name. Raphael suggests "What if the sun / be center to the world" just to show Adam that either

way the revolution goes, what is more important than the cosmological model of the day is the faith (8.122). Raphael advises Adam afterwards to “solicit not thy thought with matters hid; / leave them to God above; him serve, and fear!” (8.168-170). Instead, “wherever placed, let him dispose; joy thou / in what he gives to thee, this Paradise / And thy fair Eve;” (8.171-173). Raphael wants Adam to focus on the practical virtuous life. He wants Adam to focus on the gifts God has given him: the middle-earth appropriate to his thoughts, the gift of Eve, the fruits of the earth and labor, the pleasure of God’s Edenic presence with him. For humans, “Heaven is for thee too high / to know what passes there; be lowly wise: / think only what concerns thee, and thy being;” (8.168-175). Humanity is exhorted by Milton to focus on the daily, to descend to the particulars of love and obedient faith. Adam agrees with Raphael, knowing how “apt the mind or fancy is to rove” (8.188). Instead of clouded speculation, he affirms that “to know / that which before us lies in daily life, / is the prime wisdom: What is more, is fume, / or emptiness, or fond impertinence: / and renders us, in thing that most concern, / unpracticed, unprepared, and still to seek.” (8.192-197). Adam and Raphael come to unanimity in their dialogue that what is firstly important before astronomy and physics and biology and all other forms of scientific revolution is the faith.

Adam’s seven actions after God creates him may be paralleled to God’s seven acts of creation and thus model the proper mode in which humans should imitate God in inquiry and knowledge. First of all, Adam sets his gaze to the heavens, responding to God’s speaking of light into being (8.257). Then, he springs instinctually into upright posture, ordering himself heavenward in body too (8.260). Third, he surveys all the earth’s beauty of creation and creatures (8.261-3). Next, he is filled with joy overflowing in his heart (8.266). Fifth, he examines himself totally (8.268). Sixth, like the day of his creation by God, Adam speaks, now imitating God in the use of words (8.272). He names all the creatures and acknowledges his creator (8.278-9). Finally he rests in “gentle sleep” like God does on the seventh day until he sees God in his dream (8.289). God tells him of all Paradise, exhorts Adam to obey, and elevates Adam to his proper place in creation.

After the fall, Michael restores Adam to proper knowledge. Adam says of his second angelic dialogue in Book 12 that “Greatly-instructed” he “shall hence depart; / greatly in peace of thought; and have [his] fill / Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain / Beyond which was [his] folly to aspire.” (12.558-561). Adam concludes his thoughts with penetrating self-awareness and conviction of the first principles of knowledge:

Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,
And love with fear the only God; to walk
As in his presence...taught this by his example, whom I now
Acknowledge my Redeemer ever blest” (12.562-564, 572-573).

Adam acknowledges Christ first. He accepts the story of the Scriptures that Michael gives to him as explaining all future history. He comes to terms with what is proper to his kind. He accepts his place within the model of hierarchy that places him below God and above creation. He affirms that obedience and faith is better than all the folly that he aspired to know of the causes of the heavens and the earth in his dialogue with Raphael.

Michael confirms Adam’s conclusions with his final exhortation to proper behavior and knowledge in the response to the fall. Michael’s final words to Adam are that “this having learned, thou hast attained the sum of wisdom” (12.575-576). He tells man to “hope no higher, though all the stars / thou knewest by name, and all the ethereal powers, all the secrets of the deep, all Nature’s works, or works of God in Heaven, air, earth, or sea” (12.576-579). He tells Adam to add to this knowledge “Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith, / add virtue, patience, temperance” (12.582-584). He does not prevent the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Rather, he emphasizes what is most important about a model of understanding the universe for Adam. He argues to “add love, / By name to come called charity, the soul / of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth / to leave this Paradise, but shalt possess / A Paradise within thee, happier far” (12.584-587). Michael helps Adam conclude that the goal of knowledge is to be good like God in the way that is proper for man: obedience in faithful love.

The story that Michael tells Adam ultimately ends with the account of the redeeming faith of the Son. In this denouement, Michael exhorts Adam to remain faithful foremost, though he had stood at the pinnacle of knowledge, on the height of speculation even with the angels. Milton dually saves us from ignorance and hubristic speculation. He reminds that the faith is at the *cor* of all knowledge. And he reminds us through Raphael and Michael's dialogues with Adam that according to our nature as human images of God in the fellowship of the angels, we will inquire. To be unfaithful, disobedient, and prideful, and especially with knowledge, is the ultimate sin against God, others, and self. What matters is how, what, who, where, when, and why we ask. Adam asks before the fall, in the ultimate unmediated dwelling of God and his servants in creation together. He inquires in complete humble submission in order to know Truth, to understand God's creation to praise and worship God. And where his inquiry borders on hubris, Raphael advises Adam to what we should do in the face of revolutionary science: be faithful, then believe the best model of the world around you.

Milton writes in the crucible between medieval and modern. Calloway describes this early modern period as a time when natural philosophers like Bacon and Boyle were in intense debate over the form in which inquiry should be done.¹³ The great question was whether humans should seek knowledge of God or God-like knowledge as the first things.¹⁴ Not only were philosophers questioning this, but everywhere medieval science was unravelling. Questioning the authority of Aristotle in the theological arena transferred to the scientific. Nowhere was this more evident than in the revolution in astronomy over the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian synthesis. Into his great work, Milton incorporates questioning of the accepted medieval cosmological model and new ones, but faith is the crux of his work and the heart of its conclusion. The medieval world picture is still the best one for the poet.

¹³ Calloway, Katherine. " 'His Footstep Trace': the Natural Theology of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies*. Vol. 55. ed. Laura L. Knoppers. Dunquesne University Press, 2014. 53-85.

¹⁴ Calloway, " 'His Footstep Trace': the Natural Theology of *Paradise Lost*," 56.

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It was handed down to Milton through the seminal works until his time. It posits a hierarchical order to all of creation. Milton chooses to write in “The Discarded Image,” “The Elizabethan World Picture,” “The Great Chain of Being.” This model was what worked best with Milton’s faith, the Puritain-Arian-Christian faith of the great English poet. The denouement of Books 11 and 12 is where Michael admonishes that what matters most in inquiry is faith. The story of Scripture informs a tradition of virtues and practices of the people who are the Church. Thus, the divine conclusion for the questioning modern is obedient faith and virtue. The Model is just the best conception we have of the natural world that saves the appearances and follows the faith. When the faith that *Paradise Lost* argues for is understood as a storied tradition of virtues and practices of a people, the faith triumphs as the resolute conclusion whereby Adam and Eve don’t depart like Masaccio had them in despair, but standing and walking firmly in the faith they have received to see that

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way. (12.646-649)