

“THUS GOD THE HEAVEN CREATED, THUS THE EARTH”
THE BIBLICAL CREATION STORY IN MILTON’S
*PARADISE LOST*¹

—◀▶—
GÁBOR ITTZÉS

The Bible is ubiquitous in *Paradise Lost*; its presence is all pervasive. It is always there even if other—classical, contemporary cultural, or scientific—references are temporarily layered over it. As Thomas NEWTON observed in 1749, commenting on Milton’s version of the heavenly scales scene at the end of Book 4, “So true it is, that Milton oftner imitates Scripture than Homer and Virgil, even where he is thought to imitate them most” (1: 308n). Consequently, “Milton and the Bible” is a vast topic, of which I can examine only a small segment here. I will concentrate on his treatment and adaptation of the creation story in the narrow sense, that is, how he works chapters 1–2 of Genesis into *Paradise Lost*.² Even there I have to be selective and will explore Milton’s thematic, textual, and structural appropriation of his master narrative, with a special interest in his version of the *two* biblical accounts. Keeping a general eye on the exegetical tradition of which Milton is part,³ I will consider his biblical interpretation as a scholarly exercise in the sense of a passionate quest for truth rather than understand it in its ecclesiastical function.

Before we proceed, it should be pointed out here that Milton’s Bible was the King James Version.⁴ As Jason P. ROSENBLATT has recently observed, “Although Milton’s third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, owned a Geneva Bible of 1588, there is

¹ Research for this paper was supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund, OTKA (Grant No. K-101928).

² In this paper, I use “creation story” and similar terms to reference material that corresponds to that of Genesis 1–2.

³ That tradition, and Milton’s place in it, has been treated in book-length studies; for two seminal works, see, A. WILLIAMS’ *The Common Expositor* (1948) and G. A. ANDERSON’S *The Genesis of Perfection* (2001). On earlier stages of biblical interpretation—on which Renaissance commentators also drew—see, e.g., J. L. KUGEL’S *The Bible as It Was* (1997) and *Eve and Adam* by K. E. KWAM, L. S. SCHEARING, and V. H. ZIEGLER (1999).

⁴ The point is worth making, apart from the immediate context provided by this conference volume, because until recently even such a prestigious forum as “The Milton Reading Room” of Dartmouth College claimed that distinction for the Geneva Bible (1560/1599).

no evidence that her husband used it. [...] Polyglot Milton can choose among Bibles, but by 1648 he finds the authority of the KJB irresistible” (181, 183). At relevant points in the following analysis, I will provide specific comparisons among *Paradise Lost*, KJB, and TGB to illustrate Milton’s greater proximity to the Authorized Version.⁵

* * *

In his now-classic treatment of Renaissance Genesis commentaries, Arnold WILLIAMS noted that, in interpreting the opening chapters of the Bible, “[t]he first task of the commentators was to explain why there were two accounts and to harmonize them” (66). Modern scholarship’s answer to that question is the Documentary Hypothesis, which is a much more firmly established theory in biblical studies than its name modestly suggests. The canonical text of the Pentateuch is recognized as a composite of four different sources, woven together by a later redactor.⁶ Two of the four sources, or documents, are relevant for the creation story. From the opening “In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1) to the first verses of the second chapter (2:4a) the text comes from the Priestly source (P) while the next three chapters (2:4b–4:26) belong to the Yahwist source (J). The former, dated to the period of the exile (6th century BC), is characterized by a formulaic structure, cosmological vision, and systematic cataloguing. It is a “scientific” text, exhibiting significant parallels with Babylonian and Mesopotamian sources. It is from P that we learn of the six days of creation followed by the first Sabbath. J, on the other hand, which also includes the account of the fall, the loss of Paradise and the story of Cain and Abel, is considerably older (usually dated to the 10th century BC) and is characterized by an Israelite folk narrative style⁷ (WEST 61–86). The two versions, though arranged into a single

⁵ All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from Alastair Fowler’s revised critical edition. Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are taken from an online edition of the KJB (www.kingjamesbibleonline.org). TGB is cited after its online edition at www.genevabible.org/Geneva.html, with words that differ from the KJB italicized (both sites last accessed 30 Aug. 2012).

⁶ In its current—developed—form, the theory is far more complex than my sketch suggests, but the details need not concern us here. A thoroughly argued yet eminently readable, although in its claims somewhat contentious, account of the Hebrew Bible’s development is offered by R. E. FRIEDMAN in his *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987/1997).

⁷ Harold Bloom considers it the deliberately and highly ironic work of a female member of Judah’s ruling house after the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam (ROSENBERG and BLOOM 9–48, esp. 19).

narrative by the early editors, are in creative tension with overlaps, divergences, and contradictions.

Some of the most notable tensions between the two versions include their account of the creation of humanity. According to P, “male and female created he [God] them” (Gen. 1:27); J presents the event in two stages. First, man is created from dust (2:7), and woman is formed from man only later in a second move (2:21–22). Further, P affirms that God created humans in his⁸ own image and likeness whereas J speaks of his breathing the breath of life into the nostrils of man. Humans are commanded to “[b]e fruitful, and multiply” and to “replenish the earth and subdue it” (1:28) in P, whereas J’s Yahweh tells Adam “to dress [the Garden] and to keep it” (2:15).

The two sources also diverge regarding the number and order of God’s creative acts. In P’s account, which is perhaps a result of the reworking of an earlier ten-day creation text, ten created works are produced in eight creative acts on six numbered consecutive days (cf. Table 1, below). J, however, offers a more simple sequential narrative with no specific temporal signals. The creation of man and woman frames the plantation of the Garden of Eden with trees and rivers, on the one hand, and the creation of land and air animals (while sea animals are omitted altogether) on the other (cf. Table 3, below).

If J, the older narrative, seems to offer fewer details of the creation catalogue than P, it also has numerous particulars that are unique to it and missing from the six-day description. They include, to name the most salient features, Adam’s creation from dust (Gen. 2:7), the garden where he is planted (2:8, 15), the two trees and the interdiction (2:9, 16–17), the four rivers (2:10–14), the naming of the animals (2:18, 19b–20)—and names in general, including Adam and Eve, Eden and Paradise, the four rivers and other geographical names—and the nakedness of the first human couple (2:25). For countless centuries, these many details have been indelible features of “the” Judeo-Christian creation story. Genesis 1 and 2 have been read, for most of their effective history, as *one* story.

The impact of the decision of the canonical form’s editors to arrange the opening chapters of the Bible as we know them is hardly to be overestimated. For millennia, P has trumped (the older) J; Genesis 2 has long been interpreted within the matrix provided by Genesis 1. The full picture of the interplay is even more complicated, however. J and P *mutually* serve as interpretive frameworks for each other. As far as the creation story proper is concerned, J is inserted in

⁸ For the sake of readability, I follow the KJB’s and Milton’s practice of referring to God with masculine pronouns.

the P frame. But in the overall structure of Genesis, P is inserted in the J frame, which provides the narrative backbone of the whole book.⁹

Needless to say, Milton was not aware of the Documentary Hypothesis. It might perhaps be argued that he anticipated it in some poetic ways, but it is more accurate to say that even ancient biblical interpreters sensed the different qualities of Genesis 1 and 2 as texts and recognized many of the tensions and difficulties they presented both individually and combined in their canonical form.¹⁰ It is not so much what they saw but how they framed their observations and what uses they put them to that differentiates ancient and modern Bible scholars.¹¹ The justification for my use of modern exegetical concepts comes not from their availability to Milton in any sense but from their usefulness in analyzing the source text and naming some of its features and qualities that were recognized, if not so named, by a long line of pre-modern biblical interpreters including Milton.

* * *

As is well known, Milton offers his account of the creation of the mundane universe, or cosmos,¹² in Raphael and Adam's dialogue that occupies, together with the story of the war in heaven, the central books of *Paradise Lost*. At his host's request, the angel relates how this world came into being. In offering the central and most substantial creation narrative of the epic (7.131–641), Raphael faithfully follows the opening chapter of Genesis, keeping much of its formulaic structure but amplifying the biblical text. The sequence of events is identical in both accounts, as is their temporal arrangement into six days followed by a Sabbath (Table 1).

⁹ The structural and narrative significance of the Book of Generations need not be discussed here (cf. FRIEDMAN 218–219, WEST 71).

¹⁰ Kugel organizes his chapters into interpretive motifs, that is, issues—or “surface irregularities” of the text—ancient commentators felt the need to explain. FRIEDMAN lists some of the early objections raised over the course of centuries, esp. to the Pentateuch's Mosaic authorship (17–21).

¹¹ Cf. KUGEL's introductory chapter on “The World of Ancient Biblical Interpreters” (1–49, esp. 17–23).

¹² A term Milton never used, but which has its justification (see ITTZÉS 2012a: 34).

Table 1: Chronology of creation in Genesis (P) and Paradise Lost (Book 7)

Day	Gen. (P)	Theme	Creation event	PL 7.
1	1:1–2		Heaven and earth	216–242
	1:3–5	a	Light, day, and night	243–252 ¹³
2	1:6–8	b ₁₋₂	Separation of waters above and below the sky	261–275
3	1:9–10	c ₁	Dry land (and seas)	276–308
	1:11–13	c ₂	Vegetation: seed yielding plants and trees	309–338
4	1:14–19	a	Sun, moon, and stars	339–386
5	1:20–23	b ₁₋₂	Sea animals and birds ¹⁴	387–448
6	1:24–25	c ₁	Land animals: cattle, creeping things, wild beasts	449–504
	1:26–31	c ₂	Humankind	505–550 ¹⁵
7	2:2–3		Sabbath rest	581–634

The case of J is more complex. There are very few descriptive features, notably the four rivers and prelapsarian nakedness, which we encounter in the narrator’s account but are not proper elements of the creation *story* (cf. Table 3, below). Raphael does not mention them at all, but they are definitely the exception not the rule, for he is cognizant of virtually all particulars of J. He is aware that Adam named the animals (7.493),¹⁶ that he was created from dust, the breath of life was breathed into his nostrils and he became a living soul (7.524–528), that he was brought to the garden (7.537–538), and the angel is also familiar with God’s only command to Adam (7.540–545). Impressive as this list is, it is nonetheless somewhat misleading, for the integration of the various episodes into Raphael’s P differs widely.

There are, first, those verses that relate events covered by P anyway. Raphael is the custodian of that information, which includes the creation of earth and heavens (Gen. 2:2b), of plants (2:9a), and of birds and land animals (2:19a).

¹³ PL 7.253–260: amplification on first “evening and morning” (celebration of celestial choirs).

¹⁴ Seas and heavens; fish and fowl are treated together.

¹⁵ PL 7.551–581: return of the Creator to heaven.

¹⁶ He also calls “The serpent subtlest beast of all the field” (7.495): another J motif (Gen. 3:1) but one that points beyond the referential frame of this essay, limited to Genesis 1–2.

These details are largely subsumed under the Miltonic retelling of the P narrative and to that extent may lose their characteristic features (e.g. animals are not formed out of the ground as in J, but the earth brings them forth as in P; cf. Gen. 1:24).

Second, some distinctive details of J are recognizably maintained yet fully incorporated into Raphael's narrative. A case in point is man's creation from dust.¹⁷ The correspondences between the Bible's prose and Milton's verse rendering are so close that it is worth reading the two side by side (Table 2).

Table 2: Raphael's rendering of man's creation (J incorporated into P)

PL 7.519–534	Genesis (KJB) ¹⁸	Verse
Let us make now man in our image, man	Let us make man in our image,	1:26
In our similitude, and let them rule	after our likeness: and let them have dominion	1:26
Over the fish and fowl of sea and air,	over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air,	1:26
Beast of the field, and over all the earth,	and over the cattle, and over all the earth,	1:26
And every creeping thing that creeps the ground.	and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.	1:26
This said, he formed thee, Adam, thee O man	And the LORD God formed man	2:7
Dust of the ground, and in thy nostrils breathed	of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils	2:7
The breath of life;	the breath of life;	2:7

¹⁷ Another is the interdiction, which I will discuss below.

¹⁸ Cf. "Furthermore God said, Let us make man in our image *according to* our likeness, and let them *rule* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the *heaven*, and over the *beasts*, and over all the earth, and over everything that creepeth *and moveth on* the earth. Thus God created *the* man in his image, in the image of God created he him; he created them male and female. And God blessed them, and God said *to* them, *Bring forth* fruit, and multiply, and *fill* the earth, and subdue it, and *rule* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the *heaven*, and over every *beast* that moveth upon the earth. [...] The LORD God *also made the* man of the dust of the ground, and breathed *in his face* breath of life, and the man *was* a living soul" (TGB, italics added). There are twelve substantial words (verbs and nouns) that differ between KJB and TGB: *have dominion/rule, air/heaven, cattle/beast, -/moveth* (1:26); *be fruitful/bring forth fruit, replenish/fill, have dominion/rule, air/heaven, living thing/beast; formed/made, nostrils/face, became/was* (2:7). Of those, Milton opts nine times for KJB and only three times for TGB.

PL 7.519–534	<i>Genesis (KJB)</i> ¹⁸	<i>Verse</i>
in his own image he	[s]o God created man in his <i>own</i> image,	1:27
Created thee, in the image of God	in the image of God created he him;	1:27
Express, and thou becam'st a living soul.	and man became a living soul.	2:7
Male he created thee, but thy consort	[M]ale and female created he them.	1:27
Female for race; then blessed man- kind, and said,	And God blessed them, and God said unto them,	1:28
Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth,	Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,	1:28
Subdue it, and throughout dominion hold	and subdue it: and have dominion	1:28
Over fish of the sea, and fowl of the air,	over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air,	1:28
And every living thing that moves on the earth.	and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.	1:28

The first five lines (519–523) correspond very closely to Genesis 1:26, lines 526b–527 and 529–530a to verse 27, and the last four and a half lines to verse 28. Apart from slight syntactic changes (including those necessitated by the shift from a third- to a second-person form) and a few substitutions of synonyms (such as *similitude* for *likeness*, *rule* for *have dominion*, *ground* for *earth*, etc.), Milton's text is almost a verbatim quotation of the Bible. In the middle of this passage (524–528), however, the text of Genesis 2:7 is seamlessly interpolated. The integration is complete; the two sources are fully interwoven, and even a hint at J's version of Eve's creation is included.

Full incorporation of J into Raphael's rendering of P is typically counterbalanced by a wide dissemination of the same J material among various voices.¹⁹ Adam's creation from dust, usually conjoined with his introduction into the garden, is known to many epic characters. Both God the Father (11.98) and the Son (10.206–208) make explicit reference to it in the postlapsarian context. Adam mentions it to Eve both before (4.416–417) and after the fall (11.199–200) as well as to Raphael (5.516). He brings it up again during his wailing (10.743–746, 770, etc.) and conversation with Michael (11.463), who already has knowledge of it (11.260–262) apparently from some independent source. But Satan (9.176–178) probably gathers it from Adam (cf. 4.416–417).

¹⁹ Gen. 2:5–6, peculiar to J, yet apparently known to Raphael alone, is an exception. I will return to it later.

An interplay of voices has an even more prominent part in the third type of Raphael's appropriation of J. A number of details are only hinted at in Book 7 but are given a full account elsewhere. Raphael certainly knows about the tree of knowledge of good and evil (7.542–543) but does not mention the *two* trees in the middle of the garden. Their full description is left to the bard (4.218–222) and Adam (4.423–424)—and God as quoted by Adam (8.323–326). Another case in point is Adam's introduction to Eden, which was already touched upon. As we have just seen, the fact itself is known to many, but Adam gives an in-depth report of what actually happened (8.295–320). Similarly, Raphael makes very short shrift of the naming of the animals while Adam relates it in full (8.342–354). Perhaps the most fascinating episode is Eve's creation. For a fleeting contrast between man and woman, Raphael touches upon it (7.529–530), and it turns out that Michael is also privy to some of the details (11.369). These angelic references are substantially augmented by Adam's relation (8.378–539), yet the story would not be complete without Eve's own account (4.449–491), which comes narratively first and fills the gap created by Adam's sleep (Gen. 2:21, *PL* 8.478). Table 3 summarizes Milton's accommodation of the J material.

Milton, like his pre-modern colleagues, thus strives to harmonize the different strands of the Biblical narrative (J and P), and he does a very thorough job of combining the two traditions. Interestingly, however, in certain ways he does keep them separate or at least distinguishes between them. The crucial difference appears in the dramatic distribution of the relevant material over the various voices. First, Raphael's version of P in Book 7 is a counterpoise to Adam's recollection of his introduction to and first day in the garden, based on J, in Book 8. The contrast between the two most sustained creation narratives in *Paradise Lost* is emphasized in the second edition of 1674, which separates into two different books what was the subject matter of one long book in the 1667 first edition. Even more importantly, Raphael is pretty much the sole representative of P, while the J material is ultimately scattered among a variety of voices. Milton, obviously for reasons that have nothing to do with historical criticism and everything to do with narrative style and the literary qualities of the text, thus separates the two biblical versions of creation.

Table 3: Milton’s accommodation of *J*

<i>Gen.</i> (<i>J</i>)	<i>Topic</i> (<i>creation event</i>)	PL 7 (<i>Raphael</i>)	<i>Other PL text</i>	<i>Voice</i>	<i>Day</i> ²⁰
2:4b	Creation of earth and heavens	7.216–242	[cf. 3.708–721]	[Uriel]	1
2:5–6	Mist not rain	7.331–337			3
2:7	Creation of Adam from dust	7.524–527	4.416–417, etc. (see discus- sion above)	Adam, Satan, Michael, Son, Father	6
2:8, 15	Adam’s introduction to paradise	7.535–547	8.295–320, etc. (see discussion above)	Adam [etc.]	6
2:9a	Creation of plants	7.309–338			3
2:9b	Two trees	[7.542–543]	4.218–222, 423–424; 8.323–328, etc.	Narrator, Adam [God]	—
2:10–14	Four rivers		4.421–432	Narrator	—
2:16–17	Interdiction	7.542–544	4.419–430, 8.321–336, etc. (see discussion below)	Adam, ²¹ Eve, Son, Michael, Narrator	6
2:19a	Creation of birds and land animals	7.417–492			5–6
2:19b–20	Naming of animals	7.493	8.342–354	Adam	6
2:18, 21–24	Creation of Eve	7.529–530	4.449–491, 8.378–484, 11.369	Eve, Adam, Michael	6
2:25	Nakedness		4.290, 319– 320, etc.	Narrator ²²	—

²⁰ Following P’s numbering.

²¹ Note that God only utters it in reported speech. Trinitarian issues aside, the Son also confirms its divine origin when claiming to have given it in the first person (10.122–123).

²² It is only after the fall that “the eyes of [Adam and Eve] were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7).

The arrangement has some important implications. First, knowledge of the six-day creation is clearly revealed, while the “elaboration” provided by J is knowledge available to prelapsarian human reason, also confirmed by revelation. Second, what is a continuous (if somewhat repetitive) narrative in Genesis 1–2 is fragmented and distributed among several narrators in *Paradise Lost*. This tendency is emphasized by Uriel’s explanation to Satan in disguise. An eyewitness to creation, he presents his own account of the event (3.708–721). It is clearly a creation narrative yet very difficult to correlate with the biblical text. Only distant, if any, echoes of P are audible in it, and it might equally be considered an elaboration on J’s terse opening sentence (Gen. 2:4b). It does not directly contradict the Bible any more than other amplifications do, but it surely has extra-scriptural sources.²³ Creation is such a grand event that no single account can exhaust it. That is precisely the point. Just as the Bible, when we look beyond its opening chapters, is peppered with confessions attesting to God’s creative power and act, virtually every character in *Paradise Lost* alludes to God’s creation and offers their own version of the story. A full account of creation only emerges from a variety of voices engaging in dialogue.²⁴ Raphael and Adam are chief among them, but the choir also includes Eve, Uriel—even Michael—and the narrator as well (not to mention the divine characters, who confirm several details). And that holds not only after the fall but also in the untainted prelapsarian context. Truth, so Milton seems to suggest here, is not simply fragmented because of sin.²⁵ Creaturely truth is limited and must be pieced together from a number of individual perspectives.

* * *

J. P. ROSENBLATT has noted the lack of Milton’s inhibition vis-à-vis the KJB, especially after 1653 and, supremely, in *Paradise Lost* (189–190 and *passim*). It would be foolish to argue for any slavishness on Milton’s part, nor do I want to attribute any anxiety (Rosenblatt’s key term) to him. What Rosenblatt’s thesis diverts attention from, however, is the extent to which Milton’s elaboration of the text is not simply an expression of “exultant poetic freedom” (197) and “joyous creativity” (198) but is guided by centuries of exegetical tradition and is itself an exercise in biblical interpretation in the narrow sense. His methods

²³ Fowler traces Uriel’s account “couched in Augustinian, Christian–Platonic terms,” beyond the *Confessions* and *Timaeus*, to Anaxagoras, Ovid, and Macrobius (MILTON 2007: 212n).

²⁴ Cf. the repeated protestations of the difficulty of narration (e.g. 7.112–114, 76–179; 8.250–251).

²⁵ Cf. the famous Osiris passage in *Areopagitica* (MILTON 2003: 741–742).

are varied, ranging from the deceptively simple to highly sophisticated dramatic modes.

In the narrative of man’s creation, we have seen an example of how Milton appropriates the biblical text over a considerable span (Table 2). Not insignificantly, he actually combined two strands of his source and offered an easy harmonization of them, which itself is an act of interpretation. In fact, Milton is guided by exegetical tradition, which, prior to the rise of modern scholarship, interpreted Genesis 2 as an elaboration of the six-day creation story. In the passage quoted above, he presents a versified, but otherwise poetically hardly embellished, rendering of the unified narrative.

A similar but even more pointed example of harmonization concerns the events of the third day. Before the usual affirmation of the goodness of what has been created, Raphael comments on the heaven-like perfection of earth, now adorned with vegetation, and then adds,

though God had not yet rained
Upon the earth, and man to till the ground
None was, but from the earth a dewy mist
Went up and watered all the ground, and each
Plant of the field, which ere it was in the earth
God made, and every herb, before it grew
On the green stem... (7.331–337)

This passage is not to be found in P; it is taken from J:

..in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and *there was* not a man to till the ground. ⁶But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground (Gen. 2:4b–6).²⁶

In and of itself, Milton’s version is a very close paraphrase of the biblical sub-text except that he reverses the order of the verses; lines 331–334 correspond to verses 5b–6 and lines 334–337 to verse 5a. The faithfulness is so close that

²⁶ Again, Milton is closer to KJB than TGB, which runs: “in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵And every plant of the field, before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field, before it grew, for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, *neither was there* a man to till the ground, ⁶But *a mist went up* from the earth, and watered *all the earth*” (italics added).

it may conceal some crucial differences. Milton does much more than simply integrate J into P. He tacitly relocates the comment on the lack of rain and human work from the context of Adam's creation in J to day 3 of the hexaemeron, but he also reinterprets it. On P's vision, God first created the habitations for each order of beings—the heavenly bodies, animals of sea, air, and land, and humans—then the inhabitants themselves (cf. the "Theme" column in Table 1). Thus God created vegetation on day 3, to be the habitat for humanity. In J's understanding, on the other hand, plants and herbs of the field signify agriculture, which depends on rain and human work as its preconditions. With Milton's rearrangement, the causal explanative parenthesis of J is transposed into a concessive clause in *Paradise Lost*: rain and work are no longer missing preconditions of agriculture but subsequent, almost (in the etymological sense) superfluous, auxiliaries to a perfect world, solely determined by and dependent on God's freedom expressed through creation.²⁷

Harmonization and simple (quotation-like) paraphrase are by no means Milton's only interpretive techniques. The first day of creation in the words of the KJB:

³ And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. ⁴ And God saw the light, that *it was good*: and God divided the light from the darkness. ⁵ And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day (Gen. 1:3–5).

The same in Milton's rendering:

*Let there be light, God said, and forthwith light
Ethereal, first of things, quintessence pure
Sprung from the deep, and from her native east
To journey through the airy gloom began,
Sphered in radiant cloud, for yet the sun
Was not; she in a cloudy tabernacle
Sojourned a while. God saw the light was good;
And light from darkness by the hemisphere
Divided: light the day, and darkness night
He named. Thus was the first day even and morn... (7.243–252, italics added)²⁸*

²⁷ Milton's reversal of the order of the J verses also solves a difficulty of Hebrew syntax.

²⁸ Cf. "Then God said, Let there be light; And there was light. ⁴ And God saw the light that it was good, and God *separated* the light from the darkness. ⁵ And God called the Light, Day, and the darkness he called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day" (Gen. 1:3–5,

Again, Milton essentially incorporates the biblical text into his own (the relevant lines are italicized in the passage above) but then he also expands it in good targumic fashion to solve an age-old *crux interpretum*. As early as the beginning of the common era, exegetes noticed the paradox that light is created on day 1 in Genesis 1:3, but the heavenly bodies, which could be its source, are not until much later, on day 4, in 1:14–19 (KUGEL 57–58). The question preoccupied Renaissance commentators as well (WILLIAMS 52–54). They may not have agreed with Milton’s proposal, whose roots also reach back to antiquity, but that does not in the least alter the fact that his paraphrase not only served poetic purposes but was a conscious act of biblical interpretation.

Since the animals get rather short shrift in J’s creation story, fish are not mentioned in the naming scene—which seems only logical since they could be hardly “brought [...] unto Adam” in the middle of the apparently landlocked garden of Eden to “see what he would call them” (Gen. 2:19). Milton rectifies the omission, making God instruct Adam to

understand the same
Of fish within their watery residence,
Not hither summoned, since they cannot change
Their element to draw the thinner air. (8.345–348)

The epic rendering also clarifies that naming implies, on the one hand, lordship over what is named (8.338–345) and, on the other, understanding of its nature (352–354). Neither assumption is stated in the Bible, but both are widely discussed by Renaissance commentators (WILLIAMS 81).

The interdiction was fraught with even more difficulty, indefatigably interpreted away by Milton. According to J, *Adam* hears it from God (Gen. 2:17), but *Eve* quotes it to the serpent (3:3). That is significant, for in the former version the prohibition is against eating, while in the temptation scene *Eve* claims that touching is also forbidden. In the light of the disastrous consequences, this double discrepancy elicited intense exegetical reflection.²⁹ Further, *Adam* was threatened with death as punishment “in the day” of his eating, yet he did not

TGB, italics added). The only significant difference between the two early modern translations is the replacement of *separated* with *divided*, and Milton also opts for that.

²⁹ The problem with the additional element is that it is double-edged. It can be interpreted positively as strengthening the defences (if one does not even touch the fruit, much more will one refrain from eating it), but it is also dangerous. Since touching was not really prohibited, the serpent could easily demonstrate the futility of the command by touching the fruit, which should produce no effect. The argument could then be extended to tasting it as well, and the defences were undone rather than strengthened.

die until more than eight hundred years later (5:4). These problems had occupied the minds of exegetes since antiquity.³⁰ *Paradise Lost* offers a coherent narrative in which all those troubling details are smoothed out. God himself interprets the threatened death as “From that day mortal”³¹ (8.331) in the original command that Adam hears.³²

Milton’s approach to the other two, interrelated, problems is more complex. He does not treat them directly but provides an interpretation through what might be called “dramatic commentary.” The biblical text’s meaning is not explained verbally through harmonization, paraphrase, or amplification; rather, it emerges from the distribution of relevant information among the characters. We do not directly witness the scene when God commands Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The reader has only second-hand information on this crucial episode—which is, however, plentiful. In his autobiography, Adam quotes the command as forbidding only the tasting of the fruit, not its touching (8.327, 329). Raphael’s narrative includes a comparable version (7.542–544). This is not the first time that Eve has heard it, because Adam has already cited it to her in a similar fashion (4.423, 427). Later, she alludes to it in the same form (9.863–864), and it is also in this sense that the narrator (10.13) and the Son (10.122–123, 200) recall it.³³ On the other hand, it is not only Eve who, in the crucial temptation scene with Satan, includes the ban on touching the fruit (9.651, 663). Adam himself concurs before actually eating (9.925). The bard invoking Urania (7.46) and apparently Michael (11.425–426) also agree.

The simple, but neat, contrast between the two biblical scenes—different character, different formulation—is thoroughly blurred in the epic. The gap of how Eve learned about the command is closed (she heard it from Adam and Raphael in its original form), but the validity of the variant formulation is borne out by key speakers, including the narrator. Milton makes no issue of the question of touching. The extra proviso is never problematized; “touching and tasting” is not contrasted, but is treated virtually interchangeably, with just “tasting.”³⁴ It is not Eve’s formulation of the command that holds the key to the

³⁰ Cf. ANDERSON 2001: 77–84, 117–134; KUGEL 67–72, 76–78; WILLIAMS 114, 131–133; and KWAM, SCHEARING, and ZIEGLER *passim*.

³¹ That had been a standard explanation since very early times: ANDERSON 2001: 120–129, esp. 127–128; KUGEL 69–71; WILLIAMS 131–132.

³² On Fowler’s reading, Adam’s gradual recognition of what the prohibition’s “death on the day” means is a major theme in the epic (see esp. MILTON 2007: 582n and further cross-references there).

³³ Cf. further 1.2; Argument 4, 4.515, 527; 5.61, 77, 86; 9.753, 762–763; 10.4.

³⁴ Cf. “she plucked, she ate” in 9.781 (cf. 5.65; 9.595, 688, 742).

fall. That conclusion is not explicitly stated by Milton but presented through the distribution of information among the various epic voices.

Several conclusions present themselves from this analysis. First, Milton stands in a creative tradition of pre-modern literal interpretation. The scriptural narrative remains intact (in the last example, Adam alone hears from God the short version of the interdiction, and Eve quotes to Satan the long one), but its available meaning is significantly modified (here, narrowed: the ban on touching cannot be raised as a serious issue). This twofold approach—faithfulness to the biblical text yet creative modification of its meaning—is characteristic both of Milton in his poetic mode of interpretation and of his peers working in scholarly genres. As for the exegetical tradition, Milton recognizes and even accepts the questions it poses but often disagrees with the answers it provides. He then comes up with his own reading. In so doing, he employs a variety of techniques from the apparently plain to the evidently complex, including dramatic ones that were not available to scholarly commentators. What needs to be emphasized is the primacy of commentary as a quality of Milton’s text. His appropriation of his master narrative is always loaded with additional meaning. He never simply quotes his source but is always actively engaged in interpreting it. In that exercise he is guided by, and continues to engage in dialogue with, the exegetical tradition.

* * *

After Milton’s thematic and textual accommodation of Genesis 1–2, we must also look at his adaptation of the biblical narrative in terms of its structural organization. I reflected earlier, in the discussion of how specific themes are incorporated into his creation story, on the internal structure of Milton’s version compared to that of his master text. We have also seen that the way Milton brings the two kinds of material (J and P) into complex interplay resembles the canonical arrangement. In both texts the two strands serve as interpretive frameworks for each other, and Milton strengthens those tendencies. In *Paradise Lost*, the J material from Genesis 2 is thoroughly merged into a P frame in Raphael’s account, but in the overall epic Book 7 (P) appears within a narrative framework which contributes much to the fleshing out of its details and is fundamentally defined by J. What remains to examine is how the hexaemeron fits into the overall narrative pattern of the respective works. This will also allow us to explore some of the conspicuous divergences between the creation stories of *Paradise Lost* and the Bible.

The all-important difference between the two texts is that the Bible begins

with Genesis 1–2, while Raphael and Adam’s dialogue occupies the middle books of *Paradise Lost*.³⁵ The dissimilarity is by no means merely formal. The biblical story really begins here, but there is considerable prehistory before creation in Milton’s epic: Fowler dates the week preceding the first Sabbath to days 14 to 20 of 33 days of epic action (MILTON 2007: 31).³⁶ Raphael is not describing the beginning of all things even if the events he recounts predate human existence altogether. This decisive difference makes room for further divergences, many of which can be analyzed if we examine Milton’s segue into the opening chapter of the Bible.

It is not only at the beginning of the epic that Raphael’s paraphrase of Genesis 1 is not placed. Even Book 7 does not start with it. Instead, it opens with an invocation to Urania (7.1–50), which concludes with a recapitulation of Books 5–6. That naturally prepares the way for a return to the point where the previous book broke off. The story of the war in heaven now finished, Adam and Raphael can negotiate further conversation (7.50–130). As a result, the angel promises to oblige his host with a relation of “How first began this heaven” (7.86). After this intermezzo, he picks up *his* narrative where he left it off: at the Son’s return from the expulsion of the rebels (7.131–138, cf. 6.880–892). The Father then utters a relatively long speech (7.139–174), in which he responds to the new situation in the wake of the fall of angels and declares his intention

in a moment [to] create
Another world, out of one man a race
Of men innumerable, there to dwell, (7.154–156)

and commissions the Son to carry out his plan. “So spake the almighty, and to what he spake / His Word, the filial Godhead, gave effect” (7.174–175).

Several issues are involved here. Unlike the abrupt beginning of the Bible, which mostly leaves these issues open, Milton’s preface carefully defines the why, who, and how of creation. We do not know why P’s or J’s God did what he did. Milton’s Father explains his reasons, understandable against the background of angelic rebellion.³⁷ It is also specified who God the Creator is: the Father declares, the Son effects, creation—a theological detail that is in line with Milton’s general understanding but is certainly not spelled out in Genesis.

³⁵ On Milton’s embedding and subversion of the plot of his biblical master narrative, discussed from the opposite perspective of (un)endings, see SCHWARTZ, esp. 133.

³⁶ Further on epic chronology, see my “Ten Days in Paradise: The Chronology of Terrestrial Action in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” (ITTZÉS 2012b) and literature quoted therein.

³⁷ See Fowler’s note (MILTON 2007: 397–398n) and cf. ANDERSON 2000 and 2001: 21–41.

The Father’s speech further includes a metaphysical lesson on divine matter from which the new world is to be created (7.166–173). This is Milton’s doctrine of *creatio ex Deo* as opposed to the theologically standard notion of *ex nihilo*. With so much prefatory material we might now expect to delve into action, but we are still some sixty lines from “the beginning.”

Raphael affirms the immediacy of divine action and attributes the extendedness of its narration to human limitations (7.176–179). Nevertheless, the Son still does not do what we anticipate on the basis of Genesis 1:1. First, he prepares for “his great expedition” (7.193) while the angelic choirs sing and drive through the self-opening gates of heaven to the brink of the abyss (7.180–215).³⁸ Then he rides into chaos, takes “the golden compasses, prepared / In God’s eternal store” (7.225–226) and circumscribes the new world, saying,

Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just circumference, O world.
Thus God the heaven created, thus the earth,
Matter unformed and void: darkness profound
Covered the abyss: but on the watery calm
His brooding wings the spirit of God outspread... (7.230–235)

From here on, Raphael’s narrative gradually moulds itself into what ROSENBLATT calls “the interlinear poetic commentary” on Genesis 1 (194).³⁹ It is from that point on that parallels between *Paradise Lost* and the KJB are so close that their agreement over against TGB can be demonstrated.

Milton’s God may, then, create by his word—both in the sense of “by speaking” and through his Son, the Word of God (7.163, cf. 3.708)—but the Son does not simply execute creation by his word (“and said”); he also uses the golden compasses. Creation in *Paradise Lost* is not by word alone out of nothing but by speech *and* instrument out of God. These indeed seem like momentous deviations from the received doctrine of creation. They might be, but to reach that conclusion is something of a category mistake. My concern throughout this paper has been with Milton’s use of the Bible, not with his conformity to theological teaching of any sort. In terms of biblical interpretation as an intellectual

³⁸ On heaven’s gates and this scene, see Miklós PÉTI’s insightful analysis in “Conceived altogether in Homer’s spirit.”

³⁹ Since with the next sentence (“Let there be light,” 7.243) we, significantly, reach verse 3, it is worth examining more closely the transition. In fact, we would find that what is most strikingly missing here from Milton’s text are the famous opening words of the Bible, “In the beginning.” This might indeed be his most significant act of “structural interpretation” of the creation story. For a fuller discussion, see my essay “In the Beginning” (ITZÉS 2014).

and poetic exercise (and not as a function of the church), he is perfectly within his rights in what we have seen.

The introduction of the golden compasses is by no means as far-fetched as it might first appear to modern sensibilities. On the basis of good biblical evidence,⁴⁰ there was an old tradition reaching back to the Middle Ages that depicted the Creator with a pair of compasses in hand.⁴¹ (Blake's *Ancient of Days* is a rather late but very well known example of that iconographic trajectory.) Milton's solution here is not fundamentally different from his harmonization of P and J elsewhere, except that he interpolates material from a more distant part of the Bible—itself a perfectly legitimate exegetical move by pre-modern standards. Further, *how* exactly God created is not stated in the Bible. Much more often than not he is described as creating by saying that something should exist, but he is by no means limited to verbal utterance. Several times in P (let alone J's craftsman-like Yahwe!) he is said to have “made,” “divided,” “set,” “created” things, and as a result they became what they are. In fact, in verse 1—whose Miltonic rendering we have been examining—the operative verb is *created*. It is only light in verse 3 that is created by being *called* into existence. Similarly, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not biblical in the sense that neither P nor J formally teaches it; it must be based on an argument from silence.

I am not suggesting that Milton's doctrine of creation is orthodox or that we should prefer his to the church's (or anybody else's) teaching. I am not raising the question of orthodoxy at all; I am merely arguing that however novel Milton's presentation of the creation story's *beginning* (its most structurally laden part) might seem, he is still doing what we saw him do earlier in terms of thematic and textual appropriation. He is using the biblical source material and reinterpreting it significantly, albeit in ways that do not contradict its letter. The difference, if any, is in our perception. Because his interpretive moves now obviously concern doctrinal issues, and well-known doctrinal issues at that, we are more prone to notice his deviations from received readings of the biblical text. His methods, however, are not greatly different from those we observed in the context of other aspects of the text.

Milton is an idiosyncratic theologian who treats his Bible with considerable freedom. We have seen how he accommodates the opening chapters of Genesis to his own narrative thematically, textually, and structurally. He is guided

⁴⁰ “When he prepared the heavens, I *was* there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth” (Prov. 8:27). For this verse brought to bear on Gen. 1:1, see KUGEL 53–55 and WILLIAMS 40–41, but both are concerned with Wisdom rather than the compasses.

⁴¹ Cf. TAKIGUCHI, esp. illustrations in sections III (“The Iconographic Tradition—Compasses as an Attribute”) and V (“The Compass-Circle Imagery in Literature and Donne”).

by the exegetical tradition but always articulates his own interpretations in a passionate quest for truth that, in the creaturely realm, can be found only through dialogue. His interpretive performance is not merely quite consistent throughout—he remains verbally close to the underlying master text yet clarifies and often modifies its meaning rather creatively—but it closely resembles his poetic appropriation of the biblical account. Even when he keeps the overwhelming majority of the Bible’s words, the poetry into which he moulds them is unmistakably his own. These parallels between poetic or scholarly modes of appropriation give an intellectual vibrancy to Milton’s epic, which might be one key to the inexhaustibility of his reading of the biblical creation story.

WORKS CITED

Bible editions

- The Geneva Bible (1560/1599). With Original Geneva Footnotes of both the 1560 and 1599 versions and all with Corrected Spelling.* *Genevabible.org*, 11 Sept. 2002. Web. 30 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.genevabible.org/Geneva.html>>.
- The Holy Bible, King James Version.* New York: Oxford Edition, 1769. *King James Bible Online*, 2008. Web. 30 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>>.

Books and Articles

- ANDERSON, Gary A. “The Fall of Satan in the Thought of St. Ephrem and John Milton.” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3:1 (2000): 3–27. *Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute*. Web. 16 Aug. 2013. <www.bethmardutho.org>.
- _____. *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination*. Louisville, London & Leiden: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- FRIEDMAN, Richard Elliott. *Who Wrote the Bible?* 2nd ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.
- ITTZÉS, Gábor. “‘In the Beginning’: Genesis 1:1 in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.” *HUSSE 11: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English*. Veronika Ruttkay and Bálint Gárdos, eds. Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2014. 243–255.
- _____. “The Structure of Milton’s Universe: The Shape and Unity of

- the World in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Through the Centuries*. Gábor Ittzés and Miklós Péti, eds. Budapest: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary & L'Harmattan, 2012a. 34–55.
- _____. "Ten Days in Paradise: The Chronology of Terrestrial Action in Milton's *Paradise Lost*." *Early Modern Communi(cati)ons: Studies in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*. Kinga Földváry and Erzsébet Stróbl, eds. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012b. 100–130.
- KUGEL, James L. *The Bible as It Was*. Cambridge & London: Belknap, 2000.
- KWAM, Kristen E., Linda S. SCHEARING, and Valerie H. ZIEGLER, eds. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999.
- MILTON, John. *Areopagitica*. In *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Merritt Y. Hughes, ed. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 2003. 716–749.
- _____. *Paradise Lost*. Alastair Fowler, ed. Rev. 2nd ed. Harlow, etc.: Longman, 2007.
- NEWTON, Thomas, ed. *Paradise Lost: Poem in Twelve Books. The Author John Milton. A New Edition with Notes of Various Authors*. 2 vols. London, 1749.
- PÉTI, Miklós. "Conceived altogether in Homer's spirit': Milton's Transformation of an Iliadic Type-Scene." *Milton Through the Centuries*. Gábor Ittzés and Miklós Péti, eds. Budapest: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary & L'Harmattan, 2012. 206–218.
- ROSENBERG, David and Harold BLOOM. *The Book of J: Translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg, Interpreted by Harold Bloom*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990.
- ROSENBLATT, Jason P. "Milton, Anxiety, and the King James Bible." *The King James Bible after 400 Years: Literary, Linguistic, and Cultural Influences*. Hannibal Hamlin and Norman W. Jones, eds. Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge UP, 2010. 181–201.
- SCHWARTZ, Regina. "From Shadowy Types to Shadowy Types: The Unendings of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 24 (1988): 123–139.
- TAKIGUCHI, Haruo. "Donne's Compass Imagery and the Related Traditions." *The Bulletin of the YINS* 9 (2005). Web. 31 Aug. 2012. <<http://sojo.yamanashi.ac.jp/ipc/bul/final05/takiguchi/index.html>>.
- WEST, James King. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan & London: Collier Macmillan, 1981.
- WILLIAMS, Arnold. *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis, 1527–1633*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948.