

HOLY LIGHT IN *PARADISE LOST*

PERHAPS no passage in all of *Paradise Lost* has been more vigorously debated in recent years than the lines invoking light which open Book III. In these lines Milton hails "Holy Light" as "offspring of Heav'n first-born," or as "of th' Eternal Coeternal beam," or as "pure Etheral stream,/Whose Fountain who shall tell?" This Light has existed from before the material creation, though how long before Milton does not say. He observes that "God is Light," and that God thus dwells in this "Holy Light" which he terms the "Bright effluence of bright essence increate." But what does the poet mean by these grand terms? Does he have in mind the ineffable light of Dante? Is this light a degenerating neoplatonic emanation? Is it the light of God the Father? Is it physical light, the first stage of the distinction of creation? It is the Son of God? And if the Son, is Milton hesitating between an Arian "offspring of Heav'n first-born" and the orthodox coeternality of the Son with the Father? All of these solutions have been proposed. The answer to the difficult question presented in Milton's lines seems to me to lie in his supposedly Arian conception of the Logos-Son. It is my purpose in this paper to outline some of the neoplatonic and patristic tradition which lies behind his thinking in this passage and then to show that he uses a specific cluster of images there which prove that he was addressing the Son of God as Holy Light. First, however, it will be necessary to investigate the universally held opinion that Milton was an Arian.

If we accept the argument that Milton believed in this famous heresy, we imply two rather strange twists in his thought. In the first place, he never supports Arius in his works. He does mention him several times but without any

suggestion of indebtedness or kinship. Moreover, no contemporary biographer reports any Arian leanings in his conversations. In the second place, Milton was clearly aware that his conception of the Son was unusual in the Christian tradition of his day (his introductory remarks to Chapter V of the *Christian Doctrine* admit such awareness), but despite his fine training in theology he does not seem to realize that he is supporting beliefs recognized as heretical. Indeed, the *Christian Doctrine* is addressed to Protestants of all denominations in an effort to present a united program for communicants everywhere. Milton would have been almost incredibly naive had he planned a world-wide Protestant movement which would consciously include one of the most famous heresies of church history.

What were the issues which Arius had precipitated shortly after 300 A.D.? Until his time the church had not taken an authoritative stand upon any dogma. It was Arius' misfortune to precipitate the first great religious debate of the new church—the question of the meaning of the Mystery of the Trinity—which was decided finally only by the first great Council, held at Nicaea in 325. Arius had asserted that the Trinity is not composed of equal or of coeternal members. At a point in time the Father had created his Son; in doing this he had acted of his own free will. Furthermore, the Son was created out of nothing—*ex ouk onton* or *ex nihilo*, just as had been the rest of creation. Herein lay the main issue in 325: if we worship the Son we are worshipping an entity which is not significantly different from the rest of creation. In other words, Arianism opened the doors to pantheism. Milton accepts many of these details—explicitly in the *Christian Doctrine* and implicitly in *Paradise Lost*. For him the Son is inferior to the Father and he was generated or created or

begotten at a point in time as a result of the Father's free choice. But Milton's Son was not generated out of nothing; he comes from the Father's substance.

To understand the import of these statements we shall have to look first at a trinity once of immense importance to Christians but now practically forgotten: that of Platonism. For Platonism had its trinity too, which has interested Christians in many stages of their history (including some of Milton's contemporaries at Cambridge). The origins of this trinity are lost to us; certainly it can be deduced from Plato's dialogues only by the most violent wresting of meaning. Plotinus presents the theory in its complete form, but it appears in one shape or another in every neoplatonist. In the *Enneads* this trinity is named the One, Mind, and Soul. The One, which is utterly unknowable, overflows or emanates into Mind, which in turn emanates into Soul in a descending series. Such an emanation is eternal, like the orthodox Christian view of the generation of the Son, but it does not, of course, produce a co-equal trinity: all neoplatonists agree in the fundamental inequality of One, Mind, and Soul. Furthermore, it is not willed into being. Part of the nature of the One is that it must emanate Mind and Soul, as well as even lower orders. In Christian eyes the neoplatonic trinity had three major failings: it provided in no way for the incarnation of the Son as Christ; the persons were clearly of unequal rank; and the identification of the third member, Soul, with the Holy Spirit was at best dubious. Just how much influence the pagan system had upon Arius and his followers is difficult to say. They are contemporaneous. They are certainly similar in their graduated scale of divinity. But the neoplatonic trinity is eternal and its subordinate members are derived from the substance of the One; the Arian Trinity

begins in time and its second person is created out of nothing. The neoplatonic is not willed by the One; the Arian is willed by the Father.

Platonism had also come forcefully to an even earlier Christian movement by way of the Jew Philo, who had allegorized the Old Testament for his Alexandrian contemporaries. The Philonic God, it must be observed first, is quite unknowable (like the neoplatonic One and like Milton's God the Father). Thus utterly transcendent deity may be known only indirectly through his creation. Following Plato, Philo accepted the reality of a world of intelligibles. When God determined upon the visible creation, he first, as Philo says, "fully formed the intelligible world . . . and then, with that for a pattern, the world which our senses can perceive."¹ The "intellect" which perceives the intelligible world Philo does not call by the neoplatonic term Mind; rather he follows the Stoics and denominates it *Logos*: "the universe that consisted of ideas would have no other location than the Divine Logos which was the Author of this ordered frame" of the later-created, visible universe.² Philo's conception is evidently similar to the opening of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word." In Philo, then, God thinks the ideas of the intelligible world. The Mind of God is termed the Logos and it is at this stage "identical with the essence of God" and does not exist as a separate entity.³

But the ideas leave the mind of God and take on an external existence as the intelligible world, no longer identical with his essence. The Mind which embraces this intelligible world thus also comes into existence as an entity separate from God; Philo continues to call this separated Mind by the same name that it had when it was part of the divine essence: the Logos. The Logos then has, in Harry Wolfson's analysis

of Philo's thought, two stages of existence: a first stage, uncreated and from eternity, when it exists only as God's thought (not as a separate entity); and a second stage when it is generated as God externalizes his thought into an intelligible world. Philo may then speak of this Logos either as "created" or as "eternal." It is eternal in that it has existed from eternity as a property of God. When it enters its second and external stage as an entity it is properly said to be created. As such, Philo calls it the "eldest and most all-embracing of created things."⁴

Although Philo's conception of a two-stage Logos is forgotten by most Christians today, it was unquestionably a central consideration in the effort of the primitive church to establish just what was meant by the Mystery of the Trinity. Directly involved too was the issue of the divinity of the historical Jesus. It is easy to demonstrate that many of the earliest church fathers—the so-called Apologists—follow Philo in his consideration of a two-stage Logos which they apply to the Christian Logos-Jesus. Tertullian, for instance, asserted that "before all things God was alone." But "even then God was not without reason or what is called Logos. But 'as soon as it pleased God' to create the world, He 'put forth the Logos himself.'"⁵ Accordingly, Tertullian takes the statement "In the beginning was the Word" to refer to emanation or generation by which the Word entered its second stage of existence and became a person separate from the Father.⁶ Likewise Hippolytus argues that "God subsisted 'alone' and had 'nothing contemporaneous with himself' and 'beside Him there was nothing,'" although he had his reason—that is, the pre-existence Logos.⁷ Milton thus has good patristic authority when he has God assert in *Paradise Lost* that he is "alone / From all eternity" (VIII, 205 f.). These words are not

necessarily Arian at all when understood in the Philonic context.

Did God will the creation of the Logos when it came to exist in its second stage? Again we turn to Philo, who states that the "Logos together with the intelligible world came into their second stage of existence prior to the creation of the world by the will of God."⁸ And again we find the same point of view in the early fathers. Tertullian, for instance, argues that the generation of the Logos took place "as soon as God *willed* to put forth into their respective substances and forms the things which He has planned and ordered within himself."⁹ Similar quotations can be found in Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Hippolytus, and Clement of Alexandria. Milton likewise holds in the *Christian Doctrine* that "the generation of the Son . . . arose from no natural necessity. . . . For questionless, it was in God's power consistently with the perfection of his own essence not to have begotten the Son" (XIV, 185, 187). Or more generally in *Paradise Lost*, God asserts that "Necessity and Chance / Approach not mee, and what I will is Fate" (VI, 172 f.).

Was the generation of the Logos eternal? Clearly the exponents of the two-stage theory (including the earliest fathers) must hold that the actual generation had a beginning, even though the antecedent Logos as God's thought is eternal. On the other hand, the two-stage theory did not make any sense in the historical development of neoplatonism, which as we have seen held that Mind had emanated continuously from eternity. We may surmise that this neoplatonic development led Origen and Irenaeus to argue the theory of an eternal, single-stage generation of the Logos, the theory which Christians generally hold today. As Origen asserts, the generation of the Logos "is as eternal and ever-

lasting as the brightness which is produced from the sun,"¹⁰ and "there never was a time when He was not."¹¹ Under the impact of the new single-stage theory the two-stage one slowly disappeared from Christian thought. On the other hand, Apologists from Justin Martyr through Lactantius had accepted the two-stage theory of the Word, with the implication in many of them that the Trinity is unequal (as in Philo and Plotinus), that the second and third members are in some sense not eternal (as in Philo), and that they are generated from the divine substance (as in Plotinus). But this theory was never formally anathematized; if it had been, we would have practically no church fathers until after the Council of Nicaea. The movement is recognized now as subordinationism, which in its emphasis upon the divinity of the three persons of the Trinity is quite different from Arius. The single-stage theory which prevails today is actually a later development.

It is necessary now to show Milton's position in the Trinitarian controversy. There is no trace of the neoplatonic One-Mind-Soul terminology in the *Christian Doctrine* or in *Paradise Lost*, but we should not expect any because of the nature of these works and because of the absorption of the ideas in Christian terminology. However, Milton's Son is clearly an emanation differing in degree from the Father and generated from his substance. In common with all Christians, Milton rejects the origin of the Logos out of nothing—whether it be the Philonic or Arian interpretation. In doing so he avoided the real charge of heresy which could be brought against him. On the other hand, he departed from neoplatonism to return to the two-stage conception of the Logos which had been put forward originally by Philo and then had been accepted and expounded by a respectable group of church

fathers—among the earliest Christian writers. We may surmise that Milton returned to them because of a principle which has always motivated the thinking of puritan Protestantism: the desire to establish church doctrines and practices as close as possible to those of the most primitive Christian church.

Was Milton then an Arian? It seems that we can answer with certainty that he was not. Subordinationism as such has not been branded heretical, though it is not the view of the Trinity found most widely today, or even in the 17th century for that matter. As Milton himself observes in the *Christian Doctrine*, his view of the Son agrees with the faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed; he might also have added the Nicene Creed. The equality of the persons of the Trinity was not officially affirmed at Nicaea; neither was the eternal generation of the Logos.

The conception of a two-stage Logos which I have put forward proves useful in explaining several details of Milton's thought besides those which have been mentioned. Thus we find it as part of his description of the infernal trinity of Satan, Sin, and Death. As many critics have observed, the poet deliberately parallels or parodies various details of the holy Trinity in the unholy group. Thus Sin tells Satan that she originally existed as a thought in Satan's mind. Then at a point in time she was externalized as the "Goddess armd" who sprang from his head. She is conceived, that is, as a two-stage entity, emerging in time from a conceptual to an actual existence and inferior to her begetter.

Another passage where the concept proves useful is that already mentioned at the beginning of Book III, where Milton invokes Light. We should notice at once that Milton hesitates in addressing Light over whether to call it "offspring of heaven first born"—that is, the beginning of crea-

tion—or “of th’Eternal coeternal beam”—that is, a being sharing in eternity with God. If we equate this divine Light with the Logos or Son, we may understand that Milton is deliberately playing upon the issue of whether the true existence of the Logos should be dated from the time when it became external to the Father or whether its first stage (from eternity) shows its true origin. The hesitation is easily understandable in view of the two-stage theory of the Logos which I have already elaborated.

But by what right may we assume that Milton had the Logos-Son in mind when he invoked Light there at the beginning of Book III? Is this an arbitrary and unwarranted forcing of a theory into the pattern of the poem? Again the church fathers may help us. It happens that the establishment of a clear meaning for any abstract principle is a difficult thing to achieve in an argument. Analogy (or, to give it its poetic title, metaphor) frequently serves to clarify a difficult issue in the mind of the listener. Thus it happens that I have presented the two-stage Logos theory almost entirely in the abstract and it is undoubtedly a difficult conception to comprehend in this way at first hearing. The Apologists had similar difficulty in explaining the relationship of the Father and Son: they wished to assert that both were divine beings (and so to be worshipped) but at the same time they wished to assert their difference (and thus to support a genuine Trinity rather than a single deity existing in three different aspects). In order to make clear the meaning of the Mystery of the relationship between Father and Son they hit upon two metaphors especially. Justin Martyr first brings forward the image of the sun and its light, developing the idea from Biblical suggestions. The Father in this analogy is the Sun; the Son is the Light. The Son, he accordingly says, has

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power “indivisible and inseparable from the Father, just as they say that the light of the sun on earth is indivisible and inseparable from the sun in the heavens.”¹² Hippolytus continues the sun-light image and adds to it a simile comparing the Son to a flowing stream and the Father to its source in a spring or fountain: “When I say another [God, i.e., the Son], I do not mean that there are two Gods, but it is only as light of light, or as water from a fountain, or as a ray from the sun.”¹³ It should be remembered that Milton hesitated to address the Light as “Bright effluence of bright essence increate”; or, he wonders, “hear’st thou rather pure Ethereal stream, / Whose Fountain who shall tell?” We must assume that Milton means that the stream is the Logos and the Fountain the Father. Since the Father is completely transcendent, “Who can tell” anything about him, the Fountain? Later in Book III the angels hymn the Father as “Fountain of Light, thy self invisible / Amidst the glorious brightness where thou sit’st” (lines 375-6).

The collocation of the image of sun-light with fountain-stream continues in the Latin fathers with the same meaning. Thus Lactantius argues that the Father and Son cannot be separated: “the former is as it were an overflowing fountain, the latter as a stream flowing forth from it: the former as the sun, the latter as it were a ray extended from the sun.” Or again, they cannot be separated—“just as the stream is not separated from the fountain, nor the ray from the sun: for the water of the fountain is in the stream, and the light of the sun is in the ray.”¹⁴ Tertullian uses the same images with the addition of another from a tree and its roots: the unity of God in the Son is declared, he says, “just as the root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river, and the sun the ray. . . . I should not hesitate, indeed, to call the tree the son or

offspring of the root, and the river of the fountain, and the ray of the sun." These images he finds useful to explain the unity of the Trinity: "the tree is not severed from the root, nor the river from the fountain, nor the ray from the sun; nor, indeed, is the Word separated from God. Following, therefore, the form of these analogies, I confess that I call God and His Word—the Father and His Son—two. For the root and the tree are distinctly two things, but correlatively joined; the fountain and the river are also two forms, but indivisible; so likewise the sun and the ray are two forms, but coherent ones." Tertullian then argues from these analogies to affirm the subordination which is inherent in them: "Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated."¹⁵

A further reason why these fathers used the sun-light metaphor to express the mystery of the Trinity lies in its currency in contemporary Judaism and neoplatonism. We have seen that Plotinus was arguing at this time that the One emanates into Mind, the neoplatonic equivalent of the Logos. The process, he argues, "may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance."¹⁶ Other neoplatonists echo this metaphor. At an earlier period, Philo presents the Jewish God as being, he says, "His own light. For the eye of the Absolutely Existent needs no other light to effect perception, but He Himself is the archetypal essence of which myriads of rays are the effluence, none visible to sense, all to the mind."¹⁷ Elsewhere Philo asserts that God "is not only light, but the archetype of every other light, nay, prior to and high above every archetype, holding the position of the model of a model. For the model or pattern was the Word [Logos]

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which contained all His fullness—light, in fact; for, as the lawgiver tells us, ‘God said, “let light come into being” ’ (Gen. 1:3).”¹⁸ One may paraphrase Philo that when God uttered the words “let there be light,” the Logos or saying or Word came into existence as light. Small wonder that some interpreters of Milton’s lines have confused the Logos with the physical light of the first day of creation. Milton takes full advantage here of the ambivalence of meaning.

These allegorical rays of Philo may in addition be sent “forth from heaven into the mind of man. For while there is abiding in the soul that most God-like and incorporeal light, we shall restore the reason which had been given in pledge . . . to get the full benefit of the divine gift, and to enjoy calm repose through the presence of a counsellor and defender so true, so sure never to abandon the post in which he has been stationed.”¹⁹ For his part, Milton invokes the Light to “Shine inward and the mind through all her powers / Irradiate.” Also in *Paradise Regained* the inner force of Light as a power revealing the Father’s will is again stated in terms of the fountain-stream image: “he who receives / Light from above, from the fountain of light, / No other doctrin needs” (IV, 288 ff.).

Finally, the invocation to Light in Book III continues into the implication that the Light was somehow present at the creation:

Before the Heavens thou wert, and at the voice
Of God, as with a Mantle didst invest
The rising world of water dark and deep,
Won from the void and formless infinite.

Apparently Light was active in connection with the creation of the six days. The implication is that the Light interpreted as Logos or Son was the active agent. Without entering into a discussion of Milton’s conception of the Son as the active

agent of the Father, we may remark that the *Christian Doctrine* considers that "God the Father produced every thing that exists by his Word and Spirit" (XV, 5) and then goes on to identify the Spirit with the Father's power rather than with a person. I believe that the Logos-Son is the active agent of creation in Milton's thought.

In conclusion, let me summarize my view of these complex matters. First, Milton was no Arian, though he gladly embraced subordinationism. For him the second and third persons of the Trinity are inferior to the first. In one sense the Son has existed as the unexpressed Logos of the Father from all eternity. In another sense he came into existence "in the beginning." Milton never under any circumstances questions whether the Son is divine. *Paradise Lost* expresses substantially the same view. In Book III he hails Holy Light as either "offspring of heaven first born" or as "coeternal" with the eternal. That he has in mind the Son in this passage is made clear by the fact that he associates the two images of sunlight and fountain-stream in exactly the same way as they had been used by post-apostolic Christians who tried through these images to express what the Christian Trinity means. Within the bounds of poetic and religious metaphor Milton seems to me to have been entirely successful, even though he has confused his modern interpreters. For my part, I find it an interesting problem as to whether I have expressed Milton unblamed.²⁰

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NOTES

1. "On the Creation," iv, in *Works*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (Loeb, 1929), I, 15, 17. See also Harry Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), I, 226 ff.

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2. "On the Creation," v, in *Works*, I, 17; cf. Wolfson, I, 230.
3. Wolfson, I, 231.
4. "Allegorical Interpretation," III, 61, in *Works*, I, 419.
5. *Adversus Praxeam*, 5 and 7, as cited in Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), I, 195.
6. *Adversus Praxeam*, 5 and 7; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 198.
7. *Contra Haeresim Noetim*, 10; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 194.
8. Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 223.
9. *Adversus Praxeam*, 6; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 224.
10. Origen, *De Principiis*, I, 2, 4; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 201.
11. Origen, *De Principiis*, IV, 4, 1; Wolfson, *Philosophy*, I, 201 f.
12. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 128.
13. *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, 11.
14. *Divine Institutes*, IV, 29.
15. *Against Praxeas*, 8.
16. *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
17. *On the Cherubim*, 96-97, in *Works*, II.
18. *On Dreams*, I, 72-75, in *Works*, V.
19. *Ibid.*, 112-113.
20. A more extensive argument with further details and with more supporting evidence may be found in my "Milton's Arianism Reconsidered," *Harvard Theological Review*, 52 (January, 1959), 9-35, and in "The Meaning of 'Holy Light' in *Paradise Lost* III," *MLN*, LXXIV (1959), 589-592.