Haberdashers' School

Occasional Papers Series



Occasional Paper Number 106

Classical Allusion and Biblical Reference in *Paradise Lost* (Books I-III)

Dr Christopher Joyce

Teacher of Classics (Boys' School) 2012-2018
Head of Classics (Boys' School) 2018-2026

christopherjoyce.academia@gmail.com

October 2026

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Christopher J. Joyce

Abstract

Milton's use of Classical and Biblical sources has long been discussed in Miltonic scholarship. In line with more recent currents of literary criticism, this paper examines Milton's allusiveness in the first three books of his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. It places Milton's work within a broader literary framework that reaches back to Homer and Hesiod in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, but also seeks to understand the poem's meaning in the context of theological disputation in seventeenth-century England. It argues that Milton's hell is a poetic device without a literal interpretation. Milton's influence on English Protestant thinking subsequently involves a rejection of Calvinistic doctrines of divine foreordination and the re-affirmation of freewill as a theological bedrock.

From the mid eighteenth century to the first half of the twentieth, Miltonic scholarship understood Classical allusion in the poetry of John Milton (1608-1674) chiefly as an aesthetic convention. In his pioneering commentary on *Paradise Lost*, T. Newton in 1749 identified and annotated Milton's debt to earlier Classical models.[1] In 1801, H.J. Todd, building on Newton's commentary, catalogued the sources for Milton and was the first commentator to recognise the debt to St Paul and Aratus at *Paradise Lost* V. 503. Like Newton before him, Todd offered a philological and explanatory, rather than a conceptual, analysis of Milton's style.[2] At the other end of the nineteenth century, A.W. Verity saw the wide-ranging allusiveness of Milton's poetry as an expression of his erudition and humanist versatility.[3] Later in the twentieth, M.Y. Hughes commented on the reframing of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) as a distinctive marker of the Christian epic and moved conversation in a new direction by recognising the functional, as distinct from the ornamental, import of Milton's allusions. Unlike earlier scholarship, which tended to regard Classical allusiveness solely as ornamental and decorative, Hughes understood allusions in Milton more instrumentally. For Hughes, the flashback to Ariosto's epic

[1] T. Newton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. (London, 1749).
[2] H.J. Todd, *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, 6 vols. (London, 1801).
[3] See A.W. Verity's editorial introductions to *Arcades and Comus* (Cambridge, 1891), *Comus and Lycidas* (Cambridge, 1898/1919), and *Milton's Sonnets* (Cambridge, 1912).

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was more than literary posturing and signified a reconfiguration of received material for new poetic ends.

Since Hughes, scholars of Milton have drawn increased attention to his argumentative, theological, structural, political, and cosmological self-positioning in an established tradition beginning with the Greek epic poets Homer and Hesiod in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. Aware of the tension between Classical material and the new Christian ethos of Milton's epic, J.H. Collett was unsatisfied with the habit of viewing allusion as mere window-dressing. Instead, Collett constructed a tripartite taxonomy for the working of mythical material, which he identified as the fabled, the feigned, and the typological.[1] More recently, J.R. Held has identified four major cosmological predecessors in the Classical repertoire as a 'genealogy' of poets: Hesiod, who in the *Theogony* recorded the mythical genealogy of the Greek gods; the Stoic Aratus, who in the *Phaenomena* wrote about Stoic cosmology and the order of the stars; the first-century BCE Roman poet Lucretius, who in the *De Rerum Natura* gave an Epicurean account of the nature of the universe; and, finally, the Apostle Paul, who in Acts and Romans presented a diatribe against idolatry and in place of traditional Greco-Roman models provided a new Christian cosmology.[2] From a different angle, P. Stevens explores Milton's engagement with Classical literature as an anchor for a newly emergent English (Protestant) nationalism.[3] These more recent approaches tend to view allusiveness in Milton less as a literary convention and more as a purposed reformatting of inherited subject matter subject to the specific goals of Milton's poetry. Just as the Roman epic poet Virgil alluded to earlier Greek models, in particular Homer and Callimachus, not just to proclaim the greatness of his own epic style but to reframe inherited material to extol the greatness of his subject, which was Rome's destiny as conqueror, so did Milton use literary models not simply because it was a convention of all learned writers to do so, but because he intended to subordinate Classical (pagan) subject matter to his poetic purpose, *viz.* to proclaim Christianity over the older pagan worldviews which it had displaced.

Recent scholarship rightly focuses on the instrumentality of literary allusiveness. It duly emphasises the programmatic use of Classical and Biblical models, not just for learned display. These insights are not entirely new. The first-century CE Roman literary critic and theorist, Quintilian, in the tenth book of his rhetorical handbook *Institutes*, famously wrote that learning starts with imitation (*imitatio*). As he notes, imitation alone is insufficient. 'Whilst command of words, figures, and arrangement is to be acquired by the study of the best authors, the mind must also be exercised in the imitation of all the good qualities which such authors exemplify.'[4] He proceeds: 'Only a dull and sluggish spirit will be content to do nothing but imitate, without inventing anything new. With our advantages of training, we are even more bound than our predecessors to progress. We ought even to surpass our models: if we confine ourselves to imitation alone, shall we ever realise the ideal in oratory? Nature herself does not achieve exact resemblance in reproduction. More, there is much in oratory that is characteristic of individual speakers, and due to natural gifts: this cannot be made matter of imitation. You may imitate the language and rhythmical arrangement of a great speech; but

[1] J.H. Collett, 'Milton's use of Classical mythology in *Paradise Lost*', *PMLA* 85.1 (1970), pp. 88-96.
[2] J.R. Held, 'Milton and Genealogical Poetry: Paul, Aratus, Lucretius and Hesiod in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly* 54.4 (2020), pp. 263-280.
[3] P. Stevens, '*Pietas in Patriam:* Milton's Classical Patriotism', *Humanities* 11.2, 42 (2022), pp. 1-25.
[4] Quint. *Inst.* X. 2.3 ('lectione dignis auctoribus et verborum sumenda copia est et varietas figurarum et componendi ratio, tum ad exemplum virtutum omnium mens derigenda').

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the fashion of words changes, and as for arrangement, there must always be an adaptation of sound to sense.' (tr. H.E. Butler).[1]

On Quintilian's view, imitation (*imitatio*) and invention (*inventio*) were two sides of the same coin. When Virgil borrowed from Homer, for example, he was not just repeating material but moulding and refashioning it for a fresh and distinctive purpose. The death of Turnus at the end of *Aeneid* XII at the hands of the Trojan hero Aeneas bears resonances of that of Hector at the hands of Achilles in *Iliad* XXII, but it serves a different goal. Both deaths are fated. Both satisfy the vengeful whims of an aggrieved foe. But, with Turnus's death, the *Aeneid* comes to an end, because through it, Aeneas' mission, which is to sow seeds of a new civilisation in Italy, is fulfilled. The death of Hector in the *Iliad*, by contrast, signals no finality in the narrative. The wrath of Achilles in not eventually assuaged until Hector's father, Priam, intercedes in *Iliad* XXIV. Allusiveness is not just a display of erudition. Its usefulness to the Greek and Roman poets was that it provided a means to distinguish their works from literary precedents. Virgil's use of Homer was not about becoming a 'second Homer'. The *Aeneid* is not a Roman re-hash of earlier Greek epics but a departure from them. Literary allusiveness is not the same as regurgitation. It shows awareness of what has gone before but, at the same time, proclaims authorial novelty. As argued here, Milton's debt to Classical archetypes was far from derivative or parasitical. Milton did not 'need' older material through any lack of originality. His debt to his Classical models was that by alluding to them, he could give his epic a new and distinctive purpose. Unlike Homer, Hesiod, Virgil or Ovid, Milton's epic work embraced a Christian view of the world. Classical allusion in Milton is not about 'measuring up' to the great poets of the ancient world but about displacing them altogether. By cross-referencing older material, Milton trumps his Classical predecessors, together with the pagan worldview which they embraced.

Classical and Biblical references are unevenly distributed over the twelve (originally ten) books of *Paradise Lost*.[2] The focus of this essay is the first three books of Milton's epic poem. To shape the discussion, I divide it into three discrete components, each treating one book separately. My main focus will be not merely on Milton's borrowing from earlier sources but, more critically, on its poetic utility. As scholars now recognise, Milton was no passive imitator. A true heir to the ancient literary heritage, every piece of inherited fabric he rewove into an epic tapestry that bore his own distinctive signature of craftsmanship. Not all allusions will be analysed as there is not the space to do so, and the discussion will therefore be selective. As I hope to show, Milton's Classical and Biblical borrowing have a defined poetic purpose.

[1] Quint. *Inst.* X. 2.4 ('Ante omnia igitur imitatio per se ipsa non sufficit, vel quia pigri est ingenii contentum esse iis quae sint ab aliis inventa. Quid enim futurum erat temporibus illis quae sine exemplo fuerunt, si homines nihil, nisi quod iam cognovissent, faciendum sibi aut cogitandum putassent? Nempe nihil fuisset inventum.')

[2] The original (1667) edition of *Paradise Lost* was in ten books, but in 1674, Milton split books VII and X to create twelve books in total, mainly to model itself on the twelve-book structure of Virgil's *Aeneid*. From 1688 onward, the twelve-book structure became the recognised and authoritative format.

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I: *Paradise Lost*: Book I.

The convention of starting an epic with an invocation is ancient, beginning with Homer. An important innovation in Classical literature is brought by Virgil, who in the *Aeneid* invokes an external Muse but configures himself as a seer (*vates*), as distinct from a Greek poet (*poētēs*), who sings with divine authority.[1] Milton signals further departures. Unlike Classical models, *Paradise Lost* entails four separate invocations at key moments in the narrative. The invocation in Book I is to Moses, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. In the third book, Milton invokes 'holy light', which in Christian theology is associated with the Second Person of the Trinity, representing divine understanding, wisdom, comfort and salvation (III.1).[2] There are two further invocations, one at the start of Book VII of Urania, when the narrative moves away from the cosmic battle back to earth after the Satan's fall is described, and the last at the start of Book IX, which does not nominate any Muse, but where Milton shifts 'Those Notes to Tragic' (IX. 6), which signifies Melpomene and an implicit link to Virgil.[3] Invocations happen when a vital narratological shift is about to happen. The first two books of *Paradise Lost* begin in hell, where the description is of suffering and torment. Hell features in the *Odyssey* and in the *Aeneid*, but not at the start. Homer's hell is narrated in the voice of the eponymous hero of the second epic, Odysseus (Ulysses), and in the *Aeneid* in Virgil's authorial voice. Distinctive about Milton is that he draws his inspiration for hell from an Old Testament prophet who is silent about it. By invoking Moses, Milton thus eschews a Biblical straightjacket and allows his imagination to work freely, prioritising Classical imagery in his poetic vision.

Homer's *Iliad* commences by invoking a goddess (θεά) to recount the destructive wrath (μῆνιν…οὐλομένην) of Achilles, which inflicted countless travails on the Greek army (ἢ μυρί' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε) and dispatched many a valiant soul to Hades (πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν/ ἡρώων), leaving a carrion for the birds and the dogs (αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν/ οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι), to satisfy Zeus's will (Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή) (Hom. *Il.* I.1-5). The *Odyssey* opens with a prayer to the Muse to tell of the sufferings of Odysseus, a man of many turns (ἄνδρα…πολύτροπον)[4], after he sacked the holy citadel of Troy (ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν

[1] 'Musa, mihi causas memora' ('Muse, tell me the reasons…') (Virg. *Aen.* I.8). In iconography, Virgil is linked to Clio, the Muse of History, and Melpomene, the tragic Muse. The third-century Virgil Mosaic from Hadrumentum, now in the Bardo Museum, represents Clio standing behind Virgil holding a scroll; Melpomene is also discernible from her tragic mask and *cothurni*. By the later Middle Ages, Virgil had come to be seen as the highest exemplar of poetic excellence. On the importance of Virgil to Petrarch, see M.L. Lord, 'Petrarch and Vergil's first *Eclogue*: The Codex Ambrosianus', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 86 (1982), pp. 253-276.

[2] The association between Christ and the Holy Light is made explicit in the Fourth Gospel; see Jn. 1: 4-9; 8:12 ('I am the light of the world'); 12: 35-36, 46; the association is also made at 2 Corinthians 4:6 and Hebrews 1:3. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed references the Second Person of the Trinity as 'Light from Light, very God from very God'. For patristic exegesis, see especially Augustine's Tractates (34) on John 8:12, (35) on John 8: 12-14, and Cyril of Alexandria's *Commentary on John* (at John 1:5).

[3] The link between Virgil and Melpomene is not attested before the third century CE but seems to have been well established by the Middle Ages; see the penultimate note.

[4] I avoid the infelicitous and poetically rebarbative rendition by E. Wilson (*The Odyssey*, New York, 2017, p. 3) of πολύτροπον at Hom. *Od.* I.1 as 'complex', which fails to capture the double signification of Odysseus 'turning much' and 'turned much' (upon the sea). Wilson's programmatic aim to find a demotic voice for Homer bypasses what Aristotle states in the *Poetics* (23-24: 1459a-1460b), that epic is the most elevated of poetic genres, requiring the loftiest register and metre. The epithet πολύτροπον

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πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν) (Hom. *Od.* I. 1-2). Seven centuries later, the Roman poet Virgil began the *Aeneid* by proclaiming to sing the tale of weapons and a man (*arma virumque cano*) driven across the sea by the fierce wrath of Juno (Hera), queen of the gods (Virg. *Aen.* I.1-3). All three epics presuppose human offence delivered to a deity. The cause of suffering in the *Iliad* is the insult given to the sun-god Apollo by Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, when he took the daughter of his priest, Chryses, captive. The cause of suffering in the *Odyssey* is the offence given by the eponymous hero, Odysseus (Ulysses), king of Ithaca, to Poseidon (Neptune) and of his companions when they ate the sacred cattle of the god Hyperion (Helios). The cause of suffering in the *Aeneid* is the train of insults borne by Juno, wife and sister of Jupiter (Zeus), whose beauty had been slighted by the judgement of Paris, prince of Troy, when he nominated Venus (Aphrodite) as the fairest of three goddesses in a beauty contest initiated by Discordia (Eris), goddess of strife, when she rolled a golden apple across the banquet table at the wedding of Peleus, father of Achilles, and Thetis, sea nymph and mother to Achilles. In all cases, humans suffer through the folly of at least one mortal who brings destruction down upon his people. In all cases, suffering ends when the offence to the god or goddess is assuaged.

Aware of his Classical models, Milton begins *Paradise Lost* with an invocation, but his purpose is markedly different. As in Homer and Virgil, epic suffering in Milton originates with an act of disobedience – in this case, Lucifer's striving for parity with Omnipotence – but the narratological import could not strike a greater contrast with the Classical precedents. In the Christian story, Lucifer's infidelity presages the Fall of Adam, which binds humankind in a sinful bond that lasts four thousand years, until Redemption is bought by Christ, the Son of God and Second Adam, through His Death and Resurrection. Like the suffering in Homer and Virgil, the causes of suffering are cosmological, but unlike Homer and Virgil, in Milton, whose cosmology was instructed by Christian doctrine, it is ended through no human effort but by the self-sacrificial love of God who sustains the wrong at the hands of those who are finally redeemed. The invocation in *Paradise Lost*, therefore, entails a paradoxical negation of the worldviews of Milton's Classical predecessors. Redemption in the world of Homer and Virgil happens when humans atone for their infidelities. On the Christian worldview, to which Milton was heir, the paradigm is inverted, so that redemption happens when God atones. The adoption of a Classical trope signals not that Milton is a slavish imitator but, on the contrary, that he is a daring innovator and paradigm shifter. Through use of a traditional commonplace, Milton sets himself up against the literary giants of the Classical world, whose works he is not only rivalling but, in a greater sense, aiming to displace with a work on a grander scale.

The Muse of Milton is the 'Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top/ Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire/ That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,/ In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth Rose out of Chaos' (I. 6-10). Milton here alludes to the prophet Moses, the first of whose five books, Genesis, recounts the creation of the heavens and the earth. Milton speaks, so he implies, with prophetic authority. Unlike the false Muses which inspired the poets of Greece and Rome, the Muse that inspires him is 'heav'nly', which means that his poetry is founded upon a true doctrine, which, he proclaims, will rectify the false doctrines of

is discussed in a fragment of the ancient critic Antisthenes preserved some centuries later in the writings of the Neoplatonist Porphyry; for a translation and commentary (in Portuguese), see P. M. G. Dotto, 'Odisseu πολύτροπος: tradução e comentário de um fragmento de Antístenes de Atenas', *Classica – Revista Brasileira de Estudos Clássicos* 38 (2025), pp. 1–20.

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the pagans. Some lines later, Milton alludes to Hesiod's *Theogony*. When Lucifer is cast from heaven, he plummets into the depths of hell alongside his minions. Milton writes: 'Nine times the Space that measures Day and Night/ To mortal men, he with his horrid crew/ Lay vanquisht, rowling in the fiery Gulfe/ Confounded though immortal' (I. 50-54). In his account of the fall of the Titans, Hesiod, a near contemporary of Homer, writes that while Zeus achieved mastery, he hurled the earthborn Titans down into the abyss of Tartarus. To illustrate the spatial enormity, he writes that it would take a bronze anvil nine days and nights to fall from Olympus to earth (ἐννέα γὰρ νύκτας τε καὶ ἤματα χάλκεος ἄκμων/ οὐρανόθεν κατιὼν δεκάτῃ κ' ἐς γαῖαν ἵκοιτο) and another nine days and nights to fall from earth to Tartarus (ἐννέα δ' αὖ νύκτας τε καὶ ἤματα χάλκεος ἄκμων/ ἐκ γαίης κατιὼν δεκάτῃ κ' ἐς Τάρταρον ἵκοι) (Hes. *Theog*. 722-5).[1]

In Milton, the thematic borrowing has a twist. The Titans are banished from their former home because of a usurper, Zeus, son of Cronos (Saturn). The Olympians who take their place in heaven are upstarts. In Milton's system, the paradigm is inverted. With the Fall of Lucifer, the upstart is banished. In both cases, entrance to the fiery pit happens because of a cosmic act of insolence. In Hesiod, insolence is committed when Cronos, himself a usurper against his father, Uranus, consumes his children and meets his comeuppance when Rhea (Ops), his wife, hides Zeus and gives him a rock to swallow, causing him to belch up his children, who precipitate his overthrow (Hes. *Theog.* 492-500).[2] Zeus and his siblings are wronged, but they wield no authority until the Titanomachy is complete.[3] In Hesiod, there is no supreme power whose will Cronos transgresses, because when he commits the offence, he is still in a position of cosmic mastery. Above Cronos sits a higher moral law that does not issue from the lord of heaven. When that law is violated, the consequences for Cronos are cosmic. Hesiod clarifies that Cronos is not the ultimate authority but is bound to the higher principles of Moira (Fate) and Themis (Justice), who pre-exist Cronos himself (Hes. *Theog.* 132-138).[4]

By contrast, in *Paradise Lost* Almighty God is supreme ruler without peer. Lucifer, not God, gives the insult. God, not Lucifer, sustains the wrong. The consequences for Lucifer are, of course, cosmic in significance, but that is because Lucifer of his own volition disobeys God.

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[1] On the development of the falling anvil in its mathematical meaning, see A.J. Simoson, *Hesiod's Anvil: Falling and Spinning Through Heaven and Earth* (Washington D.C., 2007).

[2] On the vomiting episode as a ritualised inversion of the cosmic order, see H. S. Versnel, 'Greek Myth and Ritual: the Case of Kronos', in J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London, 2014), pp. 121-152.

[3] For a discussion of how Hesiod re-works mythical material to construct the Titanomachy as a legitimising narrative of the rule of Zeus, see R. Mondi, 'Tradition and innovation in the Hesiodic Titanomachy', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 116 (1986), pp. 25–48. On the influence of the Hesiodic account on later Classical reception, see G. D'Alessio, 'Theogony and Titanomachy', in M. Fantuzzi and C. Tsagalis (eds.), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 199-212. On the appropriations of Greek cosmic war narratives by later Jewish authors, see A. Grzybowska-Wiatrak, 'Rewriting the Genesis sequence: The account of the Titanomachy in the third book of the Sibylline Oracles reconsidered', in R. Fialová, Jiří Hoblík, and Petr Kitzler (eds.), *Hellenism, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity: Transmission and Transformation of Ideas* (Berlin and Boston, 2022), pp. 131-144.

[4] On the relationship between Themis and the Moirai, see G. Pironti, 'Dans l'entourage de Thémis: les Moires et les 'normes' panthéoniques', *Kernos* Suppl. 21 (Liège, 2009), pp. 13-27. For a broader investigation into how these deities operate in Homer's *Odyssey*, see F. Zigarelli, 'La trama normativa del sacrificio a Pilo: themis, hora e moira in Hom. *Od.* III 31 ss.' *Mythos: Rivista di Storia delle religioni*, 19 (2025), pp. 1-16.

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When Lucifer arrives in hell, though confined to its torments, he retains the choice to rejoin the heavenly host in bliss if he were to renounce his rebellion. Because he cannot renounce it, he prefers the pangs of perdition to obedience before the Almighty.[1] For Milton, unlike Hesiod, hell is a chosen estate, a place created by God for the disobedient: 'Such place Eternal Justice had prepar'd/ For those rebellious, here their Prison ordain'd/ In utter darkness, and their portion set/ As far remov'd from God and light of Heav'n/ As from the Center thrice to th' utmost Pole) (I.70-74). The imagery of fire, sulphur, and everlasting torment come from a Classical source, but its poetic import in *Paradise Lost* is exactly the reverse of what it is in the *Theogony*. In the latter, the infernal prison to which Cronos and his entourage are confined is one from which they cannot escape, not because they do not wish to escape from it, but because they cannot escape even though they might desire to do so. In Milton, the torments Lucifer must face are ones from which he cannot escape either, not because God has made it impossible for him to escape them, but because he cannot summon up the will to escape. For Milton, the gates of hell are locked from the inside.[2] God has His law, to which disobedience is reversible.

The linkage between Lucifer, who henceforth becomes Satan, and the Titans is made more explicit later. Following the dialogue between Satan and his comrade-at-arms, Beelzebub, Milton likens those who lie with him on the fiery lake to those whom Zeus cast to the pit of Tartarus: 'Thus Satan talking to his neerest Mate/ With Head up-lift above the wave, and Eyes/ That sparkling blaz'd, his other Parts besides/ Prone on the Flood, extended long and large/ Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge/ As whom the Fables name of monstrous size,/ Titanian, or Earth-born, that warr'd on Jove,/ Biarios or Typhon, whom the Den/ By ancient Tarsus held…' (I.192-200).[3] The gods of Greek mythology function as a point of reference, but not as active participants in the narrative. The cross-cultural parallel serves to liken, as well as to differentiate, Milton's epic from earlier Classical models. Like the Titans, the company of Satan is damned. Like the Titans, they face an eternity of misery. Unlike the Titans, however, they have freewill.[4] As Satan himself pronounces: 'Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime,/ Said then the lost Arch Angel, this the seat/ That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom/ For that celestial light? Be it so, since hee/ Who now is Sovran can dispose and bid/ What shall be right: fardest from him is best/ Whom reason hath equald, force hath made supream/ Above his equals. Farewel happy Fields/ Where Joy for ever dwells: Hail horrours, hail/ Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell/ Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings/ A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time./ The mind is its own place, and in

[1] On freewill as rational choice in Milton, see M. A. Treip, '"Reason is also choice": The emblematics of free will in *Paradise Lost*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 31.1 (1991), pp. 147-177.

[2] Here, I paraphrase C.S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1940), Chapter 8 ('Hell'): 'I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside. I do not mean that the ghosts may not wish to come out of hell, in the vague fashion wherein an envious man wishes to be happy: but they certainly do not will even the first preliminary stages of that self-abandonment through which alone the soul can reach any good. They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.'

[3] Compare the reference also with Ov. *Met.* V. 325-331, 346-58.

[4] The question of freewill in the ancient epic tradition is enormously complex and largely unresolved. The Titans have freewill in the sense that they choose to make war on Zeus, but they are denied freewill in the sense that their choices are constrained by an inescapable cosmic order. Cronos freely chooses to resist the prophesy, but fate ensures that his resistance becomes the mechanism by which the prophesy is fulfilled.

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itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n./ What matter where, if I be still the same,/ And what I should be, all but less then hee/ Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least/ We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built/ Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:/ Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce/ To reign is worth ambition though in Hell...' (I.243-262). Milton's hell is a choice. Though the sentence comes from without, the will to enter comes from within.[1]

In this nuanced paradox lies the key difference between the fatalistic doctrines of Milton and Hesiod. The latter denies the Titans control over their own destiny. For the former, however, freedom of the will becomes the ethical bedrock of divine justice. Without freedom for every moral agent to choose between courses of action, the sentence of hell would render the Divine Judge more reprehensible than any damned soul.[2] What works at the cosmological works also at the human level. Adam and Eve lose their place in Paradise not through external compulsion but through deliberate choice: 'Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view/ Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause/ Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,/ Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off/ From their Creator, and transgress his Will/ For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?/ Who first seduc'd them to that fowl revolt?' (I. 28-34). The operative word is 'seduc'd'. Satan, or the Devil, is the tempter but has no power to fix the destiny of humankind. Through their own unfettered decision Adam and Eve sin and thus cause their own downfall. The Biblical reference point is Genesis 3:1-19, which Milton understands through the lens of Christian exegesis. In the Biblical version, Eve is tempted only by a serpent, not by Satan, who features in the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament) three times: at Job 1: 6-2:7, at Zechariah 3:1-2, and at 1 Chronicles 21:1. In the Hebrew understanding, Satan is a celestial advocate who acts with divine permission, not against instruction, sent by God to test Job, to accuse the High Priest Joshua, and to incite David to number Israel. The identification with the serpent develops later. Though hinted at in 2 Corinthians 11:3 and John 8:44, its only explicit manifestation is at Revelation 12:9 and 20:2. Though some see an early identification in Second Temple Judaism,[3] the first unambiguous

[1] On the nature of divine judgment in Milton, see P. Rout, 'Free will and divine justice. A theological-philosophical inquiry into *Paradise Lost*', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research* 12.1 (2026), pp. 351-356.

[2] On the anti-fatalistic and, therefore, the anti-Calvinistic views of Milton, see A.D. Danielsen, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge, 1982); B.M. Bryson, *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton's Rejection of God as King* (Newark and London, 2004).

[3] The Wisdom of Solomon (2:24) states: 'Death entered the universe only through the Devil's envy. Those who belong to the Devil's party experience death.' The Wisdom of Solomon, not in the Rabbinic Canon, belongs to that portion of the Old Testament for which there is no Hebrew original. The first rendition of the Torah (or Pentateuch) in Greek happened around 280 BCE at Alexandria, the so-called 'Septuagint edition', which over the next two hundred years accreted to include the later Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), the historical books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles), and the poetic or 'wisdom' books (Psalms, Proverbs, Job), for which there are Hebrew originals. However, in the course of time, non-Hebrew scriptures made their way into the Greek Bible, such as the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Tobit, Judith, Baruch, 1-4 Maccabees, and additions to Daniel and Esther. These became part of what later came to be known as the 'Greek Jewish Libraries', or as the deuterocanonical books, which are accepted as authoritative, though of secondary status, by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but are rejected by the Protestant Churches, which refer to them as the 'Jewish Apocrypha'. For further discussion, see A.G. Salvesen, 'Deuterocanonical and apocryphal books', in A.G. Salvesen and T.M. Law (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Septuagint* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 384-402.

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Jewish identification appears in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer in the ninth century, who identified the serpent with Samael, the wicked angel.[1]

Perhaps more remarkable still is the lack of Biblical precedent for the story of Lucifer and his fallen angels.[2] As a Protestant of the puritanical tradition, Milton regarded the Bible as the sole source of divine teaching. In a posthumous treatise titled *De Doctrina Christiana*, or *On the Christian Doctrine*, Milton defined doctrine as something that must be derived 'from Holy Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit'.[3] Milton's Protestant conviction about scriptural sufficiency (*sola scriptura*) did not deter him from poetically imagining the story of Satan's cosmic fall from heaven, without foundation in any canonical or non-canonical Biblical text.[4] Its origins lie with the Church Fathers of the West, Jerome (*Vulg. Is.* 14:12; *In Isaiam Ep.* 22), Origen (*De Principiis* I.5.5-6; 3.2.1; *Hom. Ez.* 13), Tertullian (*Adv. Marcion* 5.17; *De Cultu Fem.* 1.1–2), Cyprian (*Ad Quirinum* 2.10; *De Habitu Virg.* 12), and finally Augustine (*Civ. Dei* 11.15; 11.19; 12.1; 14.3; *Enchiridion* 29). The name Lucifer was first given in the Vulgate translation of Isaiah 14:12, who rendered *hêlēl ben šāḥar* ('exalted one, son of the dawn') as Lucifer ('the light-bearer'). The first Christian writer to give a full account of Satan's primordial fall was Origen (c.185-254 CE), who on the strength of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 argued that Satan was originally a good angel who fell through pride. A rough contemporary, Tertullian (c. 160-225 CE), applied Isaiah 14: 12-15 to Satan, calling him 'the angel who fell', and linked Satan to the serpent. Cyprian (c. 200-258 CE) used Lucifer as an exemplum of pride leading to ruin, but the most complete formulation of the doctrine comes from Augustine (354-430 CE), who claimed that Satan was created good, fell through pride, and morphed into the serpent that tempted Eve. The multi-layered exegesis that gave the West the threefold identification of Lucifer, Satan, and the serpent of Genesis is post-Biblical. Milton, significantly, refers to 'Lucifer' only three times in all of *Paradise Lost*.[5]

Why does the story of Lucifer feature so prominently in *Paradise Lost*? Human iniquity is explained in cosmological terms. Just as Greek and Roman poets explained human suffering in terms of the cosmos, Milton gave a cosmological explanation for why Adam and Eve sinned. For Milton, the purpose of the Lucifer story is to elevate Adam's Fall to celestial significance. The sin of Adam has gravity *only* if understood in cosmic terms. Its import can only be felt if measured against a primordial event which resulted in the fall of a third of the heavenly host. The consequences of sin are so grave that the cosmos is put out of joint when

[1] See R.S. Dulkin, 'The Devil Within: A rabbinic traditions-history of the Samael story in "Pirkei de-rabbi Eliezer"', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 21.2 (2014), pp. 153-175.

[2] On the fall of the angels in Milton, see D. T. Benet, 'The Fall of the Angels: Theology and narrative', *Milton Quarterly* 50.1 (2016), pp. 1-13. On Satan-Lucifer as the allegory of fallen faith, see M. Johnson, 'Fallen faith: Satan as allegory in Milton's *Paradise Lost*', *Scientia et Humanitas* (2013), pp. 1-13.

[3] J. Milton, *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine, Compiled from the Holy Scriptures Alone*, vol. 1 (Boston, 1825).

[4] On Milton's insistence on Scripture as the sole basis of theological doctrine, see B. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, 1979).

[5] See V. 757-9 ('The Palace of great Lucifer, (so call/ That Structure in the Dialect of men/ Interpreted'); VII. 131-138 ('Know then, that after Lucifer from Heav'n/ (So call him, brighter once amidst the Host/ Of Angels, then that Starr the Starrs among)/ Fell with his flaming Legions through the Deep/ Into his place, and the great Son returnd/ Victorious with his Saints, th' Omnipotent/ Eternal Father from his Throne beheld/ Thir multitude, and to his Son thus spake'); XI. 419-426 ('for those Appointed to sit there, had left thir charge,/ Flown to the upper World; the rest were all/ Farr to the inland retir'd, about the walls/ Of Pandemonium, Citie and proud seate/ Of Lucifer, so by allusion calld,/ Of that bright Starr to Satan paragond.').

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committed.[1] The sin of Adam has implications not only for Adam but for the created order. Causally primal, the Fall of Lucifer becomes a cosmic touchstone. The fiery imagery evokes Mount Etna: 'And such appear'd in hue, as when the force/ Of subterranean wind transports a Hill/ Torn from Pelorus, or the shatter'd side/ Of thundring Aetna, whose combustible/ And fewel'd entrals thence conceiving Fire,/ Sublim'd with Mineral fury, aid the Winds,/ And leave a singed bottom all involv'd/ With stench and smoak…' (I. 230-7). Milton calls to mind Virgil's depiction of Etna in *Aeneid* III (570-7): 'The port capacious, and secure from wind,/ Is to the foot of thund'ring Aetna join'd./ By turns a pitchy cloud she rolls on high;/ By turns hot embers from her entrails fly,/ And flakes of mounting flames, that lick the sky./ Oft from her bowels massy rocks are thrown,/ And, shiver'd by the force, come piecemeal down (tr. John Dryden).[2] The cavernous realms in which the Titans of Classical literature dwell become the image which Milton uses to characterise hell, but the important difference is that the chains which bind Satan and his crew in the nether regions are ones of their own, not of divine, making.[3]

In Christian literature, the imagery of hell paradoxically has a non-Biblical origin. The New Testament sometimes likens damnation to Gehenna (Mt. 5:22, 29-30: 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mk. 9:43, 45, 47; Lk. 12:5; James 3:6),[4] but this is one of two images used in the Christian Scripture, the other being that of outer darkness (Mt. 22.13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17). The Gehenna image in the New Testament is transposed from the Old, where its meaning develops over time. Joshua (15:8) identifies the Valley of Hinnom (later, Gehenna) as the geographical demarking boundary between Judah and Benjamin. Later, it becomes a place where the detestable practice of child sacrifice is performed by those who defy the prohibition (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6; Jeremiah 7: 31-2; 19: 2-6). The image of fire, sulphur, and the worm that never dies is present in Isaiah (30:33; 66:24) and points ahead to an eschatological judgment at the end of time when the righteous will be saved and the unrighteous condemned. Isaiah does not overtly identify the fire that will burn the unrighteous with Hinnom, but the reference to Tophet was used by later Christian exegesis to link the fire, sulphur, and worms to Gehenna.[5] These Biblical images are unimportant for Milton. The New Testament, in particular the Gospel of Matthew, refers to Gehenna as a place of wailing and gnashing of teeth, but Milton does not draw upon it. For Milton, the most influential of the infernal imagery is Classical in origin.

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[1] On the nature of sin in Milton, see P.J. Gallagher, '"Real or Allegoric": The ontology of sin and death in *Paradise Lost*', *Studies in English Humanism* 6.2 (1976), pp. 317-335.

[2] 'Portus ab accessu ventorum immotus et ingens/ ipse; sed horrificis iuxta tonat Aetna ruinis;/ interdumque atram prorumpit ad aethera nubem,/ turbine fumantem piceo et candente favilla,/ attollitque globos flammarum et sidera lambit;/ interdum scopulos avolsaque viscera montis/ erigit eructans, liquefactaque saxa sub auras/ cum gemitu glomerat, fundoque exaestuat imo.'

[3] On the link between the confinement of the Titans and binding magic, see J. Lamont, 'Cosmogonies of the Bound: Titans, giants, and early Greek binding spells', *Classical Philology* 116.4 (2021), pp. 471-497.

[4] Gehenna, or the Hinnom Valley, has often been identified with a garbage dump on the outskirts of Jerusalem where an incinerator was kept, but the historical basis of the identification is now thought to be tenuous. The first time when such an identification is made is with the twelfth-century Provençal rabbi David Kimhi, whose Biblical exegesis gained traction during the Later Middle Ages. There is, however, no reference in the works of Josephus, the Mishnah, the Targums, or in Second Temple Jewish literature to the Hinnom Valley as a place where refuse was tipped and burned. For a cross-examination and refutation of the standard tradition, see L.R. Bailey, 'Gehenna: the topography of Hell', *Biblical Archaeologist* 49.3 (1986), pp. 187-203.

[5] On the development of Gehenna as a metaphor for hell, see K.E. Schwartz, 'From the Valley of Hinnom to Hell: The Rhetorical Function of Gehenna', Doctoral dissertation (Liberty University, 2026).

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There is one mention only of Gehenna in all *Paradise Lost*: 'First Moloch, horrid King besmear'd with blood/ Of human sacrifice, and parents tears, Though for the noyse of Drums and Timbrels loud/ Their childrens cries unheard, that past through fire/ To his grim Idol. Him the Ammonite/ Worshipt in Rabba and her watry Plain,/ In Argob and in Basan, to the stream/ Of utmost Arnon. Nor content with such/ Audacious neighbourhood, the wisest heart/ Of Solomon he led by fraud to build/ His Temple right against the Temple of God/ On that opprobrious Hill, and made his Grove/ The pleasant Vally of Hinnom, Tophet thence/ And black Gehenna call'd, the Type of Hell.' (I. 392-405). The Biblical references are the crushing of the Ammonite army at Rabbah by Joab (2 Samuel 12:26-29), Solomon's lapse into idolatry (1 Kings 11: 1-13), and of Tophet, defiled by Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), where Judah burned their sons and daughters in the fire, and where Jeremiah, prophesying that it would become the Valley of Slaughter (Jeremiah 7: 31-32), declared that the place would be filled with corpses because of Judah's idolatry (Jeremiah 19: 5-6, 11-14). The hermeneutical priority given to non-literal interpretation is conveyed by the non-Biblical, and thus non-literal, metaphors. With the one exception mentioned, Milton eschews the Biblical images of hell because they do not serve his purpose, which is to describe hell in figurative language. To grasp the Fall in cosmic terms, he needs a pagan literary backcloth upon which to portray Satan's descent from the heights.

Unlike Dante's vision of hell, which is structured, physical, and topographical, Milton's vision is chaotic and disorderly.[1] When Biblical tropes are deployed, Milton moves with caution. An example is the portrayal of Satan's vast size, which he compares to the beast Leviathan (I. 201), the enormous sea-monster of the Old Testament (Isaiah 27:1; Job 41:34). The marshalling of infernal forces recalls the plague of locusts that swarms upon Egypt: 'As when the potent Rod/ Of Amrams Son in Egypts evill day/ Wav'd round the Coast, up call'd a pitchy cloud/ Of Locusts, warping on the Eastern Wind,/ That ore the Realm of impious Pharoah hung/ Like Night, and darken'd all the Land of Nile:/ So numberless were those bad Angels seen/ Hovering on wing under the Cope of Hell/ 'Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding Fires;' (I. 338-346). The point of comparison is the countless swarm of the enemy, but whereas in the Biblical story the locusts are sent to punish Egypt (Exodus 10: 13-15), in Milton's simile the locusts parallel the infernal host that rallies behind Satan. Milton stands a Biblical image on its head: in Exodus, the locusts are a portent of divine vengeance against an iniquitous people, but in *Paradise Lost*, they are likened to Satan's fold. Just as the Biblical image is inverted, so does Milton reconfigure the Classical tradition of the Council of War. In the narratological sequence of *Paradise Lost*, the great cosmic battle which the Satanic forces will lose takes place after the war council happens, but in chronological sequence it is prior. In the *Aeneid*, the Council of War has real consequences for the outcome of Latium, but the futility of the infernal council in *Paradise Lost* is that it has no implications for the status of heaven and hell, which is forever fixed. The battle foreshadowed is, paradoxically, the cosmic battle

[1] For a brief synoptic overview of development of the imagery of hell in European literature from Dante to the twentieth century, see P. Sinha, 'A comparative analysis of Hell presented by Dante Alighieri, John Milton, and James Joyce', *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 10.4 (2022), pp. 63-66.

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that has already happened.[1] Milton inverts the Iliadic muster-council-battle sequence and both dramatically prefigures and retrospectively echoes the War in Heaven.[2]

Among the infernal minions are the idols before which God's own people stooped when they neglected true worship: 'The chief were those who from the Pit of Hell/ Roaming to seek their prey on earth, durst fix/ Their Seats long after next the Seat of God,/ Their Altars by his Altar, Gods ador'd/ Among the Nations round, and durst abide/ Jehovah thundring out of Sion, thron'd/ Between the Cherubim; yea, often plac'd/ Within his Sanctuary itself their Shrines,/ Abominations; and with cursed things/ His holy Rites, and solemn Feasts profan'd,/ And with their darkness durst affront his light.' (I. 381-390). The passage harks back to the story of King Solomon, tempted by his many foreign wives to worship the false gods of the Gentiles (1 Kings 11.1-11). In the Biblical story, idolatry is seen as a human failing, a temptation to which rulers fall prey when corrupted by wealth or forbidden sexual lusts. As false gods, idols have no power of their own. By placing idols in Satan's fold, Milton ironically observes that Satan has no real power beyond temptation. The extensive and vivid description of the Satanic host calls to mind the Catalogue of Heroes in *Iliad* II and *Aeneid* VII, with the one major difference that in Homer and Virgil, the warriors listed have real power to vanquish the enemy, whereas Satan has no military power as such. His potencies are rhetorical, psychological, political and sublime.[3]

Satan's sin is pride (I. 36, 58, 527). When he casts his eyes upon his mustered army, his heart 'Distends with pride, and hardning in his strength/ Glories' (I. 572-3). The onset of Satan's army is likened to the cranes that attack the Achaean host on the shores of Troy (I. 575-6). The allusion is to the opening of *Iliad* III, where the Trojan army is compared to a flock of cranes descending on a race of pygmies (Hom. *Il*. III.1-3).[4] There are similarities and differences. In the Homeric version, the simile inverts the natural order, because Troy is being invaded from outside, whereas in the simile the Trojans are likened to invaders. In Milton's version, the simile serves to liken the invader to birds of prey. Milton is not just borrowing from a Classical source but trumping it. The terror which the Achaean host faced when attacked by the armies of Hector was as nothing by comparison with the terrors inflicted upon humankind by Satan's onset: 'For never since created man,/ Met such imbodied force, as nam'd with these/ Could merit more then that small infantry/ Warr'd on by Cranes: though all the Giant brood/ Of Phlegra with th' Heroic Race were joyn'd/ That fought at Theb's and Ilium, on each side/ Mixt with auxiliar Gods;' (I. 572-8). Milton proclaims that no epic battle related by the poets of old can match the strife that will follow the exit of Satan's armies from hell to do war with the Almighty. Yet, this comes with epic irony, because the battle with the Almighty has already happened. In Milton, the Council of War, almost perversely, comes after the cosmic

[1] For a detailed study of how contradictions, ambiguities, and transgressive narrative elements are built into the narratological outlay of *Paradise Lost*, see D. Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost: Reading the Designs of Milton's Epic* (Princeton, 2014).
[2] For a study of the inverted sequence, see D. Quint, 'Milton's book of numbers: Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* and its catalogue," *Modern Language Quarterly* 43.3 (1982), pp. 209–231.
[3] See further K. Lehtonen, 'The Satanic sublime in *Paradise Lost*: Tasso, charisma, objection', *Modern Philology* 116.3 (2019), pp. 211-234.
[4] On the crane simile in Homer, see L. Muellner, 'The simile of the cranes and pygmies: A study of Homeric metaphor', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 93 (1990), pp. 59-101.

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war has been fought and lost. The epic struggles at Troy and in Latium are mere trifles by comparison.[1]

Other intertextualities with Homer magnify the sinfulness of Satan's brood. The vision of hell in Milton is one not only of unquenchable fire but also of wealth and splendour. Hell, for Milton, is a place of riches and earthly artifice, crafted by false architects who serve worldly vanity. Pandemonium, 'the high Capital/ Of Satan and his Peers' (I. 756-7), is an edifice made of jewels, gold, and earthly dross. Milton hints at an Olympian parallel. The gods who feast in the wide halls of Olympus are inconsequential. The great palace of Homer's gods Milton sets not on the heights of heaven but in the bowels of hell, into which Satan's forces enter gleefully: 'The hasty multitude Admiring enter'd, and the work some praise/ And some the Architect: his hand was known/ In Heav'n by many a Towred structure high,/ Where Scepter'd Angels held thir residence,/ And sat as Princes, whom the supreme King/ Exalted to such power, and gave to rule,/ Each in his Herarchie, the Orders bright.' (I.730-7). The transposition of the hall of the gods on Olympus to the depths of perdition is amplified by the allusion to the architect god Hephaestus (Vulcan): 'Nor was his name unheard or unador'd/ In ancient Greece; and in Ausonian land/ Men call'd him Mulciber; and how he fell/ From Heav'n, they fabl'd, thrown by angry Jove/ Sheer o're the Chrystal Battlements: from Morn/ To Noon he fell, from Noon to dewy Eve,/ A Summers day; and with the setting Sun/ Dropt from the Zenith like a falling Star,/ On Lemnos th' Aegaean Ile: thus they relate,/ Erring; for he with this rebellious rout/ Fell long before; nor aught avail'd him now/ To have built in Heav'n high Towrs; nor did he scape/ By all his Engins, but was headlong sent/ With his industrious crew to build in hell.' (I. 738-751). The reference is to the hurling by Zeus of the blacksmith god Hephaestus from the heights of Olympus, first mentioned in the opening book of the *Iliad* (Hom. *Il.* I.585-595). According to the Homeric tradition, Hephaestus was thrown from heaven when he aided his mother Hera against his father Zeus, who in anger threw him by the ankle down to earth, where he landed on the island of Lemnos after falling for an entire day until sunset. In the *Iliad*, Hephaestus reminds his queenly mother not to make war on Zeus because, however justified, she cannot prevail against him. Zeus, he warns her, has the power to cast all the gods from heaven. The significance for Milton is that the great palace which Vulcan wrought for the Olympians is the very same palace in which Satan in hell dwells.[2] In Homer, it is a place of bliss from which the gods might be expelled if they incur Zeus's displeasure. In Milton, by contrast, it is the place where the worst pangs of hellish torment are experienced, and one into which those denied heavenly bliss are admitted when they enter hell's chambers.

As the Satanic company enters the halls, its retinue is agog at its jewelled magnificence. Its members enter 'As Bees/ In spring time, when the Sun with Taurus rides,/ Poure forth thir populous youth about the Hive/ In clusters; they among fresh dews and flowers/ Flie to and fro, or on the smoothed Plank,/ The suburb of thir Straw-built Cittadel,/ New rub'd with Baume, expatiate and confer/ Thir State affairs.' (I. 768-775). The simile is borrowed from Virgil, who in various places in the *Aeneid* compares protagonists to bees. The first time is in the first book, after Aeneas is shipwrecked on the shores of Africa. Tyrian outcasts labour to build Queen Dido's royal domicile: 'As exercise the bees in flow'ry plains,/

[1] On the battle for humankind as the most important epic battle in Milton, see B.K. Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of* Paradise Regained, (Providence, RI, 1966).

[2] On the hurling down of Hephaestus, see G. Hedreen, 'The return of Hephaistos, Dionysiac processional ritual and the creation of a visual narrative', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 124 (2004), pp. 38-64.

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When winter past, and summer scarce begun,/ Invites them forth to labor in the sun;/ Some lead their youth abroad, while some condense/ Their liquid store, and some in cells dispense;/ Some at the gate stand ready to receive/ The golden burthen, and their friends relieve;/ All with united force, combine to drive/ The lazy drones from the laborious hive:/ With envy stung, they view each other's deeds;/ The fragrant work with diligence proceeds.' (Virg. *Aen.* I. 4.430-437, tr. John Dryden).[1] Dido, an exile from Phoenicia (Lebanon) through the machinations of her wicked brother, has fled to a haven in Libya to found a nascent city, Carthage. In Virgil's usage, those likened to bees are victims of an ancient wrong done to their ruler.[2] Milton inverts the paradigm. In *Paradise Lost*, those likened to bees are outcasts from heaven because of a wrong committed by their leader. In one sense, they too are exiles and victims. The haven to which they retreat has its pleasures. It glisters with the magnificent lustre of gems and precious metals, but the pleasures which it confers are illusory. The true haven from which they have fallen is the castle of heaven.

There are also resonances of the second book of the *Iliad*. Achilles, the Myrmidon king, has suffered offence at the hands of Agamemnon, lord of the Achaean army, and refuses to join the battle against Troy. Zeus sends Agamemnon a false vision in his sleep bidding him arm the Greeks in Achilles's absence so that Troy that day might be taken. Even Nestor, the wise old king of Pylos, is fooled. The expedition is doomed to disaster. The sceptred kings of the Greek army follow their commander blindly: 'Even as the tribes of thronging bees go forth from some hollow rock, ever coming on afresh, and in clusters over the flowers of spring fly in throngs, some here, some there; even so from the ships and huts before the low sea-beach marched forth in companies their many tribes to the place of gathering' (Hom. *Il.* II. 87-93, tr. A.T. Murray).[3] In the Homeric usage, the simile conveys folly. The warriors are not wicked so much as foolish and blind. They gather around their leader in a swarm, doing the bidding of a deluded preceptor.[4] In Homer's simile, the bees exit their hive to fly across the field in diverse directions; in Virgil's they gather in the hive.[5] The Homeric image is of dispersal, whilst the Virgilian of integration. Both resonances are important for Milton: in the Virgilian implication the warrior bees of Satan gather in the hive of Pandemonium, but in the Homeric, they will soon swarm from their hellish nest to the world above to sting their victims. This double allusion sets the agenda for the battle that is to follow. Satan's army has forged its own home. Hell's dominion is one which Satan and his crew, not God, have crafted. The battle which they wage, unlike that of the Achaeans under Agamemnon, avenges in their case a perceived, not an actual, wrong done. In the *Iliad*, the Greeks wage war on an insolent foe that has stolen

[1] 'Qualis apes aestate nova per florea rura/ exercet sub sole labor, cum gentis adultos/ educunt fetus, aut cum liquentia mella/ stipant et dulci distendunt nectare cellas,/ aut onera accipiunt venientum, aut agmine facto/ ignavom fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent:/ fervet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.'

[2] On the bee simile and its poetic ambivalence to convey both admiration and suspicion, see E. Giusti, 'Virgil's Carthaginians at *Aen.* 1.430–6: Cyclopes in bees' clothing', *Cambridge Classical Journal* 60 (2014), pp. 37–58.

[3] ἠΰτε ἔθνεα εἶσι μελισσάων ἀδινάων/ πέτρης ἐκ γλαφυρῆς αἰεὶ νέον ἐρχομενάων,/ βοτρυδὸν δὲ πέτονται ἐπ' ἄνθεσιν εἰαρινοῖσιν:/ αἳ μέν τ' ἔνθα ἅλις πεποτήαται, αἳ δέ τε ἔνθα:/ ὣς τῶν ἔθνεα πολλὰ νεῶν ἄπο καὶ κλισιάων/ ἠϊόνος προπάροιθε βαθείης ἐστιχόωντο/ ἰλαδὸν εἰς ἀγορήν.

[4] On the deluded pride of Agamemnon, see B. Sammons, *Device and Composition in the Greek Epic Cycle* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 137-170.

[5] For a comparison of how the bee simile functions in Homer and Virgil, see S. Heist, 'Insight into the community: Bee similes in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*', *Journal of Undergraduate Research* 2.1 (2016), article 6.

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Menelaus's bride, Helen. In the world of *Paradise Lost*, Satan declares enmity on the Almighty not because of injury done by God, but because of a self-inflicted wound. The loss experienced by Satan's demonic forces is one which they, no one else, have incurred.

The first book of *Paradise Lost* is to be read against a Biblical and a Classical backcloth. The great battles of Greco-Roman antiquity range forces of comparable might in opposition. The battle that is to ensue in the following books of *Paradise Lost* (V-VI) is uneven. There is another important difference. The Council of War at the start of *Paradise Lost* prefaces a battle that has already taken place, because the Battle in Heaven related to Adam in the fifth and sixth books is a flashback, not unlike the tale of the fall of Troy in *Odyssey* VIII, told at Phaeacia by the bard Demodocus to Odysseus as he weeps at the loss he has inflicted (Hom. *Od.* VIII. 499-520). Sporting an appearance of awful might, Satan commands no power against Omnipotence. God grants Satan and humankind-yet-to-be freewill. The metaethical maxim requiring freedom for any action to be good or evil is here affirmed. Goodness is only goodness if there is freedom to do otherwise. Zeus, unshakeable, is a usurper. All who oust predecessors live in fear of being ousted. To the God of Milton, this cannot apply. Milton's God is the eternal rightful possessor of heaven. Zeus cannot be ousted from Olympus because of his unequalled power. The God of *Paradise Lost* cannot be ousted because of His very nature, which in its munificence grants His creatures freewill. Those who seek to oust the Almighty only oust themselves. Entry to heaven or hell for Milton lacks compulsion. By contrast, those expelled from Olympus in the Classical tradition fall through no choice. Those who enter Milton's hell enter by their own decision.

The theological and ethical frame of Milton's first complete epic stands in counterpoint not only to the fatalistic precepts of the Greek and Roman poets but also to Calvinistic doctrines of Predestination and Irresistible Grace.[1] Though raised a Puritan, Milton in maturity rejected distinguishing elements of Five-Point Calvinism, as appears from his posthumous treatises.[2] *Paradise Lost* belongs to a religiously disputatious England which, from the Reformation, had unsuccessfully imposed unified doctrine upon the centrifugal strands of Protestant Christianity. Just as Milton rejected core Calvinist beliefs, his understanding of the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity shows influences of Arianism, or Homoiousianism, a low Christological heresy that took root in the fourth century, which subordinated the Second Person (the Son) to the First Person (the Father), only to be condemned at the First Nicene Council in 325 CE, and later, in 381, under the guidance of the Cappadocian Fathers, at the First Constantinopolitan Council, when the Three Trinitarian Persons were defined as consubstantial and coeternal.[3]

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[1] *Paradise Lost* is the first epic Milton completed, but he had worked previously on an Arthurian epic which he never finished. For the purposes of this essay, the 'first epic' of Milton means the first finished epic. For a detailed study of how the figure of Arthur transformed in Milton's thinking, see S.F. Ng, 'Milton, Buchanan, and King Arthur', *The Review of English Studies* n.s. 70 no. 296 (2019), pp. 659-680.

[2] For a broader discussion of Milton's theological self-positioning, see C. Jeffrey, '"Both mind and will depraved": Milton, Calvin, and the doctrine of total depravity', *Milton Quarterly* 59 (2025), pp. 14-30.

[3] For my discussion of the development of Catholic-Orthodox doctrine in the fourth century CE through the first two Ecumenical Councils, Nicaea I (325) and Constantinople I (381), see my earlier paper in *Occasional Papers*, 'The seeds of the Roman Empire of the East: Constantinople in the making from Constantine I to the death of Theodosius I (AD 324-395)', no. 77 (January 2025).

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II: *Paradise Lost*: Book II.

Having described hell in lurid language in the first book, Milton in the second turns to the preparations for war schemed by Satan and his infernal advisors. Milton is not the first epic poet to have imagined a Council of War. His most memorable prototype is Virgil who, in the eleventh book of the *Aeneid*, conjures up a debate between Turnus, Latinus, and Drances (Virg. *Aen.* XI. 296-444).[1] In *Paradise Lost*, the infernal council at Pandemonium operates between four Biblical characters, two from the Old Testament, two from the New Testament: Moloch, a Canaanite deity linked to child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; 20.2-4; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23.10; Jeremiah 32:35); Belial, a personification of worthlessness, lawlessness, and evil (Deuteronomy 13:13; 1 Samuel 2:12); Mammon, the personification of wealth (Mt. 6:24); and Beelzebub, a Biblical transposition of the ancient Near Eastern god Ba'al, worshipped as a god of fertility in the Fertile Crescent and associated with the storm-clouds (Mt. 12:24).[2]

Though reminiscent of Virgil's, Milton's Council of War has a distinct poetic function. Virgil's Council of War takes place after the war between Aeneas and the Italians led by the rebellious Turnus has already begun: Latinus, the king of Laurentium and father-in-law-to-be of the hero Aeneas, Trojan invader of Italy and upstart claimant to the hand of Latinus' daughter Lavinia, originally betrothed to Turnus, chief of the Rutulians, and the warrior Drances council Turnus to lay aside his hurt pride and make terms with Aeneas, fated by the will of Jupiter to found a new civilisation on the shores of Italy.[3] Milton's Council of War happens after the war in heaven has finished. This is not about a defensive strategy or bargained compromise, but a needless protraction of a war that has already been fought and lost. The infernal protagonists, with one exception, are not peacemakers. There are other differences, among which is that in *Paradise Lost*, the discussion is held among aggressors, not the invaded. In Virgil and in Milton, exiles from a foreign land wage war. In the *Aeneid*, the invaders are not initially aggressors but come in peace. Expelled from their homeland in Troy, the exiles led by Aeneas seek a home in Italy by peaceful methods but are thwarted by the design of Juno, who sends Allecto to stir up strife among the Italian natives.[4] The exiles in *Paradise Lost* are Satan and his crew, but unlike the Trojans, they have arrived at their new home by the time the war begins. Milton's epic battle, like Virgil's, is over territorial claim, but unlike Virgil's, not over a new kingdom. Unlike Virgil, who envisages a thwarted defensive compromise by those among the Latins who attempt to steer Turnus on a peaceful path, Milton instead depicts a wrongheaded offensive strategy.

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[1] On the Council of War in the *Aeneid*, see E. Fantham, 'Fighting words: Turnus at bay in the Latin Council (*Aeneid* 11.234–446)', *American Journal of Philology* 120 (1999), pp. 259-280.

[2] Beelzebub is thought to derive from Baal Zebul ('Exalted Lord'), associated with the northwest Semitic god Baal/Hadad, described in Ugaritic texts as the 'Rider on the Clouds' (Ugaritic *rkb ʿrpt*). The association with the storm-clouds is, however, non-Biblical. The earliest mention in the Bible of Baal-Zebub, god of Ekron, is at 2 Kings 1: 2-16, and he features in the Greek Synoptic Gospels as 'Beelzebub' (Mt. 2:12, Mk. 3:22; Lk. 11:15). On Baal as a West Semitic storm god, see John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield, 2002). For a discussion of the Baal Cycle, see N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, 2002).

[3] For a deeper exploration of the working of fate in the *Aeneid*, see G. Zanker, *Fate and the Hero in Virgil's* Aeneid (Cambridge, 2023).

[4] On Allecto, see further C.J. Mackie, '*Nox erat*…Sleep and visions in the *Aeneid*', *Greece & Rome* 38.1 (1991), pp. 59-61.

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Both accounts, however, are woven together by one bright thread, resistance to fate. In both accounts, the decision to protract war is taken by the losing side. In Virgil's, the warlike ambitions of Turnus are impious because Jupiter has decreed in advance that Aeneas must win. Rome-to-be is ineluctable. The right course of action for the underdogs is to swallow their pride and buckle under the Trojan newcomer. In Milton's, the right course of action for Satan and his hellish band is to renounce evil and reconcile with their Creator. Like Turnus in the *Aeneid*, Satan cannot do this because he is consumed by pride. Like Turnus, resistance to fate and confinement to life in the Underworld is preferable to accepting the lordship of a master whom he cannot accept. There, the similarities end. Virgil's Turnus, though foolhardy and rash, elicits sympathy: he, not Aeneas, was the original, if not the rightful and lawful, claimant to a royal marriage and throne; he, not Aeneas, has sustained outrage and humiliation as a result of a morally indifferent divine will that arbitrarily favours Aeneas, not him. By contrast, there is nothing arbitrary or morally neutral about the will of Milton's God, whose nature is goodness. Satan's exile, through decreed, is not predestined.[1] Satan, though enslaved, is enslaved by his own corrupted will. The will of Jupiter preordains Turnus's fall and, therefore, his recalcitrance, but God wills neither the recalcitrance nor the fall of Satan. Both Satan and Turnus resist the will of heaven, but Turnus's resistance paradoxically fulfils Jupiter's intentions. When Aeneas buries the sword into Turnus's breast at the close of *Aeneid* XII ('ferrum adverso sub pectore condit', Virg. *Aen*. XII. 950), he brings closure to a divine mission, to found a new Roman race from the blended remnants of his band of Trojan exiles and a conquered native Italian foe. The multilayered Latin verb *condere* delivers the double meaning of 'to bury' and 'to found'. A new era is founded when Aeneas's sword buries itself in the entrails of the Rutulian underdog. The soul of Turnus flees grumbling to the shades of the Underworld, powerless to do otherwise. Satan, too, laments his damnation, but unlike Turnus, he has the power to reverse it.

The Council of War in Pandemonium is the cause and origin of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Unlike Laurentium in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Satan's domain in *Paradise Lost* is not under foreign siege. The Almighty does not wage war upon Satan and hell. Satan and his infernal entourage are abandoned to hell's fiery pangs, but God does not intervene to prevent them from experiencing it. Jupiter in the *Aeneid* wills that Trojan and Latin one day reconcile, just as Milton's God wills Satan's reconciliation. The key difference is that Milton's God gives Satan a choice. Satan is not forced to come to terms. Satan has the option to spend the rest of eternity in hell, unreconciled to his Creator. Here, we encounter the defining contrast between divine will in Milton and Virgil. In Virgil's conception, the will of heaven cannot be resisted; though Juno, Dido, Turnus, and at various points Aeneas stand in opposition to the will of the almighty Jupiter, at best they can only delay the operation of fate, and through their momentary recalcitrance, they bring what has been fated to pass. Carthage is fated one day to fall to Roman arms, and without the dalliance with Dido, what was written into fate could not

[1] This is the essence of the distinction between the competing doctrines of Single and Double Predestination. Single Predestination, favoured by Luther and other Protestant movements influenced by Lutheranism, speaks of Divine Election and Divine Preterition, whereby those who are not among the Elect are left to decide between salvation and perdition. Double Predestination, favoured by Calvin, Zwingli and Knox, speaks of Divine Election and Divine Reprobation, whereby God predestines both the Elect and the Reprobate. Calvinist doctrines were strong among English Puritans and fed into the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). For a critical commentary on the Westminster Assembly, see C. van Dixhoorn, *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1653* (Oxford, 2012).

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have unfolded. In Virgil, even resistance to fate is, in one sense, fated. In Milton, fate is self-determined. God does not necessitate Satan's destiny. God, indeed, does not will the Fall of Lucifer, even if the horrible sentence which it incurs issues from divine decree. Unlike Jupiter's, God's will is not irresistible. The great theological paradox is this: the moral defectiveness of the pagan king of heaven is borne out in the fact that he is not everlasting, comes to power through revolution, and enforces his will upon his subjects as a usurping tyrant forces his or her will upon the ruled, whereas the God of Milton, in His supreme majesty, though eternally reigning, does not force his will on Creation. Milton understands God's majesty as a moral and theological proposition. For God to be supreme, He must be morally perfect. Moral perfection cannot exert itself by tyrannical force. Only a God who is perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent could allow hell as a possibility, because only a God who is truly almighty could permit His will to be transgressed.

Hell for Milton is not a cosmic necessity, whilst for Homer and Virgil, it is inescapable. Those who find their way there despise the punishment which it entails, but the difference in Milton is that for damned souls, damnation is the preferred option. The one condition placed upon redemption in Milton's universe is spiritual humility, a price too heavy for Satan to pay. The contrast struck with both the Homeric and the Virgilian conceptions of the afterlife could not be more marked. In the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, Achilles famously pronounces that he would rather be a poor man's slave in the world above than king of all the dead in the world below. Achilles bids his visitor Odysseus not to praise death (μὴ δή μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ), because it would be better to serve as a living soul one without means or status (βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλῳ, ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρῳ) than to rule over the feeble souls of the dead (ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν) (Hom. *Od.* XI. 489-491). The once proud and mighty Achilles speaks with dignified humility. Once dead, existence is meagre. Those who encounter Hades would gladly accept the lowliest of stations on earth if given the possibility to ascend once more to the world above.[1] In Milton's hell, the reverse is true. Escape is a possibility, but if it means self-prostration before the Almighty, escape is not preferable to an eternity of damnation. The souls in Homer's hell are stripped of all their former pride. The souls in Milton's hell are filled with self-pride, to the point that even the most exalted station in heaven is despised if it entails self-abandonment to the will of Omnipotence.[2]

As with the first book, the second book of *Paradise Lost* is redolent with Biblical and Classical allusiveness. Mammon's speech before the war council incites the applause of his infernal audience: 'Such applause was heard/ As Mammon ended, and his Sentence pleas'd,/ Advising peace: for such another Field/ They dreaded worse then Hell: so much the fear/ Of Thunder and the Sword of Michael/ Wrought still within them; and no less desire/ To found this nether Empire, which might rise/ By pollicy, and long process of time,/ In emulation opposite to Heav'n.' (II. 290-298). Like Drances in Virgil's Council of War, who foresees that failure to offer terms of peace with the one who has the will of Jupiter on his side can only lead to total annihilation, Mammon, in recognition of the futility of any proposed war against the

[1] On the intractable problem of death in Homer, see J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1983). For a more recent discussion of how Greek authors conceptualise the Underworld from Homer onward, see S. Lye, *Life/Afterlife: Revolution and Reflection in the Ancient Greek Underworld from Homer to Lucian* (Oxford, 2024).

[2] On pride as the root of all sin in Christian theology, see K. Timpe and N.A. Tognazzini, 'Pride in Christian philosophy and theology', in J.A. Carter and E.C. Gordon, *The Moral Psychology of Pride* (London, 2017), pp. 211-234.

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Almighty, urges Satan to remain within his confines so as not to worsen his sentence. Mammon cautions: 'Warr therefore, open or conceal'd, alike/ My voice disswades; for what can force or guile/ With him, or who deceive his mind, whose eye/ Views all things at one view? he from heav'ns highth/ All these our motions vain, sees and derides;/ Not more Almighty to resist our might/ Then wise to frustrate all our plots and wiles.' (II. 187-193). The language of Mammon echoes the second Psalm: 'The One enthroned in heaven laughs;/ the Lord scoffs at them./ He rebukes them in his anger/ and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,/ "I have installed my king/ on Zion, my holy mountain."' (Psalm 2: 4-6). The Psalmist decries the efforts of the nations to rise up against God, who derides and scoffs at all their designs.

Mammon's council also bears a resonance of Prometheus, who defies Zeus and, in his defiance, suffers an eagle to pluck his liver. He remarks on the consequences of a lost protracted war: '…what if all/ Her stores were op'n'd, and this Firmament/ Of Hell should spout her Cataracts of Fire,/ Impendent horrors, threatning hideous fall/ One day upon our heads; while we perhaps/ Designing or exhorting glorious Warr,/ Caught in a fierie Tempest shall be hurl'd/ Each on his rock transfixt, the sport and prey/ Of racking whirlwinds, or for ever sunk/ Under yon boyling Ocean, wrapt in Chains;/ There to converse with everlasting groans,/ Unrespited, unpitied, unrepreevd,/ Ages of hopeless end; this would be worse.' (II. 174-186). Mammon's warning to the Satanic Council recalls the dread punishment inflicted upon the rebellious Titan who defied Zeus by empowering mortals. In recompense, Prometheus was chained to a rock where he endured the cruel elements for a thousand years.[1] The myth is first related by Hesiod (*Theog.* 521-616; *Works and Days* 47-105) and later by the tragedian Aeschylus (*P.V.* 1-127, 180-309, 944-1093). Like Prometheus, Satan as the serpent gives the first humans knowledge in Eden, but the knowledge he affords is of nakedness and vulnerability, whereas God teaches Adam thereafter how to survive. In the Greek myth, humans before the visitation of Prometheus know vulnerability but not how to survive in a hostile world. The gift of fire is imparted by a rebellious Titan, whereas Satan's only gift is the knowledge of evil. Mammon's warning recalls a passage of Horace (*Odes* I.2.1-4): 'Enough of snow and hail at last/ The sire has sent in vengeance down:/ His bolts, at his own temple cast,/ terrified the town.' (tr. John Conington).[2] Horace's metaphor of the pounding of the elements references the torment of civil war, which Rome now wants to confine to the past. The Promethean parallel ties humans into the cosmic tale of Satan's fall. Before he was chained to a rock, the Titan Prometheus lived freely among the Olympian gods, but his fall from grace was occasioned by his intervention in human affairs (Hes. *Theog.* 535-569). Satan's predicament strikes an important contrast, because Satan, unlike Prometheus, has already fallen by the time he intervenes. Mammon's words warn Satan that if he meddles in Eden, his torments will increase.[3] This creates an awkward and, at best, indirect parallel with Prometheus, whose throes are incurred by the gift of fire to mortals.

The Promethean parallel, though imperfect, is important, because Hesiod clarifies that not all the Titans made war on Zeus, and some remained in heaven when Zeus established his rule. Styx and her children approach as allies (Hes. *Theog.* 383-404). Themis and

[1] On the Promethean myth, see X. Ren, 'Disorder, punishment, and grace: The harmonization of divine will and fate in the Prometheus trilogy', *Religions* 16.4 (2025), pp. 483-495.
[2] 'Iam satis terris nivis atque dirae/ grandinis misit pater et rubente/ dextera sacras iaculatus arcis/ terruit urbem…'
[3] On the figure of Mammon in seventeenth-century literature, see further B. Hoxby, *Mammon's Music: Literature and Economics in the Age of Milton* (New Haven, 2002).

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Mnemosyne become consorts of Zeus and bear the Muses (901-919). Leto, daughter of Coeus and Phoebe, becomes the mother of Apollo and Artemis (Diana) (404-499). The loyal Titans prefigure the faithful company of heaven, the rebellious Titans the rebel angels who join Satan's entourage, with the one vital difference that God, unlike Zeus, does not establish kingship by usurpation.[1] When the Council of War in *Paradise Lost* ends, hell's rebellious company disperses. First to leave Pandemonium is Satan, encircled by Seraphim and heralded by trumpet blasts. The procession out of the infernal palace leaves a wave of devastation: 'As when Alcides from Oealia Crown'd/ With conquest, felt th' envenom'd robe, and tore/ Through pain up by the roots Thessalian Pines,/ And Lichas from the top of Oeta threw/ Into th' Euboeic Sea.' (II. 542-546). Milton recalls a passage from the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*: 'And after him I marked the mighty Heracles—his phantom; for he himself among the immortal gods takes his joy in the feast, and has to wife Hebe, of the fair ankles, daughter of great Zeus and of Here, of the golden sandals. About him role a clamor from the dead, as of birds flying everywhere in terror; and he like dark night, with his bow bare and with arrow on the string, glared about him terribly, like one in act to shoot. Awful was the belt about his breast, a baldric of gold, whereon wondrous things were fashioned, bears and wild boars, and lions with flashing eyes, and conflicts, and battles, and murders, and slayings of men.' (Hom. *Od.* XI. 601-613, tr. A.T. Murray).[2]

The progeny of Zeus and Alcmene, and fostered by Amphitryton, hated and pursued by Hera, the hero Heracles was compelled to perform twelve labours of unimaginable hardship. In the vision of Odysseus of hell during his katabasis in *Odyssey* XI, Heracles commands the awe of the dead but is a shade, without potency beyond his infernal dwelling.[3] The implicit likening of Satan to Heracles conveys Milton's ironical conception of the forces of evil. Though terrible in appearance, the company of hell comprises mere phantoms. Satan is both a presence and an absence. The evil he unleashes in the world carries real destructive force, but he is a phantasmic entity, without the unaided power to undo any of God's intentions. Unlike Heracles, whose might draws on an internal source, Satan's vigour requires extrinsic nourishment. Satan has no power in the world which humans do not accord him. Satan can tempt and beguile but cannot subvert the will of God without human aid. The ghosts of the Homeric Underworld are fearsome in appearance, but the poet of the *Odyssey* reminds us that they are feckless shades, insubstantial, fleeting, without embodied essence, and capable of conversation only when they drink of the ram's blood which Odysseus offers them. Satan can wreak havoc if given the power to do so by those who, in a manner of speaking, perform an act of spiritual necromancy. Human sinfulness is like an evocation of a deathly spiritual force. For that force of death to have real power, however, it must be evoked by human agency which grants it access to the heart.

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[1] On the Titans as prefiguring the fallen angels, see J.N. Bremmer, 'Remember the Titans. Greek fallen angels: Kronos and the Titans', in J.N. Bremmer and L.T. Stuckenbruck (eds.), *The Myth of the Fallen Angels* (Groningen, 2004), pp. 35-61.

[2] τὸν δὲ μετ' εἰσενόησα βίην Ἡρακληείην,/ εἴδωλον: αὐτὸς δὲ μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι/ τέρπεται ἐν θαλίῃς καὶ ἔχει καλλίσφυρον Ἥβην,/ παῖδα Διὸς μεγάλοιο καὶ Ἥρης χρυσοπεδίλου./ ἀμφὶ δέ μιν κλαγγὴ νεκύων ἦν οἰωνῶν ὥς,/ πάντοσ' ἀτυζομένων: ὁ δ' ἐρεμνῇ νυκτὶ ἐοικώς,/ γυμνὸν τόξον ἔχων καὶ ἐπὶ νευρῇφιν ὀιστόν,/ δεινὸν παπταίνων, αἰεὶ βαλέοντι ἐοικώς./ σμερδαλέος δέ οἱ ἀμφὶ περὶ στήθεσσιν ἀορτὴρ/ χρύσεος ἦν τελαμών, ἵνα θέσκελα ἔργα τέτυκτο,/ ἄρκτοι τ' ἀγρότεροί τε σύες χαροποί τε λέοντες,/ ὑσμῖναί τε μάχαι τε φόνοι τ' ἀνδροκτασίαι τε.

[3] On the poetic importance of the shade of Heracles, see W.-M. Stock, 'And what about the shade of Heracles?', *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 19.2 (2025), pp. 173-195.

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Milton's description of hell's guardians draws heavily on Classical references. Before the gates of hell lies a demonic creature half-woman, half-snake, with a waist of baying hounds. So terrifying is it that even Scylla and Hecate pale by comparison: 'Before the Gates there sat/ On either side a formidable shape;/ The one seem'd Woman to the waste, and fair,/ But ended foul in many a scaly fould/ Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm'd/ With mortal sting: about her middle round/ A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bark'd/ With wide Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung/ A hideous Peal: yet, when they list, would creep,/ If aught disturb'd thir noyse, into her woomb,/ And kennel there, yet there still bark'd and howl'd/ Within unseen. Farr less abhorrd then these/ Vex'd Scylla bathing in the Sea that parts/ Calabria from the hoarce Trinacian shore:/ Nor uglier follow the Night-Hag, when call'd/ In secret, riding through the Air she comes/ Lur'd with the smell of infant blood, to dance/ With Lapland Witches, while the labouring Moon/ Eclipses at thir charms.' (II. 648-666). Scylla is known from the twelfth book of Homer's *Odyssey* and the thirteenth of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Odysseus as he sails through the straits, navigates around Scylla, a monster of terrifying dimensions, who dwells in rock that faces the whirlpool Charybdis. She has twelve feet, all misshapen (τῆς ἦ τοι πόδες εἰσὶ δυώδεκα πάντες ἄωροι), six necks, a head on each (ἐξ δέ τέ οἱ δειραὶ περιμήκεες, ἐν δὲ ἑκάστῃ/ σμερδαλέη κεφαλή), three rows of teeth in each mouth (ἐν δὲ τρίστοιχοι ὀδόντες), and is hidden to her waist in a hollow cave (μέσση μέν τε κατὰ σπείους κοίλοιο δέδυκεν) (Hom. *Od.* XII. 89-93). In Ovid's account, Scylla's waist is girt with savage dogs ('feris atram canibus succingitur alvum'), but she has a maiden's face ('virginis ora gerens') (Ov. *Met.* XIII. 733-734).[1] Milton's hellish fiend is worse, with a serpentine body visible to beholders. Hecate is the witch-goddess of the moon, associated with its dark side, the reference point of Milton's 'Night-Hag'. Known from Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, in the earliest versions she is worshipped as honoured of Zeus and nurse of the young (Hes. *Theog.* 411-452). In the Homeric tradition, she is the torchbearer who becomes Persephone's companion (*Hymn to Demeter* 25-26, 438-440). By the early fifth century BCE, she morphs into a liminal goddess (Aesch. frgs. 208-233; Pind. *Paean* 2.73-77). By the late fifth century and into Hellenistic and Roman times, she is associated with night terrors, witchcraft and harmful magic (Eur. *Med.* 397; *Hel.* 569-570; Theoc. *Id.* II.12-14; Hor. *Sat.* I.8.33).[2]

Monstrous portents readily associate themselves with hell. Milton's liberal borrowing of Classical imagery signals that it is not to be read literally. The gods, heroes and monsters of Classical tradition were, from Milton's Christian standpoint, fictional. As signposts, however, they fulfil a vital function. Milton's lurid delineation of hell on a Classical canvass implies that none of it is real. As a spiritual state, hell is of course real, but as a physical one, it can only be viewed figuratively. Later in the second book of *Paradise Lost*, as Satan makes his way out of the chambers of hell to the world above, he must pass through an empty void that separates his dominion from Creation. He parleys with Chaos, the personified Nothingness, who guides him upward toward newly created earth, which hangs from the vault of heaven by a golden chain. Chaos speaks: 'I upon my Frontieres here/ Keep residence; if all I can will serve,/ That little which is left so to defend/ Encroacht on still through our intestine broiles/ Weakning the Scepter of old Night: first Hell/ Your dungeon stretching far and wide beneath;/ Now lately

[1] On the poetic importance of Scylla in the *Odyssey*, see M. Hopman, 'Narrative and rhetoric in Odysseus' tales to the Phaeacians', *American Journal of Philology* 133.1 (2012), pp. 1-30.
[2] On the evolving figure of Hecate as a chthonic deity, see further S. Banwari, 'Hecate: Goddess of liminality and magic', *Akroterion* 70 (2026), pp. 1-21.

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Heaven and Earth, another World/ Hung ore my Realm, link'd in a golden Chain/ To that side Heav'n from whence your Legions fell:/ If that way be your walk, you have not farr;/ So much the neerer danger; goe and speed;/ Havock and spoil and ruin are my gain.' (II. 999-1009). Milton calls to mind a passage from the *Iliad*, where Zeus warns that no one must thwart his will at the risk of being thrown into Tartarus, as far beneath Hades as earth is beneath heaven. To illustrate his unchallengeable might, Zeus commands the gods of Olympus to forge a chain to hang from heaven which, tug at it as they may, cannot displace the king of the gods (Hom. *Il.* VIII. 15-20).[1] Milton transposes the image to heaven and earth. Heaven prevents earth from tumbling into the abyss, but at the same time, the weight of the earth cannot unseat God.

Satan gives Chaos no reply but wends his way earthward on a perilous voyage, more perilous even than the journey embarked on by the Argonaut Jason or by Ulysses himself: 'He ceas'd; and Satan staid not to reply,/ But glad that now his Sea should find a shore,/ With fresh alacritie and force renew'd/ Springs upward like a Pyramid of fire/ Into the wilde expanse, and through the shock/ Of fighting Elements, on all sides round/ Environ'd wins his way; harder beset/ And more endanger'd, then when Argo pass'd/ Through Bosporus betwixt the justling Rocks: Or when Ulysses on the Larbord shunnd Chraybdis, and by th' other whirlpool steard.' (II. 1010-1020). Milton's elemental description of the journey to earth echoes the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, the third-century BCE epic Greek poet who, writing in the Hellenistic period, became a source for Virgil two centuries later. Battered on all sides by the winds and waves, the Argo sails through straits, risking shipwreck and loss (Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* II. 522-611). Likewise, the dangers countenanced by Ulysses as he passes Charybdis are told by Homer: 'We then sailed on up the narrow strait with wailing. For on one side lay Scylla and on the other divine Charybdis terribly sucked down the salt water of the sea. Verily whenever she belched it forth, like a cauldron on a great fire she would seethe and bubble in utter turmoil, and high overhead the spray would fall on the tops of both the cliffs. But as often as she sucked down the salt water of the sea, within she could all be seen in utter turmoil, and round about the rock roared terribly, while beneath the earth appeared black with sand; and pale fear seized my men.' (Hom. *Od.* XII. 235-244, tr. A.T. Murray).[2]

In the Homeric and Apollonian versions, the sea journeys are undertaken by warrior heroes seeking a home that is theirs by birthright. Milton inverts the model, so that Satan, the antihero, leaves an infernal home that he has willed to land on a foreign shore. The perils he endures along the way are illusory because God does not block his ascent from hell, nor wishes to do so. Satan's wreckage is not risked by the journey upward but by a self-willed refusal to continue the passage all the way to heaven. The arduous obstacles which stand in the path of any heavenly ascent are imposed by the self. Jason and Ulysses are beset by foes not of their own making, whereas Satan's foe is not God himself but his own stubborn refusal to submit to God's will. The obstacles in his way are all self-contrived. The blocks to Satan's ascent exist in Satan's mind. Because the imagery is Classical, it is allusive and not real. In

[1] The classic treatment of Zeus and freewill in the *Iliad* is P.E. Eberhard, *Das Schicksal als poetische Idee bei Homer* (Tübingen, 1923). For a more recent development of Eberhard's discussion, see E. Wong, 'The harmony of fixed fate and free will in the *Iliad*', *Antichthon* 36 (2002), pp. 1-18.

[2] ἔνθεν μὲν Σκύλλη, ἐτέρωθι δὲ δῖα Χάρυβδις/ δεινὸν ἀνερροίβδησε θαλάσσης ἁλμυρὸν ὕδωρ./ ἦ τοι ὅτ' ἐξεμέσειε, λέβης ὡς ἐν πυρὶ πολλῷ/ πᾶσ' ἀναμορμύρεσκε κυκωμένη, ὑψόσε δ' ἄχνη/ ἄκροισι σκοπέλοισιν ἐπ' ἀμφοτέροισιν ἔπιπτεν·/ ἀλλ' ὅτ' ἀναβρόξειε θαλάσσης ἁλμυρὸν ὕδωρ,/ πᾶσ' ἔντοσθε φάνεσκε κυκωμένη, ἀμφὶ δὲ πέτρη/ δεινὸν ἐβεβρύχει, ὑπένερθε δὲ γαῖα φάνεσκε/ ψάμμῳ κυανέῃ· τοὺς δὲ χλωρὸν δέος ᾕρει./ ἡμεῖς μὲν πρὸς τὴν ἴδομεν δείσαντες ὄλεθρον·

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the Christian worldview which *Paradise Lost* enshrines, all bars to God are self-manufactured. Towards the end of the third book, Satan comes within glimpse of heaven to look upon its radiance and to reflect bitterly on what he has lost but cannot will himself to enter. The bar to entry for those under the sentence of damnation are imposed not by God but by the damned themselves.[1]

Satan's momentary glimpse of heaven alludes to images from Revelation (21:19): 'The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald,'. Milton echoes: 'But now at last the sacred influence/ Of light appears, and from the walls of Heav'n/ Shoots farr into the bosom of dim Night/ A glimmering dawn; here Nature first begins/ Her fardest verge, and Chaos to retire/ As from her outmost works a brok'n foe/ With tumult less and with less hostile din,/ That Satan with less toil, and now with ease/ Wafts on the calmer wave by dubious light/ And like a weather-beaten Vessel holds/ Gladly the Port, though Shrouds and Tackle torn;/ Or in the emptier waste, resembling Air,/ Weighs his spread wings, at leasure to behold/ Farr off th' Empyreal Heav'n, extended wide/ In circuit, undetermind square or round,/ With Opal Towrs and Battlements adorn'd/ Of living Saphire, once his native Seat;/ And fast by hanging in a golden Chain/ This pendant world, in bigness as a Starr/ Of smallest Magnitude close by the Moon./ Thither full fraught with mischievous revenge,/ Accurst, and in a cursed hour he hies.' (II. 1041-1055). Milton closes the second book with a heavenly vision. Like Ulysses, whose native home is tantalisingly close as he reaches the shores of Phaeacia, Satan's long-lost home, to which he will never return, is now in sight. The difference is that though he regrets the loss, he desires no return. When Ulysses returns to Ithaca, he must fight adversaries to re-establish his kingship.[2] Were Satan ever to re-enter heaven, he would need to overcome himself and his pretences to kingship and acknowledge a higher sovereign. For Ulysses and Jason, their journeys, though hard, are worth the undertaking. For Satan, the journey can only be undertaken if he renounces parity with the Almighty. The worst and insurmountable obstacle he faces is to give up his claim to kingship. He is the very negation of the Classical prototype.

Paradise Lost starts in hell. For most of the first two books, the imagery is dismal. It is not until the end of Book II that Milton gives his reader any glimpse of heaven. When he does, it is that of jewelled splendour, not wholly unlike the image of Pandemonium. The jewels are, however, celestial and not earthly, as implied by the epithet 'empyreal'. The concept originates with Neoplatonic philosophers of the fourth and fifth centuries, including Proclus the Successor and the extreme Neoplatonist Iamblichus, and refers to that composed of spiritual, not material, substance.[3] The adjective, linked etymologically to fire, is used at various points in the poem to relate to the substance of the soul. Heaven, like hell, is linked in imagery to fire, but here, this relates to the gleam that shines from its turrets and battlements, not to searing, hellish fire that consumes the soul. The treasures of Milton's heaven are spiritual, not earthly, unlike the dross that bejewels Satan's palace in Book I. Satan cannot bear to look. For him,

[1] On self-damnation in Christian theology and the competing doctrines of Catholic quietism and hyper-Calvinist self-denial, see S.R. Munzer, 'Self-abandonment and self-denial: Quietism, Calvinism, and the prospect of hell', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.4 (2005), pp. 747-781.

[2] On the moral importance of Ithaca in the *Odyssey*, see A. Edwards, 'Homer's ethical geography: Country and city in the *Odyssey*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 123 (1993), pp. 27-78.

[3] Procl. *Theol. Plat.* 4.39; Iambl. *Myst.* 7.2; Lyd. *Mens.* 4.22.

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the mission is not to heaven but to earth, where he will claim new victims. God does not bar his way. Like the angels, the Almighty does not deny His human creatures freewill. God will prevail, but the terms on which the spiritual battle must be fought will be determined by Satan's first successes in Eden. If Satan wins in the short term, divine victory will come at a heavier price.

III. *Paradise Lost*: Book III.

Milton's theological commitments are made explicit in the third book of *Paradise Lost*. In the first two, Satan acts with full freedom and exults in his new-found liberty. God does not predestine sin or evil. From the Reformation, Protestant theology was split over this intractable issue. Though wavering over the course of his theological development, Martin Luther, in the Augustinian tradition in which he was raised, had fixated on Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, in which the analogy is drawn between the God's creatures and the potter's vessel.[1] Drawing on Exodus 33:19, where God proclaims 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion', Paul supplies his own exegesis of Divine Grace. At Romans 9:16-18, he states: 'It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.' The allusion to Pharoah comes from Exodus 9:16, where God hardens the heart of the ruler of Egypt to pursue the children of Israel through the desert and the Red Sea. Aware of the potential for an evil God, Paul expounds further: 'One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?" But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"[2] Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?' (Romans 9: 19-21). God's will, states Paul, is irresistible. Some have been created to be preserved, others to be discarded. Humans are no more able to challenge divine will than the vessel that the potter created can question the will of the potter.[3]

These portions of Pauline scripture became the theological bedrock of religious dispute in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries among rival Protestant sects. More moderate interpreters, in the tradition of St Augustine a thousand years earlier, stressed Single Predestination, whereby God chooses some for Divine Election and leaves the rest to determine their spiritual destiny.[4] During the second wave of the Reformation between 1541 and 1564, the Reformer Calvin insisted on Double Predestination, whereby God predetermines the destiny of all angelic and human souls, some for salvation, others

[1] On the influence of Augustinian theology on the development of Luther's ideas, see D. MacCullough, *The Reformation: A History* (London, 2003), pp. 103-152.
[2] This echoes Isaiah 29:16; 45:9.
[3] For a broader discussion of the evolution of the theology of Predestination, see M. Leavering, *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* (Oxford, 2011).
[4] Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*. On the development of Augustine's thought, see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000).

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perdition.[1] Calvinist doctrine instructs the Westminster Confession of 1646, which states: 'By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and fore-ordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto; and all to the praise of His glorious grace.'[2] The radical doctrine of Double Predestination effectively denies any of God's creatures freewill. Those who are saved are saved because God has foreordained it; those damned are damned by foreordination.[3]

The objections to this harsh theology are obvious. If God foreordains damnation for the Reprobate, then reprobate sinners can make no decision between good or evil. If so, the myriad verses of Holy Scripture which issue warnings against evildoing are emptied of meaning. To take the Calvinist doctrine in its most literal expression, when Scripture prescribes good works, at most it *describes* the actions of the Elect. Divine prescriptions become mere descriptions of the behaviour of those whom God has elected to salvation. All angelic and human will is bound by an eternal and immutable decree issued by God before the creation of all worlds. As Milton's century progressed, the moral impossibility of this became ever more apparent. Calvinism itself was divided between the Infralapsarians, like Calvin and Turretin, who spoke of the freedom of Satan and Adam but of the bondage of human will after the Fall, a theological structure later canonised at the Synod of Dordt (Dordrecht) in 1618-1619, which defined mainstream Calvinism, whilst Supralapsarians, like Beza and Zanchius, spoke of Adam's sin as itself foreordained.[4] In *Paradise Lost*, Milton rejects both alternatives. The purpose of the third book, in which we get the first glimpse of God in the first two Persons of the Trinity, is to endorse Arminianism, which rejects both Infralapsarian and Supralapsarian understandings of divine foreordination. Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), a Dutch Protestant, in many polemical works against which the Synod of Dordt was chiefly directed, had rejected Calvinist teaching and stressed freewill.[5] The content of *Paradise Lost* III signals in clear terms that Milton's thinking was Arminian.

Paradise Lost was conceived in the theological controversies of the seventeenth century in which Milton was writing. Protestant England was disputatious, and in the implications of Milton's first and greatest epic militate against many entrenched theological teachings of his day. Milton's God, in heavenly parley with His Only-Begotten Son, utters: 'As

[1] On Calvin's theology, see MacCulloch, *Reformation*, pp. 207-261.
[2] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, III ('Of God's Eternal Decree'), 3-5. For predestination to salvation, see Rom. 8:30; Eph. 1:4, 9, 11; 1 Thes. 5:9; 2 Tim. 1:9. For predestination to damnation, see Rom. 9:11, 13, 16; Eph. 1:4, 9. On predestination as glorifying God, see Eph. 1: 6, 12.
[3] On the evolution of Calvin's thought, see U. Zahnd, 'Calvin, Calvinism, and medieval thought', in B. Gordon and C.R. Trueman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Calvin and Calvinism* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 26-42.
[4] On the theological distinctions, see K.J. Howell, *The Order of Divine Decrees: A Comparative Analysis of Infralapsarianism and Supralapsarianism* (online, 2024).
[5] On Arminius and his relevance in the development of Protestant theology, see K. D. Stranglin and T. H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford, 2012).

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my Eternal purpose hath decreed:/ Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will,/ Yet not of will in him, but grace in me/ Freely voutsaft; once more I will renew/ His lapsed powers, though forfeit and enthrall'd/ By sin to foul exorbitant desires;/ Upheld by me, yet once more he shall stand/ On even ground against his mortal foe,/ By me upheld, that he may know how frail/ His fall'n condition is, and to me ow/ All his deliv'rance, and to none but me./ Some I have chosen of peculiar grace/ Elect above the rest; so is my will:' (III. 172-184). The reference to the frailty of human will bears a Calvinist resonance, but the matter is nuanced in the lines that follow: 'The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warnd/ Thir sinful state, and to appease betimes/ Th' incensed Deitie, while offerd grace/ Invites; for I will cleer thir senses dark,/ What may suffice, and soft'n stonie hearts/ To pray, repent, and bring obedience due.' (III. 185-190). Milton here rejects Calvinist teaching. Those not among the divinely elect are nevertheless not completely reprobate either. Some are elected for salvation, whose wills are fixed by the will of the Almighty. The rest are left to choose. The Non-Elect is not abandoned to everlasting reprobation but given possibility of redemption by receipt of Holy Scripture and the Divine Word. This compromise theology is firmly Arminian and whilst endorsing Single Predestination, rejects the harsher teachings of the Synod of Dordt.

Resonating from these lines is a rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of Total Depravity, one of the Five Points, or Canons, of Calvinism as formulated at Dordt.[1] According to that formulation, humankind after the Fall became so depraved that it could not reflect on its own iniquity. There are echoes in other Miltonic writings, most memorably in *Comus*, where temptation causes those who succumb 'To roule with pleasure in a sensual sty' (line 77). Milton alludes to the witch Circe in the tenth book of the *Odyssey*, who drugs Ulysses' companions and turns them into swine (Hom. *Od.* X. 210-273), but with a crucial twist. In Homer's version, the horror of their changed condition as pigs is that they retain the minds of men, but in Milton's transposition in *Comus*, they have no consciousness of their fallen state. In *Paradise Lost*, fallen humanity partially, but incompletely, knows its fallen condition.[2] In the Hebrew Bible, God, through the Law and the prophetic interventions that follow, speaks to a fallen Israel to warn it of its iniquity and to instruct it to turn away to righteousness. In later Christian exegesis, this implies that through moral perception is darkened by the Fall of Adam, it is not completely blinded by it.[3] Humans, though fallen, are not incapable of knowing their fallen state or hearing divine instruction to turn. This is incompatible with Calvinist Total Depravity, which states that humankind is so tarnished by sin that it cannot, except by Divine Grace, turn from its evil ways.[4] Milton's theology is steeped in the Arminian challenge to

[1] For a collection of recent scholarly literature on the Synod of Dordt (Dordrecht), see H. van den Belt, K.-W. de Jong and W. van Vlastuin (eds.), *A Landmark in Turbulent Times: The Meaning and Relevance of the Synod of Dordt 1618–1619* (Göttingen, 2022).

[2] On the distorted human self-awareness and *Paradise Lost* as a moral education for its reader through the reader's own self-interpreted failures, see S. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA, 1967).

[3] On the vexed theological question of whether fallen humanity perceives it fallen state, see C. G. Woznicki, '"Begin at the beginning": Method in christological anthropology and T. F. Torrance's fallen human nature view,' *Perichoresis* 19.2 (2021), pp. 21–41.

[4] The Calvinist doctrine of Total Depravity rules out not all human self-awareness but only saving self-knowledge, spiritual understanding, and the ability to interpret rightly man's fallen condition. The doctrine bases itself on Eph. 2:1, which states that men are 'spiritually dead'. The doctrine teaches epistemic distortion, not total annihilation, and claims that Divine Grace cannot be received without the predestinating intervention of the Almighty. On the origins of this doctrine in the theology of Augustine,

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Calvinism. Both angels and humans are free to turn from sinfulness if they by their own volition will it.

Whilst steeped in dialogue with religious disputes of his day, Milton in the third book of *Paradise Lost* draws heavily on Classical literature. Book III opens with a new invocation, this time of a celestial source, to enable him to speak with prophetic authority about the nature of God's will. His narrative has left the halls of Satan, ascended through the middle regions of Chaos, and reached the heights of heaven: 'Thee I re-visit now with bolder wing,/ Escap't the Stygian Pool, though long detain'd/ In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight/ Through utter and through middle darkness borne/ With other notes then to th' Orphean Lyre/ I sung of Chaos and Eternal Night,/ Taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down/ The dark descent, and up to reascend,/ Though hard and rare: thee I revisit safe,/ And feel thy sovran vital Lamp;' (III. 13-22). The descent to hell and re-assent to the light recalls the katabasis of Orpheus, related in the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who ventures downward to rescue Eurydice from Hades, almost successful but for his fateful backward glance, whereupon she is lost from his grasp. It resonates too with the katabasis of Odysseus in *Odyssey* XI and Aeneas in *Aeneid* VI.[1] On Milton's transposition, the hero returns safe to the world above, but he is himself the hero who descends and re-ascends. Katabatic guidance in the *Odyssey* is provided by the blind seer Teiresias, and in the *Aeneid* by the Sibyl. The Homeric descent to the Underworld is told by the main protagonist, who relates his wanderings to Alcinous, the king of the Phaeacians. In the *Aeneid*, the katabasis is related by the poet in Virgil's own authorial voice. In both versions, the heroes return enlightened about their future mission. In the katabatic tradition of Dante, Milton imagines himself as the new hero who descends to hell and returns enlightened.[2] The most important difference is that Milton's vision is of a hell of falsehood. Unlike Aeneas, whose descent to the Underworld in *Aeneid* VI marks the culmination of prophetic enlightenment, Milton's journey to and from hell marks the beginning, not the end, of his spiritual vision.

The Orphic resonance carries another poetic meaning. By the gift of music, Orpheus woos the Hades and Persephone to release his dead bride Eurydice, dead by the bite of a viper (Virg. *Georg.* IV. 457-459; Ov. *Met.* X.1-10; Apollod. *Bibl.* I.3.2). In the Orphic tradition, the artist is so powerful that he can overcome the bonds of death. Orpheus is, however, also a failed liberator. The lover comes to free his beloved from damnation but, through his own weaknesses and failings, cannot keep the sacred covenant whereby he must leave with Eurydice safely from Hades. In Milton's conception, art serves a goal higher than itself. It might describe in sublime and poetic language the story of fall and redemption, but art itself does not have a redeeming potency. Redemption is achieved not by the artist but by the divine Redeemer. Orpheus loves Eurydice and almost redeems her through his music. Christ loves His Church as a groom loves the bride. Human redemption is fulfilled by Christ the groom,

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see G. Davidson, 'The exhausted self and the Grace of God: Augustine, Total Depravity and Christian anthropology', in *Perichoresis* 24.3 (2026), pp. 20-27.

[1] On the katabasis tradition in Classical literature, see P. Bonnechère and G. Cursaru, 'La catabase dans le monde grec entre son passé et son avenir', *Les Études classiques* 83. 1-4 (2015), pp. 3-13; *Katábasis dans la tradition littéraire et religieuse de la Grèce ancienne. Actes du Colloque de Montréal et de Québec (2-5 mai 2014), Vol. I*. *Les Études classiques* 83 (2015), special issue: Société des Études Classiques (Montreal and Quebec, 2015).

[2] On Dante's katabasis as a poetic experiment in moral psychology, see T. Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, 1992). For a discussion of how Dante's vision of hell is instructed by Thomist theology, see D. Turner, *Dante the Theologian* (Cambridge, 2013).

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who perfects His bridal Church through His generous, self-emptying gift of Divine Grace. As Orpheus leads Eurydice, Christ leads the Church, but the transformative workings of divine favour operate differently. In the Classical tradition, Orpheus transforms the gods of the Underworld, not Eurydice, his bride. In the mythical version, Eurydice possesses little agency. In the Christian tradition, the Church, the bride, is the channel but not the source of Divine Grace. Through obedience to Christ, the groom, who sacrifices Himself, the pilgrim Church is given agency to dispense salvation.[1]

The metaphor of bride and groom has a key significance in the New Testament to describe the binding relationship between Christ and His Holy Church.[2] In the *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Paul writes: 'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant Church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.' (Eph. 5: 25-27). Paul writes to the Christian community at Corinth: 'I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him.' (2 Cor. 11:2). Revelation declares: 'Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.' (Rev. 19:7-8). The marriage rite of the 1662 Prayer Book likens the relationship between husband and wife to that which subsists between Christ and His Holy Church.[3] In Christian imagery, Christ is the groom who purifies the Church from sin and death through His One Oblation on Calvary.[4] Orpheus's sacrifice for his bride Eurydice is to journey to the Underworld. He fails in the mission and pays no real price. Unlike the Bridegroom in Christian doctrine, he is ultimately faithless to the covenants that bind him.

The katabatic tropes in *Paradise Lost* negate the Classical imagery on which they draw. The heroes who journey to Hades are false heroes. The visions they receive when they get there instruct them about a mission they must fulfil, whereas the vision received by Milton is of a mission already fulfilled by God. Just like the false hell which Milton in lurid language has depicted in the first two books, the katabasis is a figment of the mind without literal application. In Classical tradition, hell is a place for heroes to descend for enlightenment. In

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[1] This would be a Catholic, not a Protestant, understanding of the Church, as defined in response to the challenges of the Reformation at the Council of Trent (1543). In the Protestant understanding, salvation is bestowed through Grace alone, whereas in the Catholic, which Milton did not share, the Church acts as the instrument of Grace. For a recent overview of the differences and overlaps between Catholic and Protestant soteriology, see E. Watson, 'Differential Grace: Tracing the affective salience of second-order theological reflection', *Harvard Theological Review* 119.3 (2026), pp. 500-526.

[2] On the bridal metaphor of the Church in the New Testament, see N. Schnell, *The Bride of Christ: A Metaphor for the Church. Systematical Exegetical Analysis* (Münster, 2020).

[3] The 1662 Prayer Book transposes the words of Cranmer in the 1549 version: 'Forasmuch as the holy Scripture doth teach us, that the mariage in the first institution was ordeined for a remedie against sinne, and for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the feare and nurture of the Lord, and to the prayse of God: and that it is commended of Sainct Paule to be honorable among all men: and that it is a figure of the godly and spirituall mariage betwene Christ and His Churche…'

[4] The Protestant Reformers used the One Oblation argument, based on Hebrews 7:27; 9:26-28, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to argue that the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, or Mass, which invoked the Real Presence through transubstantiation, was a theological abomination. Catholic apologists reply that the eucharistic mystery enacts, not replaces, Christ's self-oblation on Calvary, and that that transubstantiation safeguards the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice while enabling sacramental participation. For further discussion from a Catholic perspective, see R. Nutt, 'The application of Christ's One Oblation: Charles Journet on the Mass, the Real Presence, and the sacrifice of the cross', *Nova et Vetera* 8.3 (2010), pp. 665-681.

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Paradise Lost, hell has no spiritual illumination. Milton says: 'Yet not the more/ Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt/ Cleer Spring, or shadie Grove, or Sunnie Hill,/ Smit with the love of sacred song; but chief/ Thee Sion and the flowrie Brooks beneath/ That wash thy hallowd feet, and warbling flow,/ Nightly I visit: nor somtimes forget/ Those other two equal'd with me in Fate,/ So were I equal'd with them in renown,/ Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides,/ And Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old.' (III. 26-36). The unifying theme is blindness. The four seers referenced from Classical tradition were blind. Milton, whose own literal blindness by the year 1652, as attested in his *Second Defence to the English People* (1654), is the referential point.[1] In Greek literature, physical blindness is the flipside of prophetic vision. Those who see into the future can see with their minds but not with their eyes. In Greek, the etymology of the verb 'to know' (εἰδέναι) lies with the Sanskrit वेद (*véda*) and has Indo-European cognates with the verb 'to see' (*videre*) in Latin and 'to know' (*wissen*) in German. Vision and knowledge are interlinked, which is why those with an excess of mental vision are frequently denied physical sight.[2]

Teiresias is first attested in the *Odyssey*. Circe instructs Odysseus to consult Teiresias in Hades (Hom. *Od.* X. 466-574). He prophesies Poseidon's fury, the cattle of Helios, the Titan god of the Sun, the deaths of the Suitors on Ithaca, and the final reconciliation with Penelope, his wife (Hom. *Od.* XI. 90-149). When his companions foolishly consume the cattle, Odysseus recalls Tiresias's warnings (Hom. *Od.* XII. 260-328). Later in Ithaca, when Penelope puts him to the test, Odysseus recalls Teiresias's prophesy (Hom. *Od.* XXIII. 163-207). The late antique librarian and collector of mythical material, Apollodorus, catalogues various traditions of how Teiresias went blind. The first is that his blindness was a punishment for revealing kept secrets, the second that he saw the goddess Athena (Minerva) naked, and the third that he judged that women enjoy sexual intercourse more than men, when in horror Hera blinded him (Apollod. *Bibl.* III.6.7). The tradition that Zeus compensated Teiresias with the gift of prophesy originates with Hesiod (*Mel.* fr. 4.1-8). The tradition that he was blinded for seeing Athena bathing originates with the third-century BCE Alexandrian poet Callimachus (*Hymns* V. 57-67, 81, 106). As the tradition later develops among Roman authors, Ovid tells that Teiresias became a woman for seven years after striking mating snakes and later reverted to manhood, whereupon Juno blinded him over the sex dispute, and Jupiter granted him prophetic gifts (Ov. *Met.* III. 316-338). In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Teiresias performs a key role in prophesying the guilt of Oedipus, who killed his own father and married his own mother, and in the *Antigone*, he warns of divine anger.[3] Like Teiresias, Milton is blind. Like Teiresias, he foretells a fall, in this case of Adam. Like the Teiresias of Sophocles, he discerns guilt, but like the Teiresias of Homer, he foretells homecoming and reconciliation. By compounding Classical images, Milton through the figure of Teiresias programmatically prophesies impending doom and eventual joy.

Phineus is a blind seer. According to Apollonius of Rhodes, the poet of the *Argonautica*, Zeus punished him for revealing a hidden prophesy (Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* II. 178-

[1] On the connection between blindness and sublimity of vision among Milton's republican contemporaries, see D. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 2.

[2] On the semantic shifts, see E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris, 1969).

[3] On the blindness of Teiresias, see A. Schutz, 'Teiresias, or our knowledge of future events', *Social Research* 26.1 (1959), pp. 71-89.

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300). The librarian Apollodorus records conflicting traditions that Phineus was blinded by Poseidon and Boreas, the North Wind god (Apollod. *Bibl.* I.9.21; III.15.2-3). The first reference in Classical literature is in Hesiod (fr. 1.19-49), who relates that Phineus was tortured by the Harpies for revealing the future. According to Sophocles, Phineus' sons were blinded by their stepmother (Soph. *Ant.* 966-967). The Augustan historian Diodorus of Sicily, writing in Greek, records a version that Phineus was blinded because he had blinded his own sons (Diod. IV.44). The linkage of Phineus with the monstrous birds, the Harpies, appears in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Virg. *Aen.* III.209-219). Ovid mentions him in the context of the Argonautic tradition (Ov. *Met.* VII.2-4). Like Teiresias, Phineus' blindness is an agony that must be borne in exchange for some unique gift.[1] For Milton, this takes on a Christian significance. Divine gifts come with a price. The Gift of Grace, freely given, entails a sacrifice, but in the Christian theology, the sacrifice is paid not by the beneficiary but by the divine benefactor. For Milton, the agony of blindness is one that he must bear as the channel of divinely inspired verse. This, of course, is figurative, but in the Christian understanding, the agony of redemption is borne by the one who redeems, not by those redeemed. Loss of sight is an agony imparted by God, but unlike the prophets and sages of the Greeks, it comes not as a punishment. The man healed of blindness at John 9 is, in the Christian understanding, marked out for Divine Election, an instrument for the revelation of Divine Grace. Experience of suffering brings Milton closer to divine suffering. Through pain and loss, his oneness with the suffering described in his poetry is deepened and enhanced.[2]

Classical and Biblical allusion continues throughout the third book. Satan reaches the threshold of heaven, tricking Uriel to reveal the location of Paradise. When Satan lands on earth, he wanders the surface encountering the vanities of humankind-to-be: 'Hither of ill-joynd Sons and Daughters born/ First from the ancient World those Giants came/ With many a vain exploit, though then renownd:/ The builders next of Babel on the Plain/ Of Sennaar, and still with vain designe/ New Babels, had they wherewithall, would build:/ Others came single; hee who to be deemd/ A God, leap'd fondly into Aetna flames,/ Empedocles, and hee who to enjoy/ Plato's Elysium, leap'd into the Sea,/ Cleombrotus, and many more too long,/ Embryo's and Idiots, Eremits and Friers/ White, Black and Grey, with all thir trumperie.' (III. 464-475). This recalls the corruptions that followed the Fall of Adam: 'The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.' (Genesis 6:4). The Tower of Babel relates to human arrogance in the aftermath of the Flood, when its inhabitants resist the command of God to go forth and multiply (Genesis 11:1-9). Christian and Jewish exegesis understand the symbol of Babel differently. In the Christian tradition, Babel is seen as an outgrowth of sinful pride and a warning against architectural aspiration, whereas the Jewish tradition regards Babel in multiple ways.[3] Empedocles was a presocratic philosopher who, according to legend, leapt into the mouth of the volcano Etna to prove that he was a god.[4]

[1] For a wider discussion of Phineus as a literary character in Ovid and Apollonius, see B.D. McPhee, 'Phineus' perpetual night: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* and Apollonius, *Argonautica* 2.178–497', *Hermathena* 195 (2013), pp. 55-70.

[2] In the *Second Defence*, Milton states in self-reference that ''[b]ecause of no offence, therefore, does it seem that this man who was godlike and eager to enlighten the human race was deprived of his eyesight, as were a great number of philosophers'.

[3] See D. Rabinowitz, 'Depicting difference: The Tower of Babel and the language of sacred art', *The Seforim Blog*, October 21, 2025.

[4] Diog. Laet. VIII.67-69; Hor. *Odes* I.28.4-6; Luc. *Dial.* 3; Sud. s.v. *Empedocles.*

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Cleombrotus, meanwhile, supposedly leapt into the sun after reading Plato's *Phaedo*.[1] The friars and hermits refer to holy persons of the Middle Ages whom the Protestant Reformation had consigned to history and were regarded by Milton's world with religious disdain. All are images of worldly vanity. All presage the future consequences of Adam's vainglorious pride.

Satan climbs the golden stairs to heaven to view the world beneath that he will claim for himself: 'then from Pole to Pole/ He views in bredth, and without longer pause/ Down right into the Worlds first Region throws/ His flight precipitant, and windes with ease/ Through the pure marble Air his oblique way/ Amongst innumerable Starrs, that shon/ Stars distant, but nigh hand seemd other Worlds,/ Or other Worlds they seemd, or happy Iles,/ Like those Hesperian Gardens fam'd of old,/ Fortunate Fields, and Groves and flourie Vales,' (III. 560-569). Hesiod in the *Theogony* references the Hesperides among the daughters of the Night (Hes. *Theog.* 210-264). Apollodorus relates that the Gardens of the Hesperides is where the eleventh of Heracles' labours took place (Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.11-12). The Argonauts encounter the Hesperides at the spring made by Heracles (Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 4.1393-1536). The Greek geographer Pausanias, writing in the second century CE, gives further details about their locational significance (Paus. VI.19.1-15). The Hesperides signify the farthest reaches of the known world, where heroes can reach only by divine assistance.[2] By transcending the Hesperides, Satan has passed the known boundaries of Classical myth. The story of Satan no longer can be told in figurative language taken from Classical authors. Now, the story of the cosmic battle must be told in Biblical terms. Later, at line 603, Milton alludes to 'volatil Hermes', the messenger of the gods who rides on winged sandals. Hermes is the Classical prototype of the Son of God, who is God's messenger. He crosses boundaries and delivers divine instructions to mortals, but unlike the Son of God, he cannot bring salvation. Hermes, like the other gods of myth, is false.

Satan does not enter heaven. He parleys with the archangel Uriel, whom he tricks, to reveal the path to Eden. It is on earth, not in heaven, that the renewed battle between Satan and God will now unfold. The cosmic battle between heaven and hell, told later in *Paradise Lost*, is related in the form of a flashback. Unlike Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the descent to the Underworld presages physical wars to come, or Homer's *Odyssey*, where the descent to hades foreshadows the battle which Odysseus must fight against the Suitors when he returns to Ithaca, the poetic visitation of hell in *Paradise Lost* is less of a foretelling of strife to come than a reflection upon the infernal consequences of unconquerable sinful pride. The third book ends the first quarter of *Paradise Lost*. With its closure, Milton moves into a different literary universe. Classical allusion plays a vital role in the first three books to symbolise a world from which Milton, as the epic author of a Christian story, must move. Classical allusion does not disappear in what remains of the epic but becomes less prominent. Milton does not despise his Classical models. For him, Classical literature is the poetic basis and inspiration. As a Christian and a Protestant, his understanding of scriptural sufficiency does not discourage him from drawing upon non-Biblical material. Milton's use of Classical, as well as Biblical, material amounts to more than erudite posturing. All poets in the Western tradition, beginning with Homer and Hesiod, allude to what has gone before them. All authors borrow and reshape

[1] Callim. *Epig.* VII.471; Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* 1.74; Cic. *Rep.*6.15; Lact. *Inst.* III.18.

[2] On the topographical significance of the Hesperides in Classical literature, see the foundational article of A. R. Littlewood, 'The Garden of the *Hesperides*: Ancient sources and literary treatment', *Greece & Rome* 13 (1966), pp. 1-15.

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inherited material for a new purpose. As Quintilian noted, that is the foundation of originality and literary inventiveness. For Milton, the art of allusion has a greater utility still. In Milton's poetic world, Classical literature embodies that which was informed by a false theological doctrine. That does not mean that Classical allusion was to be abandoned, but that when used, Milton needed to subordinate it to a higher purpose which, for him, was to proclaim Christian truth.

The Christian truth, as Milton understood it, was that hell is a spiritual, not a physical, state.[1] Milton's vision stands in sharp counterpoint to Dante's some three centuries earlier, in whose *Inferno* the pangs of hell are ordered symmetrically according to the nature of each sin and each offender. Those confined to Dante's hell are punished proportionately to their sins. In Dante's hell, there is no hope of release. Milton's Protestant vision is different. For Milton, the Christian hell, unlike the Underworld of the Greeks, and unlike the schematised eschatology of the medieval poets, is a self-wrought artifice.[2] Fire, brimstone, and worms are powerful images of warning, but physical torments in the afterlife are images of spiritual agonies which human language can only ever portray poetically and imaginatively. The entire vision of hell in the first quarter of *Paradise Lost* may, indeed, be an imagined falsehood. Hell is the domain of false gods and demons, and so the implausibility of its associated imagery is deliberate. The chaotic disordering of Milton's hell could not be more different from the structured ordering of Dante's. Milton does not operate on the belief that such a place exists in real space and time. For Milton, as well as for the English Protestant tradition which he has shaped, hell is a state of mind, a conflicted place of mental and spiritual torment in which those chained up within its cavernous recesses confine themselves by wilful free choice. God may pronounce the banishing sentence on the sinful, but hell's pangs are conceived by its wilful occupants.

[1] On hell as a spiritual, not a physical or corporeal, suffering, see B. Harris, 'The problem of hell, efficacious Grace, and skeptical infernalism' *AGATHEOS – European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2.1 (2025), pp. 106–139.

[2] On hell as a self-imposed state of obdurate freedom, see H.D. Egan, S.J. '"Hell": The mystery of eternal love and eternal obduracy', *Theological Studies* 75.1 (2014), pp. 52-73.

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