

The concepts of justice and free will



Two of the most influential pieces of epic literature ever written—John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*— have much more in common than it might first appear. Upon further examination of both the epics, it becomes clear that Milton seems to be engaging upon a sort of mission to create the next great Christian epic and to re-define and renew some of the themes and sacred truths that Dante discussed in *The Divine Comedy*. One of these prevalent truths was the role of justice, both in the realm of humanity and in the structure of the divine universe.

It's clear that the two novels have significantly distinct definitions and roles of justice. Throughout Dante's epic, justice is represented as perfect, divine, and infallible, especially in the realms of *Paradiso*. *Paradise Lost*, on the other hand, presents the role of justice as much more diverse and complex in the role of humanity, especially since the book seems to continually present God as a tyrannical, omnipotent figure. If God is so just and so all knowing, the reader asks, then why does he allow man to fall? Or Satan to give in to the temptation of power? To answer these questions, due respect must be paid to one commonly overlooked yet immensely important character—the Son of God. The Son represents the compromise that Milton reaches between two perplexing theological truths: the omnipotence and all-powerfulness of God's will, and the necessity of free will in the existence of humanity. By constantly portraying the Son as separate and distinct from God, and through the Son's various demonstrations of mercy and love, Milton succeeds in capturing these two theological truths. Therefore the justice of God—in order to be understood by the minds of humanity, and not

to be viewed as a sort of tyrannical mystical law—is distributed through the loving and more humane hands of the Son.

From the very beginning of the epic, the eternity of God's justice is clearly highlighted in the issue of the Angelic war. When Satan awakes in the pits of Hell, Milton writes of the banishment of the fallen angels, saying " Such place eternal justice had prepared/ For those rebellious, here their prison ordained/ In utter darkness" (1. 70-72). By highlighting such a pre-ordained and omnipotent aspect of God's character, Milton creates the issue of God's all-powerfulness from the start of his poem. The reader of Book 1 is caught feeling pity and lament for Satan, and is left wondering how God could seem so tyrannical.

God's omnipotence and tyrannical nature, however, are soon forgotten in Michael's recount of the Angelic war in his story to Adam. The text makes it quite evident that, even before the angelic war began, God knew that Satan would fall into temptation and lead his comrades into war. Milton points this out, saying " And from within the golden lamps that burn/ Nightly before Him saw without their light/ Rebellion rising" (5. 713-715), therefore emphasizing the knowledge that God had before the war had even occurred. By doing so, Milton once again raises the question of whether God's intentions are tyrannical, or if grace and love even exist in God's eternal justice.

Justice's role in the war, however, becomes relevant in the very following lines when God, " smiling to His only Son," (5. 718) informs Him of the impending war and of how He (the Son) is going to stop it. When God gives the Son the command to halt the war in Book 6, His words reveal the

necessity of the Son's role in distributing justice. " Into Thee such virtue and grace/ Immense I have transfused," God says, showing that, by becoming the separate entity of the Son, God ends the Angelic war not through stern punishment and complete obliteration, but by the " virtue and grace" of the Son (6. 703-704). Although banishment to Hell may not seem to be the most merciful depiction of God's love through justice, it ultimately represents His care for the importance of freedom throughout the universe. The expansiveness of God's will seems to have no boundaries throughout the epic, except for in regards to one aspect—the importance of free will. The Angels, instead of being completely unmade or obliterated, are sent to a place where, although they may be in eternal punishment, can continue to have free will.

Besides the Angelic war, the other obvious example of God enacting His justice through the love and grace of the Son is through the punishment of man after their fall. Even before the creation of man, God knew of their impending fall. When He sees Satan journeying towards Earth in order to " By some false guile pervert," He recognizes that Satan will succeed, and Man will fall to Satan's temptation and " faithless progeny." (3. 92-96). God's omniscience about the fall of Man may seem to complicate matters regarding their punishment. Knowing quite well that Man sinned due to their own free will, God faces the task of punishing mankind while at the same time paying attention to the fact that He knew of their fall all along. The free will of man was His own creation, so it comes as no surprise that He would feel at least a small portion of responsibility for their fall. Therefore, God sends his Son to demonstrate the mercy and love necessary in order to

enact His justice. Upon sending Him to judge Man, God calls the Son “ Man’s friend, his Mediator,” (10. 60) therefore bringing attention to the Son’s unique role as the loving interpreter of God’s justice to mankind. Even the Son himself notes how he will “ temper so/ Justice with mercy” (10. 80) and hence become God’s instrument for distributing divine justice on Earth.

Besides these two specific examples of God using the son in order to illustrate the loving side of his justice, the Son’s volunteering to save mankind in Book 3 also represents one of the most vivid and touching examples of God enacting His justice through love. As God and the Son sit in Heaven watching Satan journey towards the Earth, their conversation regarding free will and man’s fate becomes an early centerpiece for some of the major themes of the epic. One of the most important themes of this conversation, however, is God’s discussion of how, although God knows that His glory shall excel throughout the universe, he realizes that “ mercy first and last shall brightest shine.” (3. 133). Therefore, God makes the decision to ask which being in all of Heaven would be willing to become mortal to show this mercy, and “ just, th’unjust to save?” (3. 215). It comes as no surprise then, that the only Heavenly being able to perfectly interpret and distribute the justice of God is in fact God himself, or in this case the person of the Son. When the Son volunteers, therefore, God is making the difficult decision not only to save a lesser race through his love, but also to lower himself to the depths of humanity.

God’s sacrificing of himself to save Man proves to be the centerpiece regarding the theme of justice in Paradise Lost. Justice, in the end, is not something determined solely by humans. It is not something distributed

tyrannically by the lone hand of God. Justice, rather, is something much more complex and beautiful: God and Man working together in order to more accurately interpret the Eternal will of God. As Milton demonstrates, God confirmed this idea through His recognition that Man needed the Son to help them in their quest to understand His justice. Without the Son, Milton believes, what more is God than an unjust tyrant? Without His love, Man's interpretation of God's will seems to be a world without free will. Therefore, by presenting the Son as distinctly different from the character of God, Milton is able to do something quite amazing: justice, rather than being formed by the seemingly tyrannical, omnipotent will of God, includes man's free will, and is therefore not purely man nor purely divine, but is instead incarnated through the loving hands of God Himself—in the form of His only Son.

Works Cited

Milton, John, and Gordon Teskey. *Paradise Lost*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. Print.