

Book vii of john milton's paradise lost



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Passage 2 (Paradise Lost VII. 109-130): (Conversation between Raphael & Adam)

Thus Adam his illustrious Guest besought:

And thus the godlike angel answered mild. [110]

This also thy request with caution asked

Obtain: though to recount Almighty works

What words or tongue of Seraph can suffice,

Or heart of man suffice to comprehend?

Yet what thou canst attain, which best may serve [115]

To glorify the Maker, and infer

Thee also happier, shall not be withheld

Thy hearing, such commission from above

I have received, to answer thy desire

Of knowledge within bounds; beyond abstain [120]

To ask, nor let thine own inventions hope

Things not revealed, which th' invisible King,

Only omniscient hath suppressed in Night,

To none communicable in earth or Heaven:

Enough is left besides to search and know. [125]

But knowledge is as food, and needs no less

Her temperance over appetite, to know

In measure what the mind may well contain,

Oppresses else with surfeit, and soon turns

Wisdom to folly, as nourishment to wind. [130]

Book VII of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* portrays Adam's wish to obtain knowledge about the Creation of mankind and Earth, as well as Raphael's attempt to convey such wisdom. The following analysis will mainly focus on a selected passage of their conversation.

In the beginning of the passage, one can observe 'the godlike angel[s]' (*Paradise Lost*, VII, 110) struggle to put God's divine works into words. '[T]he affable Arch-Angel' (VII, 41) wonders 'what words [...] of Seraph can suffice' (113) 'to recount Almighty works' (112). The term 'Seraph' refers to angels and archangels alike. Here, Raphael seems to conclude that no creature, neither angel nor human, is essentially able to truly comprehend divine creation, or put it into words.

The selected passage underlines God's divine superiority with a specific use of language. God's act of Creation is described as 'Almighty works' (112) which can be hardly comprehended by anyone except himself. This essentially emphasises the extent of his power and importance. Further, God is titled 'Maker' (116) which is due to the act of Creation itself. According to the Bible, he made Earth and humankind. Moreover, God is named the 'invisible King' (122) which is supposed to emphasise the extent of his power. However, if one looks at historic evidence, kings who failed to be present within their own kingdoms or failed to appear to their people, were usually either loved or failed to keep their position of power. Thus, naming God an 'invisible King' (122) could effectively diminish his importance. Lastly, the difference in writing between 'earth' (124) and 'Heaven' (124) seems to underline that Heaven is superior to Earth. Now, it could be argued that the glorification of God in this passage is due to Raphael's character. Raphael

was supposedly 'one of the seven holy angels'[1] which allowed him to 'enter into the presence'[2] of God. Due to Raphael's close relationship with God, it could be argued that he over-glorifies God by making use of divine language.

The fact that the passage highlights the boundaries between mankind and God is of crucial importance to the wider context of Adam and Eve's Fall. Even though the archangel Raphael has received 'commission from above' (118), i. e. from God in Heaven, to fulfil Adam's request of knowledge, the 'illustrious Guest' (109) can only deliver 'knowledge within bounds' (120) for infinite knowledge is reserved to the Creator himself. In essence, not even the most divine archangels are allowed infinite knowledge, though they are being described as 'godlike' (110). Now, this emphasis on the knowledge boundary could already figure as a hidden warning to Adam, so he will not attempt to achieve forbidden knowledge. This seems to be backed up by Raphael's explicit warning that 'enough is left besides to search and know' (125). Here, Raphael explicitly warns Adam to stay within his creaturely limits and to seek knowledge of everyday life instead.

In the context of Adam and Eve's Fall, one can conclude that Raphael's repeated warnings fail. Adam and Eve fail to acknowledge their boundary and attempt to achieve wisdom reserved to those above humankind.

Raphael's warning to apply 'temperance over appetite' (127) for 'knowledge is as food' (126) is an allusion towards Adam and Eve's pursuit of this forbidden knowledge. They fail to control their physical appetite, as they eat the apple, and they fail to control their mental appetite for knowledge, because they eat from the tree of knowledge. Here, one could also underline

the resemblance with Gluttony, which constitutes one of the seven sins.

Gluttony is referred to as 'intemperate eating'[3] which directly contradicts Raphael's emphasis on temperance, and highlights his failed warning. In this sense, Adam and Eve's sins were both their quest for knowledge and the act of eating the apple.

Lastly, the passage underlines both the importance of knowledge as well as its dangers. Although God encourages Adam in his pursuit of knowledge by sending him the archangel Raphael as informant, the latter also puts forth that wisdom has the ability to turn to folly (130). The angel emphasises that only the knowledge which 'the mind may well contain' (128) is worth pursuing, because all else will result in surfeit. It is worth noting that the term 'surfeit' shares its meaning with gluttony. All in all, the selected passage seems to portray the underlying meaning that knowledge within bounds may be granted to all, whereas the pursuit of infinite, divine knowledge can only result in disappointment and sin.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

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Secondary Sources

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[1]Encyclopaedia Britannica, ' Raphael', [https://www. britannica. com/topic/Raphael-archangel](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Raphael-archangel)[accessed 2nd February 2019].

[2]Ibid.

[3]Alimentarium, ' The sin of gluttony', [https://www. alimentarium. org/en/knowledge/sin-gluttony](https://www.alimentarium.org/en/knowledge/sin-gluttony) [accessed 2nd February 2019].