

# Milton, the Bible, and the Epic of Redemption: A Comparative Study of Paradise Lost and Paradise Regain'd

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## Abstract

This paper offers a comparative study of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674) and *Paradise Regain'd* (1671) in relation to their principal biblical hypotexts—primarily Genesis 1–3 and the Synoptic temptation narratives (Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13), with additional reference to Pauline theology and Johannine Christology. Through close reading and intertextual analysis, the study examines Milton's poetic theology of creation, fall, freedom, obedience, and redemption; his representation of divine justice and mercy; the characterization of Adam, Eve, Satan, and the Son; and the epic's formal strategies (blank verse, catalogues, similes, invocations) as vehicles for doctrinal argument. The paper argues that *Paradise Lost* expands the brief biblical account of the Fall into a universal theodicy centered on educative freedom and *felix culpa*, while *Paradise Regain'd* contracts the epic scale to a "brief epic" that dramatizes obedience through renunciatory victory in the wilderness. Taken together, the poems refract Scripture through humanist learning and Reformation exegesis to produce a Protestant poetics of restoration.

**Keywords:** John Milton; *Paradise Lost*; *Paradise Regain'd*; Bible; Genesis; Gospels; theodicy; free will; Christology; Protestant poetics; epic.

## 1. Introduction

John Milton's epics are among the most sustained poetic engagements with the Bible in English literature. *Paradise Lost* retells Genesis 1–3—augmented by a cosmic prehistory and eschatological prospect—while *Paradise Regain'd* dramatizes the temptation of Christ. Scripture furnishes not only narrative scaffolding but also a field of doctrinal controversy: providence and predestination, liberty and grace, gender and hierarchy, kingship and tyranny. This paper situates both poems against their scriptural sources to illuminate how Milton transforms biblical narrative into an epic theodicy (loss through misuse of freedom) and an epic of renunciation (regain through obedient reason). The method is comparative textual analysis, attending to intertext, genre, and historical theology.

## 2. Literature Review

Critical discourse has long debated whether Milton's epics elevate poetic autonomy over confessional orthodoxy or, conversely, serve as imaginative commentary upon Scripture. Foundational readings include C. S. Lewis's argument that *Paradise Lost* dignifies obedience within a classical epic frame; Stanley Fish's thesis that the poem educates readers by making them complicit in Satan's rhetoric; Barbara K. Lewalski's demonstration of the poems' Protestant poetics and biblical typology; John Carey's explorations of Milton's radicalism; and Alastair Fowler's editorial commentary on sources and structures. Subsequent scholarship emphasizes Eve's agency, the politics of regicide and republicanism, and the "brief epic" as a counter-epic form privileging spiritual over martial victory.

## 3. Methodology

The study employs close reading and intertextual comparison. Primary texts are *Paradise Lost* (1674 twelve-book edition), *Paradise Regain'd* (1671), and the Bible (King James Version), with occasional reference to patristic and Reformation sources Milton knew. Analysis focuses on (a) narrative correspondences and departures, (b) doctrinal emphases (free will, Christology, soteriology), and (c) poetics (meter, epic conventions, rhetoric). Citations follow APA 7th edition; biblical citations use book, chapter, and verse.

## 4. Scriptural Hypotexts and Miltonic Transformations

### 4.1 Creation and Providence

Genesis presents creation in austere, liturgical prose (Gen 1–2). Milton amplifies this into a cosmic panorama mediated by the Son's creative agency and Raphael's pedagogy to Adam, aligning with Johannine Logos theology (John 1:1–3) and Pauline Christology (Col 1:16–17). The narrator's invocations frame this cosmology as illumination granted by the "Heav'nly Muse," fusing biblical inspiration with classical epic convention. Unlike the terse biblical narrative, Milton's account embeds the purpose of creation in a moral teleology: rational creatures are made "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall," foregrounding educative freedom as the axis of theodicy.

### 4.2 The Fall and Responsibility

Genesis 3 recounts the serpent's deception and human disobedience. Milton elaborates motives, desires, and rhetoric: Satan's envy; Eve's aspirations for knowledge; Adam's affective solidarity with Eve. The poem dramatizes temptation as an epistemic and rhetorical crisis, where sophistry mimics reason. In doing so, Milton respects the biblical sequence (dialogue, transgression, discovery) yet explains the justice of punishment through voluntariness and instruction: divine law is understood prior to transgression, and repentance remains open through mediating grace.

### 4.3 The Son and Redemption

Where Genesis gestures toward future remedy (“the seed of the woman,” Gen 3:15), Milton renders this proto evangelism explicit by enthroning the Son as pre-temporal mediator and redeemer. In *Paradise Lost* Book 3, the Son freely offers to ransom humanity, harmonizing divine justice and mercy. The Son’s victory is bloodless within *Paradise Lost* but becomes enacted in *Paradise Regained* through victorious obedience in the wilderness, in line with the Synoptic temptations (Matt 4; Luke 4). The shift from martial to moral heroism redefines epic worth: glory is measured by steadfast reason and scriptural discernment rather than arms.

## 5. Comparative Doctrinal Analysis

### 5.1 Free Will, Predestination, and Theodicy

Milton’s God insists on created freedom as the condition for genuine love and obedience, echoing Deut 30:19 (“choose life”) and opposing strict determinism. The *Felix culpa* theme—evil permitted to occasion greater good—emerges from the Son’s redemptive counsel. The Bible affirms both sovereignty and responsibility (e.g., Rom 9; Jas 1:13–15); Milton synthesizes by positing divine foreknowledge without necessitation, preserving human culpability.

### 5.2 Christology and Kingship

In Scripture, the wilderness temptations probe messianic identity—provision without trust, spectacle without obedience, rule without the cross. Milton’s Christ refuses economic, thaumaturgic, and political shortcuts, privileging inward sovereignty. Against prevailing royalist epic, *Paradise Regained* critiques worldly empire and endorses a republican, spiritual kingship—consistent with New Testament teaching that the kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36).

### 5.3 Law, Grace, and Pedagogy

Milton reads the Edenic command as a pedagogical law designed to mature reason through obedience. Paul’s account of law revealing sin (Rom 7) shadows Milton’s analysis of concupiscence. Yet grace precedes and enables restoration: angelic instruction, conscience, and providential chastening aim at reformation, not annihilation. The Bible’s covenantal arc from Adam to Christ grounds Milton’s insistence that judgment serves the larger end of mercy.

### 5.4 Gender, Companionship, and Order

Genesis 2 portrays companionship as the telos of human sociability. Milton affirms conjugal mutuality—Eve as “fit help”—yet embeds early modern hierarchy in prelapsarian “headship.” Postlapsarian dynamics intensify asymmetry, reflecting Gen 3:16. Critics debate whether the poem naturalizes patriarchy or exposes its fallenness. Scripturally, mutuality and difference coexist (Eph 5); Milton explores this tension without fully resolving it, while granting Eve significant rhetorical and moral agency.

## 6. Poetics and Epic Form

### 6.1 Blank Verse and the Logic of Argument

Milton's unrhymed iambic pentameter functions as "apt numbers" for theological reasoning, enabling periodic syntax, epic similes, and elevated diction without the constraint of rhyme. The verse supports dialectical movement—objection and reply, temptation and discernment—mirroring scholastic and sermonic forms. Biblical cadences (Psalms, prophets, Gospels) are echoed but transmuted into classical epic style.

### 6.2 Classical Inheritance and Christian Revision

Invocations, catalogues, and similes place Milton within Homeric and Virgilian tradition, yet he "justifies" epic by Christianizing its telos: the true hero conquers self, not nations. *Paradise Regained* radicalizes this revision by refusing war, courtship, and voyage topoi; its heroism is verbal and hermeneutic—Christ counters Satan with rightly interpreted Scripture, aligning poetics with exegesis.

### 6.3 Rhetoric of Temptation and Discernment

Both poems anatomize rhetoric. Satan's speeches deploy parataxis, false analogy, and appeals to pride; angelic discourse uses patient explication. Christ's replies in the wilderness model scriptural intertextuality—quoting Deuteronomy and Psalms against misapplied texts—thus turning the epic into an exercise in hermeneutics where right reading is right ruling of self.

## 7. Narrative Architecture and Temporal Scope

*Paradise Lost* spans heaven, hell, and Eden, with proleptic visions of salvation history (Books 11–12) compressing biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation. *Paradise Regain'd* contracts scope to the Judean desert yet opens intellectual vistas through debated themes—politics, philosophy, providence. The structural antithesis—expansion vs. contraction—parallels theological movement from loss to restoration: the many are gathered into the One.

## 8. Character Studies in Biblical and Miltonic Perspective

### 8.1 God the Father

The biblical God speaks sparingly; Milton's God is discursive, defending providence and freedom. Critics sometimes find the result austere, yet the design is catechetical: readers must wrestle with justice as reasoned, not arbitrary.

## 8.2 The Son/Christ

In Scripture, the Son is Word and Wisdom; in Milton, he is also the archetypal reader—rightly dividing Scripture and history. The Son's voluntary offering in *Paradise Lost* grounds atonement; his wilderness obedience in *Paradise Regain'd* models sanctification by reason ruled by charity.

## 8.3 Satan

The biblical Satan is tempter and accuser; Milton's Satan is also a charismatic rhetorician whose epic energies parody heroic virtues. His trajectory from proud rebel to sibilant deceiver exemplifies the entropy of evil: sublimity devolves into bathos. The Bible's terse adversary becomes, in Milton, an anatomy of narcissism and bad faith.

## 8.4 Adam and Eve

Genesis offers archetypes; Milton furnishes interiority. Eve's desire for knowledge and beauty, Adam's passion and reason, their dialogue and shared labor, all dramatize the goods at stake in the Fall. Their repentance—confession, mutual forgiveness, acceptance of exile—aligns with biblical penitence (Ps 51) and foreshadows redemption.

## 9. Political Theology and the Kingdom of God

Milton's republicanism informs his suspicion of tyranny, both satanic and civil. *Paradise Regain'd* contrasts worldly kingdoms with the kingdom of God, echoing the Gospels' critique of spectacle and domination. The epic thus engages biblical political theology: authority is service; liberty is obedience to right reason; true conquest is over sin.

## 10. Intertextuality: Scripture as Source and Standard

Milton weaves direct biblical citations, allusions, and paraphrases, often recontextualizing verses to emphasize moral pedagogy. While the Bible remains the canonical authority, Milton's epics function as poetic midrash—expansive commentary that aims to instruct affections and intellect. The reader is invited to practice discernment, testing rhetoric against Scripture, as Christ does in the wilderness.

## 11. Reception and Hermeneutical Effects

Readers repeatedly report being seduced by Satan's rhetoric before recognizing its hollowness—a designed pedagogical effect (Fish). The poems thus perform what they teach: the necessity of disciplined reading. Devotional readers find their sympathies reoriented toward obedience and hope; secular readers can trace the anatomy of ideology and power in persuasive speech.

## 12. Synthesis: Loss and Regain as a Single Economy

The two epics form a diptych. *Paradise Lost* narrates the anthropology of error; *Paradise Regained* narrates the Christology of correction. Where Eve and Adam misread God's command and the serpent's promise, Christ reads Satan and Scripture aright. The Bible's grand arc—creation, fall, redemption—thus becomes, in Milton, a pedagogy of reading, willing, and loving ordered to blessedness.

## 13. Conclusion

In dialogue with the Bible, Milton converts epic form into theological argument. *Paradise Lost* vindicates God's justice by portraying freedom's dignity and danger; *Paradise Regained* vindicates God's mercy by dramatizing obedient wisdom. Both poems adhere to and creatively extend their scriptural sources, translating terse biblical episodes into a capacious poetics of redemption. Milton's achievement is not to rival Scripture but to render its economy of grace imaginatively intelligible for postlapsarian readers who must learn, through reading, how to live.

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