

John Rogers, "*Paradise Lost* and the Creation of Mormon Theology"

IMMORTALITY AND  
THE BODY IN THE AGE  
OF MILTON

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## Paradise Lost *and the Creation* *of Mormon Theology*

*John Rogers*

It is not surprising that so little has been written about the impact of Milton's poetry and prose on the theology of one of nineteenth-century America's most significant religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The distinctive affinities between Milton's idiosyncratic beliefs and the Mormon theologies of atonement and creation have certainly been noticed. Marilyn Arnold and John S. Tanner have detailed some of the unusually specific similarities between the religious ideas of Milton and Mormon prophet Joseph Smith.<sup>1</sup> But implicitly holding to the common opinion that the minimally educated, culturally naïve Smith could never have encountered Milton's intellectually demanding epic, those critics have carefully refrained from positing anything like a literary historical connection between the seventeenth-century poet and the nineteenth-century religious visionary. Long before Arnold and Tanner, the fear of the cultural inaccessibility of *Paradise Lost* had nettled some of Milton's more reform-minded readers. According to eighteenth-century grammarian James Buchanan, who undertook to tame the epic's syntactical challenges in a new verse "translation," "*Paradise Lost* has been generally found

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Arnold, "John Milton: An Inspired Man," *New Era* (January 1976); available on the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [www.lds.org/new-era/1976/01/john-milton-an-inspired-man?lang=eng](http://www.lds.org/new-era/1976/01/john-milton-an-inspired-man?lang=eng). Arnold offers us the following, sizeable list of important topics on which Milton's interests seem very close to that of Mormons: the war in heaven, the creation, the fall of man, "free agency," obedience and repentance, atonement through a redeemer, mission of the Son and the subsequent apostasy, the nature of the godhead, and the fortunate fall." See also John S. Tanner, "Making a Mormon of Milton," *Brigham Young University Studies* 24 (1982), pp. 191–206, as well as his "Milton among the Mormons," in *Ringing the Bell Backward: Proceedings of the First International Symposium*, ed. Ronald G. Shafer (Indiana, PA: Indiana University of Pennsylvania Imprint Series, 1982), pp. 123–32. The work of both Arnold and Tanner might qualify as instances of what R. John Williams cleverly characterizes as the Mormon scholarly practice of "parallelomania," in "A Marvelous Work and a Possession: Book of Mormon Historicity as Postcolonialism," *Dialogue* 38.4 (2005), pp. 37–55. I am grateful to William Silverman for drawing my attention to Arnold's essay, and for sharing information about the different transcriptions of Smith's "King Follett Discourse."

to be above the capacities of ordinary readers.”<sup>2</sup> Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith, has been widely characterized since the nineteenth century as just such an “ordinary reader.” Given the evident difficulty of Milton’s poem, with its enormous range of classical reference, and the limitations of Smith’s education, how can it be said with confidence that Joseph Smith had wrestled with the daunting masterpiece *Paradise Lost*?

The argument I make in this chapter on Mormonism’s deeply Miltonic theories of atonement and creation does not depend on an image of Smith’s high intellectual engagement with Milton’s learned and sometimes unapproachable masterpiece. The distinctive plot of *Paradise Lost*, as historian Perry Miller has argued, had achieved a deep saturation in the culture of the early United States, becoming, “around the middle of the eighteenth century, not so much a secondary Book of Genesis as a substitute for the original.”<sup>3</sup> There would be at least some among the poor, minimally educated farmers and laborers in the western New York of Joseph Smith’s youth who were in a position to read the poem directly, though surely with no small level of difficulty. Many others would take advantage of the reading aids that had since the eighteenth century sprung up around Milton’s poem: readers put off by Milton’s syntax or his often obscure allusions to the classical tradition could resort to a work such as John Wesley’s heavily abridged *Extract from Milton’s Paradise Lost*, or even Eliza Weaver Bradburn’s popular *Story of Paradise Lost, for Children* of 1830, a volume that gave readers a surprisingly detailed account of the epic’s plot, as well as a firm critical warning about those theological aspects of the poem that ran afoul of Protestant orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

It was not only *Paradise Lost* that had been made newly accessible in the early nineteenth century. The long-lost manuscript of Milton’s systematic theological treatise, *De doctrina christiana*, was discovered in 1823, and in 1825 translated and published in both London and Boston, finding a readership that would be shocked by its exposure of the poet’s embrace of some of Christianity’s most notorious heresies. Every major literary or general interest periodical and most major newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic rushed to cover the exposure of the dangerous views privately

<sup>2</sup> *The First Six Books of Milton’s Paradise Lost, Rendered into Grammatical Construction* (Edinburgh, 1773), pp. 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> A modern edition of Wesley’s later eighteenth-century abridgment is *Milton for the Methodists: Emphasized Extracts from Paradise Lost, Selected, Edited, and Annotated by John Wesley* (London, 1988). See John Shawcross’s entry on “Adaptions, Literary,” in *A Milton Encyclopedia* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1978), 1:21–22 and Eliza W. Bradburn, *The Story of Paradise Lost, for Children* (Portland, ME: Shirley and Hyde, 1830).

embraced by the great poet Milton. No less important, in Boston of the following year, 1826, there appeared a widely published and widely read pamphlet written on the occasion of the revelation of Milton's heterodoxy. The pamphlet's author, Boston anti-Trinitarian minister William Ellery Channing, was eager for his own reasons to celebrate and publicize the heretical Christology to which Milton devoted the longest and most labored chapter of the treatise, chapter five, "On the Son." In his *Remarks on the Character and Writings of John Milton*, Channing applauded Milton for denying the existence of the Christian Trinity, as did the Socinian Unitarians of contemporary Britain. Also like Milton, the Arian Channing rejected in the strongest possible terms the Socinian dating of the creation of Christ, insisting, in opposition to the Socinian designation of Christ as a "mere man," that the created Christ was not first begotten as the infant in the Bethlehem manger, but had a heavenly preexistence long before his terrestrial beginnings as the human Jesus. For Channing, Arianism, which permitted the exuberant imagination of the redeemer's life in heaven before his incarnation as Jesus, was the authentically "American" form of anti-Trinitarianism.<sup>5</sup>

Channing's widely read pamphlet was considered nearly as shocking as Milton's treatise, as news articles about Channing's scandalously sympathetic look at Milton's heresies began appearing in Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational periodicals in both Britain and America.<sup>6</sup> Channing would go even further than Bishop Sumner in using the heterodox treatise as a means of unfolding the secrets of the epic, and an American reader of Channing's life of Milton would have no choice but to approach *Paradise Lost* as a poem at least potentially given to the expression of many a wayward Christian sentiment. By 1830, there were likely few churchgoing American Protestants who had not been exposed to the fact that the poet of *Paradise Lost* was a heretic who had secretly espoused some of the most outlandish theological doctrines ever voiced by a respectable, canonical proponent of Christian values. So widespread was the knowledge of Milton's apostasies – not least his lengthy argument in the treatise for the ongoing permissibility of polygamy – that it was largely the publicity

<sup>5</sup> Channing even mentions Joseph Priestley in his *Remarks* on Milton. For the tensions between the American Arian form of nineteenth-century U.S. Unitarianism and the Socinian variety represented by Priestley, see J. D. Bowers, *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See Francis E. Mineka, "The Critical Reception of Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *University of Texas Studies in English* 23 (1943), pp. 115–47. Mineka's essay is especially valuable for its detailing of the distinctness with which Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists responded to the news of Milton's heterodoxies.

surrounding the revelation of his heresies that turned cultivated American readers away from the seventeenth-century poet: "by mid-century the image of greatness Americans had cherished so long had become definitely flawed; Milton could no longer serve as a pattern of poetic perfection, nor stand as an incorrupt witness for God."<sup>7</sup>

So suggested George Sensabaugh, in reference to the refined, educated American readers whose habits and opinions formed the basis of his impressive study, *Milton in Early America*. My emphasis here rests with a less refined, more spiritually enthusiastic group of early nineteenth-century American readers, who, like Joseph Smith, participated in the unruly religious experiments of western New York and elsewhere, but who appear nowhere in Sensabaugh's book. Less educated, and more heretically inclined, readers such as Smith and his earliest disciples would have reacted quite differently than their mainstream Protestant contemporaries to the news that *Paradise Lost* might have hidden within it a controversial but appealing truth such as that of the created Christ's heavenly preexistence. In the very years that the better-educated American readers found themselves turning away from Milton, at both school and home, a different group of readers, of whom Smith was surely one, began turning its attention to *Paradise Lost* and *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, eager to take from those works a new understanding of the secrets of divinity about which the Bible was frustratingly silent.

### Milton and the Mormon Atonement

It is the epic poem that leaves its deepest impression on the Mormon narrative of the Christian atonement.<sup>8</sup> Surely it can be said that no one before Milton had imagined the Christian atonement in quite the way it finds representation in Book Three of *Paradise Lost*. The Father in Book Three spies Satan approaching this world after his journey from hell, and foresees the success Satan will enjoy in tempting man, who "will hearken to his glozing lies, / And easily transgress the sole command" (3.93-4). The Father pronounces the necessity of man's destruction ("He with his whole posterity must die" [3.209]), unless some heavenly proxy can be found to "pay / The rigid satisfaction" otherwise unpayable by sinful man (3.211-12).

<sup>7</sup> George F. Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> See Tanner's detailed reading of the dramas of atonement in Milton and Joseph Smith, in "Making a Mormon of Milton" and "Milton among the Mormons."

Breaking the heavenly silence that ensues upon the Father's request for a volunteer to become "mortal to redeem / Man's mortal crime," the Son of God offers to shed his immortality, and leave the Father's bosom, albeit temporarily, for the sake of man (3.214–15). It is thus that Milton brilliantly and beautifully envisions his Arian Son's preemption of the conventional scriptural account of man's redemption. The sacrifice that won't occur, in the pages of the Bible, until the death of Jesus on the cross, is offered in *Paradise Lost* at the very origin of man's life on earth. Adam, in Milton's story, will never be told of the premortal Son's offer of his life – the dialogue between the Father and the Son is for the reader's ears only – but Adam *will* learn directly from the angel Michael, many generations before the event itself occurs, of the moment on earth at which the Son endures the punishment due Adam, "by coming in the flesh / To a reproachful life and cursèd death" (12.405–6).

Although it would seem that no critic has committed the insight to print, it has surely been imagined by many of Milton's Mormon (and non-Mormon) readers that Joseph Smith relies heavily on numerous aspects of Milton's singular version of the Christian story. As we know, Milton's angel Michael in *Paradise Lost* oversaw Adam's conversion to Christianity, long before the nativity of Jesus, as represented in Book Twelve. A dominant feature of Smith's *Book of Mormon* would be its insistence that both the ancient Hebrews and the pre-Columbian Americans assumed to be a lost tribe of Israel were informed by an angel, well in advance of Jesus' birth, of Christ's eventual sacrifice, all of them given the opportunity freely to accept the (Mormon-restored) Christian revelation. More important, Smith would, like Milton, dictate a narrative of a premortal angelic council in which the fate of man will be determined. It was after the publication of *The Book of Mormon* (1830) that Smith began work on his new version of the first six chapters of Genesis, claiming to have found and then translated the original scripture by which he could restore "many important points touching the salvation of men, [that] had been taken from the Bible, or [were] lost before it was compiled."<sup>9</sup>

In this restored version of Genesis, titled the *Book of Moses*, Smith interrupts his story of the creation and fall of Adam and Eve to reveal the details of an ancient council in heaven clearly drawn from the dialogue of the

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Salt Lake City Deseret New Press, 1938), pp. 10–11. Smith explained that "ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors." Cited in the *Bible Dictionary* of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, available at [www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/bible.pt18?lang=eng&letter=b](http://www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/bible.pt18?lang=eng&letter=b).

Father and the Son in Book Three of *Paradise Lost*. In Smith's extraordinary rewriting of Milton's account of the redemption of man, it is not one but two heavenly beings who volunteer to assume mortality on man's behalf. The first volunteer is none other than Satan himself:

The Lord God, spake unto Moses, saying, That Satan, whom thou hast commanded in the name of mine Only Begotten, is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying – Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.<sup>10</sup>

Inspired, I should think, by Milton's presentation in *Paradise Lost* of Satan's infernal offer to embark on the expedition to earth (Book Two) *before* the narrative presentation of the Son's offer of redemption (Book Three), Smith precedes his representation of the Son's generosity with this account of Satan's cynical bid to redeem fallen man.

It is not until the next verse that we learn of the competing offer of the true Son of God, when God tells Moses, in Smith's rendering of the restored scriptural text, "behold, my Beloved Son . . . said unto me – Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever" (*Moses* 4:2). Where the Mormon Satan had offered with false magnanimity to "redeem all mankind," assuring God that "one soul shall not be lost," the Mormon Son makes no such heroic claim, telling the Father, with utter simplicity, "thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever." Smith commits himself to the dramatic energy of his account of Satan's bald attempt to secure for himself the title of "Only Begotten" and the "honor" that would otherwise be bestowed upon the Father's true Son. But more important for Smith than this inset narrative of sibling rivalry is the weighty Miltonic concern of the guarantee of human freedom. In Satan's plan to redeem all mankind, we learn, lay the seeds of the devil's eternal attempt to rob man of his freedom, since the narrative of the heroic deliverer of men sorts ill with the Mormon (and Miltonic) shibboleth of man's entitlement and obligation to will his own acceptance of Christ's offer of redemption. In Satan's attempt to *force* a universal redemption, the Mormon God goes on to explain to Moses, "Satan rebelled against me." In hoping to strong-arm every human soul, willy-nilly, into a state of salvation, Satan, God continues, "sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him" (*Moses* 4:3). It is this action of Satan's, and only this action, that constitutes his

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Smith, *Book of Moses* 4:1, available at [www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/moses/4.1?lang=eng#primary](http://www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/moses/4.1?lang=eng#primary). Subsequent passages from *Moses* will be cited by chapter and verse from the Mormon Church's excellent online presentation of LDS "Scriptures."

rebellion against God and the philosophical war in heaven that ensues. "By the power of mine Only Begotten," Smith's God explains to Moses, "I caused that he should be cast down" (*Moses* 4:3). It is at this point in the Mormon scripture that we learn that Satan becomes the "devil, the father of all lies," and that he seeks to manipulate the serpent into tempting Eve.<sup>11</sup>

What the Son of God tells the Father in the *Book of Moses* is directly related to the heavenly dialogue represented in *Paradise Lost*. And in many ways Smith can be seen to hew closely to the Miltonic original. Smith's Son of God (sometimes called Jesus, at other times the angel "Jehovah") seeks simply to obey the Father's will: "Father, thy will be done." In this act of obedience, the Mormon Son reproduces the humility of Milton's Son, who, "as a sacrifice / Glad to be offered . . . attends the will / Of his great Father" (*PL* 3.269–71). But what Joseph Smith offers in the *Book of Moses* is no simple prose transcription of Milton's poem. In his presentation of Satan's competing offer to save mankind, Smith veers widely from the epic's script. "Behold, here am I, send me," the unfallen Mormon Satan says. And he follows what we come to understand to be his ostentatious offer of himself with a heroic boast that he will be able to redeem *all* mankind. "Not one soul shall be lost," the Mormon Satan insists, promising the success of his plan for a universal redemption.

To what in *Paradise Lost* might Satan's confident salvific boast be owing? In a passage from Book Three of Milton's poem that has troubled readers since the eighteenth century, the Miltonic Son of God can himself be seen as a swaggering, or at least moderately boastful, heroic figure. "Behold me then, me for him, life for life," the Son tells the Father (3.236). And he follows this presentation of his willingness to suffer for man with a vividly imagined heroic narrative that bears almost no relation to the story of atonement as it is laid out in scripture. As William Empson notes of this scene in *Milton's God*, the Son betrays no understanding that the death he is about to undergo will involve anything so torturous as crucifixion.<sup>12</sup> Assuring himself that the Father will limit the extent of his sacrifice – he extends nothing like the willingness to subject himself to the ultimate punishment of eternal death, the offer Christ extends in nearly all seventeenth-century

<sup>11</sup> Smith would in his "King Follett Sermon," discussed later, summarize, more succinctly, the premortal council thus: "The contention in heaven was this: Jesus said there would be certain souls that would not be saved, and the devil said he could save them all. The grand council gave in for Jesus Christ. So the devil rebelled against God and fell, with all who put up their heads for him." Note that here in this version it is Christ and not Satan who first volunteers to give his life for man. See Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *Brigham Young University Studies*, 18 (1978), pp. 193–208.

<sup>12</sup> William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).



Reformed accounts of the Redemption – Milton's Son confidently imagines the future not as humiliating but as grandly triumphant:

Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsome grave  
 His [Death's] prey, nor suffer my unspotted soul  
 For ever with corruption there to dwell;  
 But I shall rise victorious, and subdue  
 My vanquisher, spoiled of his vaunted spoil;  
 Death his death's wound shall then receive, and stoop  
 Inglorious, of his mortal sting disarmed.  
 I through the ample air in triumph high  
 Shall lead Hell captive maugre Hell, and show  
 The powers of darkness bound. Thou at the sight  
 Pleased, out of Heaven shalt look down and smile,  
 While by thee raised I ruin all my foes,  
 Death last, and with his carcass glut the grave:  
 Then with the multitude of my redeemed  
 Shall enter Heaven long absent.

(3.247–61)

As Empson's careful reading shows, Milton uses this scene to establish a crucial fact about his Arian Son of God. Lacking anything like the Father's omniscience, the Son clearly believes that his ascension to heaven three days after his death will be the end of Christian history: due to his fearless heroism, Christ and all the redeemed will dwell henceforth in heaven, and life on earth will be no more. The Son's heroic optimism may be revealed as an innocently misguided burst of enthusiasm, but it also reflects the sensibility of the poet himself, who has since writing the *Nativity Ode* at the age of twenty-one sought to envision the Christian redemption as an event of active heroic virtue rather than passive suffering.

Joseph Smith, I suggest, found Milton's controversial rewriting of the Christian atonement profoundly troubling, though certainly not because Smith embraces an *orthodox* theory of Christ's redemptive suffering on the cross. Any suggestion of the dependence of the redeemed on the superhuman efforts of an external redeemer denies the capacity of the Mormon individual to effect his own salvation. So in the *Book of Moses*, Smith engages with Milton's mythmaking to fashion an even more complex version of the story of redemption: he takes what he assumes is the objectionable self-vaunting of Milton's Son of God in the dialogue in heaven and attributes that heroic confidence to a newly reimagined Satan. As if to match, or even overgo, the Miltonic Son who looks ahead to returning to heaven with all his redeemed, the Mormon Satan promises the successful redemption of *every* soul, including those souls Milton's world would leave unredeemed

because they had refused to choose the life of “faith and faithful works” necessary for redemption (II.64). What do we have in this handful of sentences from Smith’s *Book of Moses* if not a surprisingly coherent palimpsest of narrative fragments lifted from *Paradise Lost*? Smith compresses into one historical moment at least three distinct heavenly events represented in Milton’s poem: Satan’s envious rejection of the Son, as represented in Milton’s Book Five; the Son’s demonstration of filial obedience, whereby, in Milton’s Book Three, he “attends the will / Of his great Father” “as a sacrifice / Glad to be offered”; and the triumphant casting down of Satan from heaven into hell, as reported by Milton in Book Six. Whether or not Smith understood those three scenes in *Paradise Lost* to be discrete events, chronologically quite distant from each other, he knew the narrative and spiritual value of Milton’s central contribution to the scriptural story of man’s terrestrial origin. It is the poet’s drive to tell the heavenly backstory that Smith takes up and expands, overgoing *Paradise Lost* by framing, in an entirely new way, the complex psychological motives behind and the chief philosophical and theological consequences of man’s initial sin and his subsequent redemption. If the *Book of Moses* retreads some of Milton’s ground, it does so in a way that inverts the value of the Son of God’s offer of himself in the epic, turning on its head Milton’s already daring vision of atonement.

### Milton and the Mormon Creation

As intimately connected as their narratives of atonement are, the profoundest ties between Milton’s writings and Smith’s “restored” scripture rest in a different conceptual arena. In Smith’s oracular utterances, near the end of his life, concerning the relation of matter to spirit, we can see him in another strong-willed engagement with the seventeenth-century poet, as he embarks on the urgent project of shaping the new faith’s metaphysically inclined theology of creation. It is Milton’s theology of creation, as described in chapter seven of the newly translated *Treatise of Christian Doctrine*, and as patiently explained in the popular pamphlet by William Ellery Channing, that can be seen to have provided the springboard for Smith’s unfolding of the “great secret” of the identity of God and his creation in the now sacred Mormon text known as “The King Follett Discourse.” That “Discourse,” or sermon, was an extemporaneous speech Smith delivered to nearly 20,000 Mormons in Nauvoo, Illinois, on April 7, 1844, on the occasion of the funeral of his friend Elder King Follett, who died a little more than two months before Smith’s own death at the hands

of the Illinois townspeople who took strong exception to the Mormon practice of polygamy.

Although Smith's sermon, as transcribed by his disciples, runs no more than 5,000 words long, it is too dense an account of the deity and the celestial sphere to be summarized in full. But the boldest of Smith's articulations betray what I take to be a partial but unmistakable origin in the writing of the seventeenth-century poet and theologian. Although the moderns, Milton explains in his treatise, "contend that [the universe] was formed from nothing ... it is certain that neither the Hebrew verb בָּרָא [bârâ'], nor the Greek κτίζειν, nor the Latin *create*, can signify to create out of nothing."<sup>13</sup> Milton's God had not created the world *ex nihilo*: we all of us emerged *ex deo*, participating in and obliged to God's goodness because formed from the substance of God himself. It is with a closely related examination of the use of the Hebrew verb *bârâ'* that Smith begins his explanation in the King Follett discourse of his own theory of the divinized matter of the universe: "The word create came from the word בָּרָא [*bara*], but it doesn't mean so [to create out of nothing]," Smith writes in what I take to be his initial, though unacknowledged, deference to the Miltonic treatise he read with Channing as guide.

But where Milton was content to celebrate creation, including the creation of man, as an *ex deo* derivative of God's own intrinsically good substance, Smith seizes an opportunity in the funeral sermon to elevate creation even further. As we have seen, he follows Milton in his rejection of an *ex nihilo* theory of creation: for both Milton and Smith, a creation out of nothing produces far too great an ontological gulf between man and his creator. But Joseph Smith forcefully rejects the poet's alternative theory of a creation *ex deo* for a yet bolder theory of a creation *ex materia*, a creation from a preexistent body of matter and spirit (or spiritualized matter) that was coeternal with God himself: "element," or matter, explains Smith in the King Follett sermon, "had an existence from the time He had."<sup>14</sup> The physical universe was, for Smith, made, or, as he famously pronounced at

<sup>13</sup> *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine, Compiled from the Holy Scriptures Alone, by John Milton*, trans. Charles R. Sumner, 2 vols., (Boston, MA: 1825), vol. 1, p. 235. It might reasonably be thought that Smith would have had no interest in ancient Hebrew, and especially Milton's hyper-scholarly quibbles about the relation of the Hebrew to the Greek and the Latin. But Smith actively pursued credentialization in biblical studies, and, upon studying Hebrew alongside some of his apostles with one of the recent Mormon converts, Joshua Seixas, Smith pressed Seixas to sign and date a certificate that proved Smith's supposed competency in that ancient sacred language. Tanner discusses the parallel between Milton's and Smith's doctrines of creation in "Making a Mormon of Milton," p. 200.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Smith, "King Follett Discourse," p. 203. For a consideration of the Mormon theory of an *ex materia* creation that focuses on the earlier, no less Miltonic, sentiments of one of Smith's disciples, see my essay, "Parley Pratt, the Broken Planet of *Paradise Lost*, and the Creation of Mormon

the King Follett sermon, “organized,” from preexisting materials wholly distinct from the substance of God himself.<sup>15</sup> And because Smith joins Milton in refusing to recognize any meaningful distinction between matter and spirit, the same must be said of the human soul, which likewise emerged neither *ex nihilo* nor *ex deo*, “but is a spirit from age to age, and there is no creation about it.” The Mormon soul, the “spirit,” or “intelligence,” isn’t a product of *any* creation, but “exists upon a self-existent principle,” as “God never did have power to create the spirit of man at all.” The most precious part of man owes no fundamental debt to God, because like the angels described by Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who are “self-begot, self-raised / By [their] own quick’ning power” (5.860–1), the Mormon soul of man is as old as God himself.<sup>16</sup>

Shortly after the appointment of the Son of God to the status of angelic “head” (5.606), Milton’s Satan had boldly argued for that elevation’s illegitimacy on the grounds that God had no ontological, metaphysical authority over the angels (5.856–63). It was but through the contingent fact of his superior might that the Satanic God established his authority in heaven: “so much the stronger proved / He with his thunder” (1.92–3). Not content to bask in the liberal complacency of Milton’s own, privately held *ex deo* theory of creation, Smith adopts the theory of heaven voiced so sublimely, and of course so recklessly, by Milton’s Satan. As the God imagined by Satan held no organic, ontological authority over the angels, so the God imagined by Joseph Smith has no natural authority over the spirit of man, a coeternal and arguably equal being in the Mormon heaven: “God Himself found Himself,” Smith explains in the King Follett sermon, in his own account of the origins of the divine being as we know it, “in the midst of spirits and glory.” How for Smith did God establish his preeminence over these coequal spirits? “He was *greater*,” the Prophet explains. Smith’s “greater,” or stronger, but ontologically equal, God is not, however, the inimical opportunist that the God of Milton’s Satan was. Recognizing our equality with him, the Mormon God generously and lovingly arranges the universe to allow *us* to rise, much as he had himself risen earlier, to our

Theology,” in *Milton in the Americas*, ed. Angelica Duran and Elizabeth Sauer, for a special edition of *Milton Studies* 58 (2017): 125–42.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, “King Follett Discourse,” p. 203. For a more detailed account of the inspiration behind Smith’s characterization of creation as the “organization” of preexisting materials, see my “Parley Pratt.”

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of an early Mormon consideration of the individual soul, like any individual particle of matter, as even *older* than God, see my essay, “Orson Pratt, Parley Pratt, and the Miltonic Origins of Mormon Materialism,” in *Milton, Materialism, and Embodiment*, ed. Kevin Donovan and Thomas Festa (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2017), pp. 157–88.

own state of godhood: "Because He was greater He saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest . . . could have a privilege to advance like Himself and be exalted with Him, so that they might have one glory upon another in all the knowledge, power, and glory. So He took in hand to save the world of spirits."<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult not to admire Joseph Smith's expansion of, not to mention perversion of, Milton's already daring vision of the cosmos. Milton had flouted orthodoxy with the stark Arianism of his representation of the elevation of the created Son. Hardly a coequal, coeternal member of the godhead, the Miltonic Son is the Father's inferior, who receives the blessing of promotion, and is only in the course of time exalted to a rank just under, or possibly alongside, God himself. Smith appropriates the conceptual outlines of the scene of exaltation from Book Five of Milton's epic, but he uses it as little more than a conceptual springboard for his own theological speculations about the real truths of divine promotion.

For Smith, God had himself begun his existence as an inferior being, an actual human, in fact, on one of the alternative earths in the vast Mormon cosmos; the figure we now recognize on *this* earth as "God" had started out like us, meriting his own exaltation to godhood, just as we will be free to merit our own exaltations to the status of divinity:

God Himself, who sits enthroned in yonder heavens, is a Man like unto one of yourselves – that is the great secret! . . . Here then is eternal life – to know the only wise and true God. You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done – by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, Gods yourselves – to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done – by going from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation – till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory as those who have gone before, sit enthroned.<sup>18</sup>

This passage from the King Follett discourse, arguably Smith's supreme expression of his theologies of theosis and eternal divine progression, reads as a tissue of echoes of *Paradise Lost*. Satan had promised Eve that the fruit would clear her vision, and "ye shall be as gods" (9.708). Milton's Raphael had explained to Adam that he and Eve could merit a gradual promotion from human to angel: "Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit, / Improved by tract of time, and winged ascend / Ethereal, as we" (5.497–9). And

<sup>17</sup> All quotations of Smith in this paragraph from "King Follett Discourse," Amalgamated Text, p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, "King Follett Discourse," Amalgamated, pp. 200–1.

Adam offers his own, more terrestrial, version of this progressivist theology when he ventures the credo near the poem's end that Christians will reach the state of glory with a similar gradualism: "by small / Accomplishing great things" (12.566–7). It is a conceptual amalgam of just such lines that Smith adds to the stockpile of the dark materials he has extracted from Milton's epic and from which he forges his own theology of unending divine promotion "from exaltation to exaltation." He conjoins into one compressed image Satan's demonic deconstruction of divine authority, the Father's promotion of the Son to a state of heavenly headship, Satan's false promise of the progress from men to gods, Raphael's true promise of man's own upward ontological mobility, and Adam's concluding anticipation of the progress possible in the fallen world through faith and good works. Engaging morally distinct but conceptually related images from across the full sweep of Milton's epic, Joseph Smith unveils his singular vision of an endless progress of exaltation and ascent, as men and Gods move ever upward to higher and higher states of divinity.<sup>19</sup>

By any measure, in either the seventeenth or the nineteenth century, the Milton who revealed himself in the anti-Trinitarian *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* can only be deemed a heretic. As culturally aberrant as the poet's theology was, however, we can say with certainty that Milton would never have countenanced the far more aberrant claims about divinity and its relation to creation and redemption at the heart of a latter-day theology such as Joseph Smith's. In his account of the redemption, as we have seen, Smith isolates a moment in *Paradise Lost* he likely found objectionable, and transfers the divine ideology Milton had assigned to his heroic Son of God to the devil himself. Relatedly, in his vision of creation, Smith isolates the Satanic denial of God's ontological superiority over the angels, and transfers that heretical view to God, or, in his boldest formulation, to the divine being we presently recognize as the "God" of our world.

So far as we know, Smith was never pressed to explain the parallels between Mormonism and any of the elements of that strange Church of One we can call "Miltonism." But in 1833, Smith recorded a revelation from God in which he suggested – obliquely, to be sure – the method by which he arrived at some of his boldest and most important visions of

<sup>19</sup> As Jordan Watkins explains, "Mormon thinkers differ as to whether Smith's late teachings support an infinite regress model, wherein Christ's father had a father, ad infinitum; monarchical monotheism, which posits that Christ's father is the God of all other gods; or some other variation." See Watkins, "The Great God, the Divine Mind, and the Ideal Absolute: Orson Pratt's Intelligent-Matter Theory and the Gods of Emerson and James," *Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies*, 1 (2011), pp. 33–52; p. 39n.

religious truth. God, he explains, told Smith that he would “from time to time . . . receive [further] revelations to unfold the mysteries of the kingdom” and that the prophet must “study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books.”<sup>20</sup> Smith would always insist that his restoration of the truths of the Gospel was enabled by divine revelation; there is of course no explicit claim in the revelation from 1833 that Smith could piece together all the truths of Mormonism through a studious acquaintance “with all good books,” let alone the particular books of *Paradise Lost* and *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*. But I would like to suggest in conclusion that what Smith offers in that 1833 juxtaposition of the seemingly distinct activities of divine revelation and secular reading is something like an unwitting exposure of the intellectual process by which he forged some key components of the Mormon restoration of Christian truth. He studied Milton, either directly or as mediated by any number of available filters or formats. Smith brought to his own reading of *Paradise Lost* and *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine* much the same dialectical energy that Milton brought to his readings of Homer, Virgil, and almost every theologian of the Christian tradition. Acquainting himself with Milton’s vision of the material and spiritual ties that bind man to God, Smith sometimes reproduced, sometimes dramatically inverted, the values of the seventeenth-century poet as he labored to create the shockingly antithetical theology of Mormonism.

<sup>20</sup> *Doctrines and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 90:14–15; cited from the “Scriptures” section of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website: [www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament?lang=eng](http://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament?lang=eng).