

# Introduction: Relation Regained

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☞ *PARADISE REGAINED*, John Milton's four-book "brief epic" published alongside *Samson Agonistes* in 1671, has proven itself the most puzzling of the poet's major works. Milton's readers have always argued about the fundamental literary questions raised by *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*: is the hero to be faulted or admired; are we to lament or applaud the actions of its characters? But many readers of the poem Milton presents as a sequel to *Paradise Lost* have failed even to formulate those questions asked of the poet's other major works, finding themselves uncertain as to who the hero, Jesus, really is, and what, if any, action takes place. Is Jesus, known in the poem as the "Son of God," to be understood as a mere man, a divine being created by and inferior to God, or possibly himself a member of the godhead? And if he is to be taken as a person of the godhead, or some other divine being, why does he appear not to recall his former life in heaven? Might this seemingly heroic being, the Son of God, be temporarily, or even permanently, denied knowledge of God's purposes; or might he deliberately deny himself that understanding? The readers of *Paradise Regained* have found themselves just as perplexed by the question of what it is that happens over the course of the narrative. Does the Son of God actually perform the work of redeeming fallen man when he resists Satan's temptations in the wilderness, or is his refusal of Satan only a provisional, relative accomplishment? Or are we to imagine that it is the Father himself, and not the Son, who is to be credited as the principal actor in the story?

*Paradise Regained* opens with the claim that it is the Son's "firm obedience" by which the Eden lost through Adam's disobedience becomes "recovered" (1.4). But obedience is, of course, a relational term, dependent on the presence of an authoritative command or law capable of being obeyed. *Paradise Regained* will always decline to specify what, if any, command the Son is firmly obeying, or even how the Son's resistance to Satan's temptations can be understood as "obedience" at all. The Son himself will note that the ultimate purpose of the trial in the desert isn't so much the fact of his obedience, for that appears not to be in question. The purpose of the trial will be rather the knowledge afforded the Father of how, or how well, the Son "obeys":

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that he may know  
 What I can suffer, how obey? Who best  
 Can suffer best can do; best reign who first  
 Well hath obeyed; just trial ere I merit  
 My exaltation without change or end.<sup>1</sup>

“How obey?” indeed, we ask. To be sure, there are moments, clustered in the poem’s final book, in which the Son casts his response to Satan’s temptations as an act of obedience to one of the Father’s commands as recorded in scripture. In response to Satan’s offer of the kingdoms of the world in exchange for acknowledgment of Satan’s “superior” lordship, the Son will cite the first commandment, the scriptural directive by which the Father asserts that he alone is to be worshipped and served: “It is written / The first of all commandments, ‘thou shalt worship / The Lord thy God, and only him shalt serve’” (4.175–77). In the most mysterious of all of their interactions, the poem’s culminating scene on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, Satan and the Son will taunt each other with competing citations of commandments from the Bible. Satan asks the Son to cast himself down from the pinnacle because, as he says, “it is written, ‘He will give command / Concerning thee to his angels, in their hands / They shall uplift thee’” (4.556–59). The Son responds to Satan’s scriptural reference to a “command” of the Father’s by returning the word “command” from its meaning in Satan’s passage as a divine act of compulsion to the earlier, more primal, understanding of a command, familiar from the injunction to Adam and Eve in Genesis, and from the Ten Commandments as relayed by Moses, as unequivocal prohibition: “it is written, / Tempt not the Lord thy God” (4.560–61).<sup>2</sup>

It is, remarkably, this final citation of a divine commandment—one that appears on the surface to lie closest, at least rhetorically, to the prohibition promulgated in paradise—that seems in the poem’s mysterious narrative to constitute the obedient action that works somehow to both defeat Satan and to “regain paradise.” As the briefest study of the history of criticism on *Paradise Regained* would suggest, there is nothing approaching consensus on how it is that the Son’s rehearsal of a commandment recorded in Deuteronomy constitutes an act of obedience capable of fulfilling the purpose of the Son’s trial in the wilderness. Is the Son issuing a commandment that Satan must obey? Is he rehearsing from scripture the commandment that he is himself required to obey? Is he imagining himself, or encouraging Satan to imagine him, to be the “Lord God” who speaks the recorded command? Or might it be the simple act of scriptural recitation itself that constitutes a figurative act of obedience sufficiently redemptive that it brings the poem to its close?

1. *Paradise Regained*, book 3, lines 193–97, quoted from *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York, 2007). Quotations from Milton’s poetry in this introduction are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically by book and line number.

2. See John Carey’s summary of recent critical debates in the headnote to his edition of *Paradise Regained*, in *John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. Carey (London, 1997), 417–23.

It's all relative, Milton might perhaps encourage readers to think as a response to the questions that we cannot help but ask about the poem's climactic scene. To the extent that *Paradise Regained* can be said to have an identifiable conceptual or organizational principle at all, it may well be a principle of relativity. Milton's poem opens with an insistent sense of the degree to which its central terms and concerns are not independent, but radically dependent for their meaning on a consideration of their precursors or putative opposites. There is no point, for example, at which Milton's poem defines for us the nature of the "paradise" whose regaining is heralded in the title; its uncertain meaning can be sought only in relation to the more literal "paradise" whose loss, the new poem reminds us, was represented in Milton's earlier, longer epic. A related analysis can be applied to the many other dyads that structure the poem's complexly antithetical conceptual pairings: obedience and disobedience, the old Adam and the new, conventional heroic action and deeds "above heroic," public proof and private confirmation, the scripturally recorded versus the scripturally unrecorded expressions of divine will and the human actions taken in response to that will—only a few of the binaries that present themselves to the interpretive labor of judgment and comparison. Set primarily as a dialogue between Satan, once a Son of God, and Jesus, known in the poem as *the* Son of God, *Paradise Regained* resists the representation of any truth capable of being asserted in a non-dialogic form: the relative meaning of each of the relational pairs in *Paradise Regained* is established only (if it is ever established) in the context of the relation between the two main characters, whose understanding even of themselves proves to be entirely contingent on their interaction with one another.

Nowhere is the fact of relativity featured more prominently than in the lead-up to Satan's final temptation of Jesus in book 4. As Satan explains to the Son, it is his own desperate need to understand the Son's title, "the Son of God," that motivates the poem's culminating action:

Thenceforth I thought thee worth my nearer view  
 And narrower scrutiny, that I might learn  
 In what degree or meaning thou art called  
 The Son of God, which bears no single sense;  
 The Son of God I also am, or was,  
 And if I was, I am; relation stands.

(4.514–19)

Satan suggests here, surely rightly, that the phrase "Son of God" can function as a relative term: it is the nature of the relation of any creature Son to his creator God that determines the meaning of any particular condition of sonship. In fact, it might be not the *meaning* of sonship so much as its *degree* that is most important to know: there are sons, and there are sons, and the degree of sonship enjoyed by any particular son might be relative to each son's particular relation to the father, and each son's relation to any given fellow son.

But while Satan seems to intuit to an unusual degree the poem's dominant emphasis on the relative and the relational, he pursues the question of his relation to this *other* son, Jesus, with a logic so flawed it is almost painful to witness. Satan may have been right to suggest that the term "Son of God" is a relative one with respect to his adversary, Jesus: we know from book 5 of *Paradise Lost* that the Father's declaration of the Son of God's identity as his "only Son" admitted of multiple interpretations (5.604). But in the passage from *Paradise Regained* cited above, Satan also suggests, wrongly, that the title "Son of God" is not, with respect to himself, a relative term. When testing the applicability of that title to himself, he asserts it unequivocally as a categorical absolute capable of guaranteeing the stability and unity of his own identity over time: "The Son of God I also am, or was, / And if I was, I am; relation stands." Satan suggests here that he may have been an innocent Son at an earlier point in history before the rebellion of the angels, and he may be a fallen Son now; but innocent or fallen, he insists, he was, is, and always will be a "Son of God," an ontological distinction not to be changed by place or time.

The joke, of course, is on Satan, because the term "Son" in this poem must in all instances be understood to be a radically relative one. As Joan Webber has persuasively suggested, Satan's overconfident use of the word "relation" in the assertion "relation stands" betrays his misunderstanding of the contingency of creaturely authority in the Miltonic universe. Satan presumes that the relation of his past to his present claim to the title of divine sonship is not a contingent one, but an absolute, natural fact of biological continuity. It is a version of just this mistaken, non-relational understanding of "relation" that Milton, according to Webber, had already criticized in the regicide treatise *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*.<sup>3</sup> Royalists in 1649 had argued that Charles is the king now because he was the king before the rebellion. But rejecting the use of the term "king" as an absolute, Milton argued that "King and Subject are *relatives*, and relatives have no longer being than in the relation." Because the terms "king" and "subject" are relative, a king cannot maintain his identity as king if his subject "take[s] away the relation." As Charles I in Milton's *Tenure*, so Satan in *Paradise Regained*. "Son," like "king," functions as a "relative," nowhere more than in the radically meritocratic world of Milton's heaven: a son cannot persist in his titular sonship if his unfilial actions "take away the relation." The "relation" of Satan's sonship then and now cannot "stand," and in just over forty lines Satan, standing with the Son on the pinnacle, will fall.

Milton in this poem will push the problem of relativity much further than that, pressing us to ask the far more difficult question, whether the Son of God's sonship is similarly relative. Milton, quite shockingly, will nowhere in *Paradise Regained* insist on the Son's sonship as an absolute, as a position to which he is entitled by virtue of an unequivocal, primogenitive bloodtie to the Father. We are nowhere asked to care that the Son of God triumphs because of his simple identity as the "first-begot" (1.89) or because either he, or Satan, or both, at this moment learns that the Son was the first of

3. Joan Webber, "The Son of God and Power of Life in Three Poems by Milton," *ELH* 37 (1970): 191n. Victoria Kahn discusses Milton's argument for the relativity of kingship in *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton, N.J., 2004), 128-29.

the creatures generated by the Father. With impressive discipline, the poem refuses to represent any point at which the narrator or the Son or Satan is shown to understand, or to know, the essential nature of the Son's "relation" to the Father. The angels—who alone in the poem finally reveal the fact (one that all of Milton's readers naturally presume) that the Son of God had an existence in heaven before his birth as Jesus—do not in any way insist on the Son's identity as God's firstborn creature. Even for the angels, the Son's "relation" to the Father is *relative*: he is the Son of God not because he is the firstborn of all living creatures, but because he merited that relative title in the War in Heaven, actively "expressing" himself, just as he has here, as "the Son of God":

True Image of the Father whether throned  
 In the bosom of bliss, and light of light  
 Conceiving, or remote from Heav'n, enshrined  
 In fleshly tabernacle, and human form,  
 Wand'ring the wilderness, whatever place,  
 Habit, or state, or motion, still expressing  
 The Son of God, with Godlike force endued  
 Against th'attempter of thy Father's throne,  
 And thief of Paradise; him long of old  
 Thou didst debase, and down from Heaven cast  
 With all his Army, and now thou hast avenged  
 Supplanted Adam, and by vanquishing  
 Temptation, has regained lost Paradise.

(4.596–608)

In accounting for the motive behind his final temptation of the Son, Satan had struggled to produce a logical argument of relatedness ("if I was, I am") by which he could secure his sense of the continuity of his identity as a "Son of God": assuming that his identity as Son in the past guaranteed his identity as a Son in the present, Satan failed to recognize that the title of sonship is contingent on his active performance of sonship, a category of being Milton boldly encourages us to see as a relative term. Satan failed to convince himself, or us, of the survival of his title from his prelapsarian past to his postlapsarian present. What he accomplishes instead, ironically, is the manifestation of the historical continuity of the *Son's* identity as "the Son of God," from the glory days in the War in Heaven to the virtuous deprivation in his wilderness present. The Son maintains his sonship, "whether throned / In the bosom of bliss" or "enshrined / In fleshly tabernacle, and human form, / Wand'ring the wilderness, whatever place, / Habit, or state, or motion." By merit more than birthright, the Son *is* entitled to the title of Son, but that entitlement is contingent on his active "expression," or performance, of the office of sonship at all times, and in "whatever place, / Habit, or state, or motion."

The boldness of Milton's relativization of even the Son's identity as "Son" cannot be overstated. We might reasonably expect the poem to tell us, as Abdiel did in *Paradise Lost*, that the Son of God is the exalted "Son" by virtue of his status as the first of God's

creatures, and by virtue of the role he played in the creation of heaven and the angels, and of earth and its inhabitants. But the theological rationalizations of an Abdiel are nowhere heard in *Paradise Regained*, which will never directly assert that the Son has triumphed over Satan because he is God himself, or because he is the first-begotten of God, or because he had been exalted to the status of “Son” at some earlier, heavenly point in life. It is rather the same “Godlike force” with which presumably we are all endued that enables the Son, here in the wilderness of the present moment, to defeat the “attempter.” We may ourselves be tempted, when the Son says, standing, “Tempt not the Lord thy God,” to imagine that at the moment of this utterance both Satan and the Son come into a perfect knowledge of the “truth” of the Son’s identity as the first begotten, or even perhaps his identity as God himself. But it is a temptation that the poem urges us to resist, as the title “Lord thy God” is also, most crucially for Milton, a “relative”: as the antitrinitarian Milton had explained in his theological treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, the term “God” can itself be a title, one that the Father can willingly, provisionally bestow not only on his created Son but on angels as well.<sup>4</sup> Further, the passage from Deuteronomy the Son cites at the poem’s climax names not just “God” but the “Lord thy God.” The “Lord,” as was argued by the heretical early modern Arians, was never an unqualified term for the Most High God, but a relative term that named nothing more than the dominion of the divine being in question; the title “Lord” was, furthermore, most commonly applied not to the Father but to the Son.<sup>5</sup> The presence of the possessive pronoun “thy” modifying “God” only presses further the case for the relativity of the term “God,” as the godhood asserted by the Son at this moment might be relative to his addressee: if the Son can be seen obliquely to speak that quotation directly to Satan, his claim to be the “Lord thy God” may be no more than an allowable, still antitrinitarian, claim of a godlike dominion over his adversary at the moment of Satan’s defeat. The Son, in other words, may well be declaring his status as “God” on the pinnacle, but only insofar as he is claiming lordship, or dominion, over Satan, with relation to whom alone the title “God” at this moment may have its meaning.

The advance in the study of *Paradise Regained* over the last forty-five years has been focused on the complexity of Milton’s fashioning of the hero’s identity and of his representation of the hero’s actions. In her landmark 1966 study, *Milton’s Brief Epic*, Barbara Lewalski argued conclusively for the theological and narrative complexity of Milton’s presentation of the hero’s very nature.<sup>6</sup> And in an influential essay first published in 1983, Stanley Fish drew attention to the poem’s strategies for raising readerly expectations concerning its plot.<sup>7</sup> The enduring critical problems first raised by

4. Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, 2001), 385–87. See the passage in book 1, chapter 5 of Milton’s *On Christian Doctrine*, reprinted in *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of Milton*, 1183–88.

5. See Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford 1996), 79–84. Wiles (p. 80) cites an unpublished manuscript by the Arian Isaac Newton, who declares, “We worship the Father as God, the Son as Lord.”

6. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Milton’s Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of “Paradise Regained”* (Providence, R.I., 1966), 133–63, 314–21.

7. Stanley Fish, “Things and Actions Indifferent: The Temptation of Plot in *Paradise Regained*,” in *Composite Orders: The Genres of Milton’s Last Poems*, ed. Richard S. Ide and Joseph Wittreich Jr., *Milton Studies* 17 (Pittsburgh, 1983); reprinted in Fish, *How Milton Works*, 349–90.

Lewalski and Fish, about the nature in *Paradise Regained* of character and action, have proven to be mutually dependent: who the Son is can be understood only by what he does, and what it is the Son does, if that is ever to be understood, will always entail both who he *is* and, because the Son has a past life that he may or may not be able to remember, who he *has been*.



Each of the essays included in this collection of new readings of Milton's poem responds to the radical extent to which *Paradise Regained* is both riven and made whole by a complex interplay of the mutually dependent terms Milton would have called "relatives." These contributions to the study of Milton's most conceptually challenging poem focus on the interaction and intersection of opposing, but related, intellectual traditions, literary genres, political philosophies, theologies, identities, and actions. The volume opens with essays by Thomas Festa and Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler, who account for the poem's engagement with competing cultural traditions and modes of knowledge acquisition. The tension Festa notes in the interplay of the classical and the scriptural influences on Milton's "brief epic" has long been discussed by Milton's critical readers. But Festa goes further to argue for the way in which the competition between classical literature and holy writ intersects a related opposition between literal and spiritual interpretations of scriptural or, in fact, any literature. Skerpan-Wheeler examines *Paradise Regained* in light of Milton's strong commitment to the modern method of intellectual organization forwarded by the sixteenth-century French Protestant logician Pierre de la Ramée. Milton's hero, in Skerpan-Wheeler's analysis, is endowed with a dim intuition of the nature of his identity as the Son of God. But his internal, intuitive knowledge of who, and whose, he is cannot manifest itself by some ineffable spiritual communication. The Son's "private" intuition of his identity is transmuted into a broader, "public" knowledge by means of an entirely human, indeed academic, verbal engagement with his sparring partner, Satan; the Son's Ramist rhetorical and epistemological method requires him to test, in dialogue with another, the relative weight of related versions of the truth. For both Festa and Skerpan-Wheeler, the hero's final accomplishment in *Paradise Regained* rests on the poem's insistent staging of a conflict between competing but related exegetical and epistemological modes and systems.

It is the contentious contemporary seventeenth-century world of English literary, religious, and political culture that marks the analyses of *Paradise Regained* by Emily Griffiths Jones and Feisal G. Mohamed. Jones's argument explores the essentially romance structure of Milton's plot, which traces the Son of God's discovery of his royal birthright and his just inheritance of a kingdom that had been fraudulently usurped by an evil half-brother. The scripturally oriented "providential romance" of *Paradise Regained* positions itself in opposition to the culture's dominant literary practice of romance narrative. The heroes of the contemporary Restoration prose romances by Margaret Cavendish and Percy Herbert, Jones argues, traverse their

landscapes with a decidedly modern, skeptical canniness. And the Royalism implicit in the Hobbesian sensibilities of their heroes provokes Milton to fashion a romance that subjects the earthly to the heavenly kingdom, and the world of radical contingency to the more patient, and implicitly nonmonarchic, universe of Christian providence. For Mohamed, it is the contemporary seventeenth-century revival of Stoicism, and especially the contemporary readings of the book of Job, against which Milton positions the literary and political identities of his hero and his poem. Mohamed likens Milton's anti-Stoic reading of Job to that of the poet's friend Sir Henry Vane, finding in both men the starkest opposition to the Stoic and Royalist engagement with Job by the popular contemporary poet Francis Quarles. In praising not a soulless, calculated exercise of Stoic reason but the Son's passionate, indeed "hungering," commitment to obedience, Milton's poem, according to Mohamed, voices its allegiance to the idiosyncratic political philosophy of a virtuous, obedient, "godly" republicanism.

David Schmitt and Eric Song pursue a different means by which to explain the welter of political energies fueling *Paradise Regained*. The conceptual binary that marks their investigations is the alternating stress in Milton's poem on privacy and publicity. Schmitt identifies in the Act of Uniformity in 1662, and in subsequent Restoration attempts to legislate religious conformity, a systematic attempt to isolate the private realm of belief from the public realm of religious practice. Avoiding any explicit appeal to the contested term "conscience," Schmitt's Milton exposes the public relevance and scope of conscientious privacy. For Eric Song, Milton's attention to the related, but relative, binaries of publicity and privacy expands to encompass the realm of gender and sexuality. From there, the tension between privacy and publicity is felt to reverberate even more broadly, affecting even the poem's central theological and narrative mystery: the Son's almost incomprehensible identity as both human and divine. Like Schmitt, Song finds in the poem's systematic antinomies the basis for an implicit politics, but for Song it is a broader struggle to forge a "political theology" that motivates Milton's complication of the categories of privacy and publicity.

This volume concludes with essays whose influence can be traced to the mythopoetic reading of *Paradise Regained* of Northrop Frye.<sup>8</sup> In very different ways Andrew Kau and David Quint see in *Paradise Regained* the poet's crucial re-engagement with the mythic concerns of his earlier poetry. For Kau, it is the cultural, even ideological, significances attached differentially to Adam and to Eve in *Paradise Lost* that structure an almost typological interplay of competing ideas and ideals in the sequel. Asserted explicitly as a new Adam, the Son in *Paradise Regained* is also, in Kau's account, a new Eve. Although she appears to have only a shadowy presence in Milton's later poem, the figure of Eve, or what Kau calls the "Eve function," permits Milton to imagine a redemption of paradise by the ethical, not theological, categories of freedom and individualism. Quint expands Frye's interpretation of *Paradise Regained* to

8. Northrop Frye, "The Typology of *Paradise Regained*," *Modern Philology* 53 (1956): 227–38. See also Frye's *Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (Toronto, 1965); and James Nohrberg, "Paradise Regained by One Greater Man: Milton's Wisdom Epic as a 'Fable of Identity,'" in *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, ed. Eleanor Cook (Toronto, 1985), 91–93.



make sense of Satan's important but hitherto overlooked claim to possess the natural world. At stake in the competition played out in Milton's narrative for the "ownership" of nature is the degree to which we should be permitted to find in the world itself a numinous presence, whether pagan or Christian, or any ground whatsoever beneath our claims of independent authority. Quint shows us Milton returning in this late poem to the problems in the Nativity Ode with which he began his literary career, producing, in the later poem, a profoundly equivocal solution to the question of the relative value of a stripped-down monotheism, on the one hand, and, on the other, a vision of nature as an independent ground of human authority.

As do most studies of *Paradise Regained*, nearly every essay in this volume applies its analysis of competing "relatives," or conditioned relative terms and problems, to illuminate the most important, and most baffling, scene in Milton's poem, the moment at which the Son meets Satan's request to stand on the pinnacle of the Temple of Jerusalem (4.541–95). What actually happens just before, during, and after the Son stands and Satan falls, Milton carefully screens from our view and our understanding. But as the essays here make splendidly clear, it is not our business in reading *Paradise Regained* to seek to identify in any of the poem's pronouncements the poet's definitive resolution of Christianity's deepest mysteries. What of the Son of God's mysterious identity Satan and the Son come to understand at the poem's end is, crucially, never clarified, nor is the nature of the action that initiates Satan's fall and the Son's triumph. What, further, a recovered paradise would actually look like, and what its regaining would actually mean, is not something that Milton's poem pressures itself to reveal, at least in any easily recognizable, declarative form. It is not one theological fact or another, or, for that matter, one ethical, or political, or aesthetic fact or opinion or another, that is permitted to stand assertively as a "truth" by the end of the poem. Rather, as Satan himself declares, ignorant of its wider meaning, and as the contributors to this volume implicitly assert, *relation stands*: it is the relation of dialectically poised pairs of facts, opinions, traditions, and beliefs whose interpretable interplay constitutes the only body of truth *Paradise Regained* will permit itself to assert.

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