

Better to Reign in Hell?: Paradise Twice Lost

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Abstract In *Paradise Lost*, Satan utters the assertion, “Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven,” but Satan is the Prince of Liars. This study finds that he is rationalizing. The evidence shows that he finds no joy in Hell and resorts to schemes to leave the place at the first opportunity. As the brightest of God’s angels, Lucifer was in the Paradise of Heavenly Delight. When he served God, he had the respect and admiration of all the other angels. While the motivation for his rebellion against God may be the subject of some disagreements—the most likely reason being his envy of the Son—his cause was lost from the start against an omnipotent God. Having lost his war in Heaven, Lucifer (now called Satan) and his followers were cast out of Heaven—out of Paradise—and plunged into Hell, chained to a lake of fire that emitted no light, and condemned to an eternity of pain and suffering. The assertion that such a condition could in any sense be “better” would seem preposterous, but then again, Satan is a liar, and the assertion may be considered a classic example of psychological rationalization.

Keywords: Milton, *Paradise Lost*, punishment, rationalization, regret, remorse, Satan

Introduction

In a reading of John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*, the common inference, and the author’s apparent implication, is that the title applies solely to the disobedience and consequent Fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In this study, we explore an earlier expulsion, the expulsion of Lucifer, now Satan, and his rebellious angels from the Paradise of Heaven. Lucifer, the Light Bearer, mounted a war in Heaven, his cause nominally being that God was a tyrant who needed to be overthrown, as Charles I was overthrown by the armed forces of the British Parliament in Milton’s lifetime and for whose regicide Milton was the chief apologist (Hyman & Bennett, 1978). Indeed, Bernstein (1986) traces Hell as a means of retribution to the Old Testament: “Hell was sought first by the psalmist as a weapon against the tyrant, as *a cri de coeur* [a cry from the heart] against oppression” (p. 89).

At the outset, although it is not central to the purpose of this study, we are obliged to consider what it was that caused Lucifer to organize a host of angels into an army that would oppose the all-powerful King of Heaven to the extent of initiating a war against him. In the course of this study, we encounter several candidate explanations: pride, envy of the Son, a desire for freedom from a King’s tyranny, or some other grievance.

Lucifer, who, having lost his war against the all-powerful God, is hereafter assigned the name Satan, the Adversary. We may assume at the start that being the brightest angel in Heaven contributed in part or in whole to Lucifer’s hubris, to the point of arrogance, and to his presuming to be next in line to be King of Heaven. Fenton (2005/2006) offers a rather different perspective, that God might have misled Lucifer into believing that he was not omnipotent, that there could be hope that the rebellion might succeed (Zarov, 1973). Corroborating that view is the matter of God’s

placing Adam and Eve in deliberate peril, knowing that they would succumb to the seduction of Satan.

The perennial question asked by theologians from the beginning of the time of Moses's account of the Fall is why God put the object of temptation squarely in the center of the Garden of Eden. Such behavior on the part of the omniscient, omnipotent God appears to be consistent with the view that Lucifer was intentionally misled. Otherwise, how could he have had any hope of success in defeating the King? "Even Gabriel seems to acknowledge that it was not necessarily a foregone conclusion that Satan would lose" (Fenton, p. 48). A close reading of Book IV supports that assessment (IV, 906-961).

Having lost their war of rebellion, the defeated angels were cast into utter darkness and chained to a lake of fire that burned but gave no light. Once residents of a celestial Paradise, the fallen angels were now consigned to eternal suffering in Hell. In what would appear to be in direct conflict with the ancient rules of war, there is no indication, no hint, of mercy on the part of the victorious King of Heaven. As Armstrong (1992) puts it, "...the more humane punishments are denied to Satan and the fallen angels" (p. 94). It is here that Satan claims it is "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven". A careful reading of *Paradise Lost* and other texts casts doubt on the claim. An alternative interpretation of Satan's statement is that he is rationalizing, covering up the terrible outcome of his decision with a veneer of positivism.

The Research Question

This study aims to discover whether, and if so, to what extent, Satan's pronouncement in *Paradise Lost* that it is "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven" reflects his true feeling or is the product of rationalizing his loss of the Paradise of Heaven. A corollary question is, Where is the evidence that Satan would truly find it "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven"?

Methods

We employ multiple methods of inquiry, the premise being that several methods can improve

the validity of the analysis and evaluation of our understanding of Satan's claim that it is "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven". We start with a thematic review of the critical literature of *Paradise Lost* and do a close reading of what the poem has to say about Satan, Heaven, and Hell. We also examine other texts dealing with those subjects.

Results

Who or What is Satan?

Is Satan a person or an idea? In Christian theology, Satan is "the proper name of the Devil, the supreme embodiment or spirit of evil, the tempter and spiritual enemy of humankind, the adversary of God" (OED, 2008). In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is a person, a being much in the form and attitudes of a human. Milton here adheres to the long-held view of many, that God did not create man in his own image, but rather man created God in his image. In the poem, Satan exhibits the characteristics of man: pride, fear, jealousy, and narcissism.

Milton's Satan is by all counts, "the personification of evil" (Russell, 1987, p. 36). In the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, et al.), God boasts, "I create the light; I create the darkness" (Isaiah, 45:7). So tradition suggests that God created Satan, but the children of Israel created evil. The dilemma, of course, is that if God is omnipotent, omnibeneficent, omniscient, and omnipresent, how can evil exist in the world? This is the problem of theodicy, to which Milton provides the answer: God gave free choice to both humans and angels. It is in "later Christian tradition, dramatized by Dante (1472/2003) and Milton, Satan came to rule Hell, to punish people there, and to suffer there himself" (Russell, 1987, p. 240).

That Satan is a consummate liar, a master manipulator of language and rhetoric, is well documented. He uses powerfully persuasive speech and credible arguments to mislead and delude others into backing his cause. This can be seen in Book II of *Paradise Lost* when Satan addresses the fallen angels, distorting the truth and presenting a warped version of the history leading up to the war in Heaven and its consequences.

When Lucifer challenged the King of Heaven, he might have known that to lose would result in calamitous consequences. “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:24). There is no doubt that Satan suffers in Hell. According to Milton’s narrator, he is “racked with deep despair” (PL I: 126). Beer (2008) writes that he is “constantly attempting to assuage his pain, never succeeding” (p. 317). There remains the question raised by Fenton (2005/2006) as to whether God might have given false hope to Lucifer, suggesting in some way that a rebellion might succeed against a God who was not omnipotent. We leave that intriguing notion for another study.

In consideration of Evil personified in Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Gilbert (1923) explains how and why Adam and Eve fear Satan. Although the war in Heaven “was not part of Milton’s purpose,” the narrative develops “the character of Satan, and [shows] how evil leaders hold their influence in spite of the protests of the more acute of the mass—represented by Abdiel.” Opposing the view that Satan is somehow the “hero” of the poem, we note that while he is named 72 times, Eve is mentioned 408 times, God 342, and Adam 109.

Heaven and Hell

Every culture, every religion, has its mythical version of the afterlife. Judaism has its Shamayim (Gruenthaner, 1947), Christianity its Heaven, and Islam its Jannah (Ouis, 1998). The brave Viking aspired to enter Valhalla. Greek heroes on whom the gods conferred immortality enjoyed eternal bliss in the Elysian Fields, as, according to Pindar (498 BCE/2008), did all Greeks who led a righteous life. Virtuous Hindus find their bliss in Svarga (Jacobsen, 2009). Each of these, reflecting the values of its culture, offers hope after a life of pain, deprivation, oppression, and injustice, a proposition that Marx derides when he claims that “Religion is the opiate of the masses” (Birnbaum, 1953, p. 131).

Lucifer, the angelic Light Bearer, could enjoy all the benefits that humans were denied during their lifetimes (Ross, 1985; Newton, 1997).

He had immortality with but one obligation: To obey the King, no more than that. Whatever the reason, Lucifer could not bear that burden. His punishment was to be cast into Hell, where he uttered his rationalization, “Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.” Really? What might Hell have been like? To begin, Milton invokes “the deep Tract of Hell” (PL I: 28), signaling darkness and distance from God, which is the standard theological definition of Hell (Blake, 1790/2018; Broadbent, 1954).

McDermott (1967, p. 186) offers three perspectives of Hell, drawing on Christian tradition: The Hebrew Sheol or Greek Hades; Gehenna, the hellfire of the New Testament; and Tartarus. The first two, Sheol and Hades simply connote death, although Hades was the God of the Underworld in Greek mythology and later became known as the place of the inferno for immoral gods and humans. Gehenna and Tartarus, however, conjure the perdition intended by Milton as the fate of Satan and his followers. Pain! Eternal suffering! God inflicted on the rebels such punishment as cannot be imagined; for example, Satan and his fellow fallen angels lay “Groveling and prostrate on yon Lake of Fire” (PL I: 280). In Greek mythology, Tartarus stands as a primeval deity and a vast abyss located beneath the earth. It served as a place of revenge for the most heinous gods, as well as the Titans, those vanquished in the Titanomachy, the war between the Titans and the Olympian gods, and mortals. It is this picture that Milton draws as the Hell that Satan haughtily suggests he prefers.

In the Western, especially Christian, tradition, Hell is a dark and desolate place of despair, with no hope or possibility of relief. The narrator of The Revelation to John, the last book of The New Testament, writes, “And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15, King James Version), a text from which Milton draws his description of the punishment of Satan and his fellow rebels. In Matthew 25:41, Jesus judges those who failed to care for those in need: “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” and in verse 46: “And these

shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

Rationalization

As a psychological defense mechanism, to rationalize is “to explain or justify (one’s behavior or attitude) to oneself or others with plausible but specious reasons, usually unwittingly” (OED, 2008). A common, if humorous, example is the boy who, not having studied, fails a test and claims, “The teacher hates me.” Brody and Costa (2020) found associations with deeper psychological problems. “Rationalization has been found to be associated not only with poorer emotional development, but also with a broad range of antisocial behavior, including not only shoplifting, but also pedophilia and murder” (p. 1). Satan’s rationalization is flawed. He is blinded by his pride, envy, and ambition, and he fails to see the true nature of hell. In reality, hell is a place of eternal suffering and torment. Satan will never be able to find satisfaction or happiness there.

Having lost his position in the Paradise of Heaven, Satan sees himself as a powerful being who refuses to submit to anyone, including God. If he cannot rule in Heaven, as was the aim of his rebellion, then he will rule in Hell. In any event, he is determined to rule. He sees himself as a victim of injustice. To the extent that the punishment he and his followers received at the hands of the King of Heaven may be seen as lacking proportionality, one of the pillars of just war tradition (Hurka, 2005), he may have the basis for a legitimate case. Unfortunately for him, there is no higher court to which to appeal. Instead, he uses the rationalization evident in his assertion that it is “Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.” From a purely hedonistic perspective, given the paradisiacal nature of Heaven contrasted with the eternal agony of Hell, who in his right mind would prefer the latter?

Free Will

Free will is Milton’s answer to the riddle of theodicy. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “free will” as,

The power of an individual to make free choices, not determined by divine predestination, the laws of physical causality, fate, etc. Also, the doctrine that human beings possess this power and are hence able to direct and bear responsibility for their own actions. (OED, 2008).

Lucifer and his followers were unhappy with the situation in Heaven and considered God to be a tyrant. They had free will. They had choices. They could have taken the path of the Stoics, accepting, even loving, their fate, *Amor fati* (Kronman, 1995). After all, it was God who created them in the first place. They could have tried negotiating with God, airing their grievances, even though they knew their bargaining power was weak. They could have sought the intervention of the Son. They chose war. The consequences of that decision were disastrous for Lucifer and his followers. An opposing view might be that the angels really had no free choice. If they followed the rules of the King, they would be safe in their Heavenly Paradise. That might be considered coercion rather than freedom. They had the freedom to do what they were told! Alternatively, if they were to choose a different path, a deviation from the King’s rules, they would suffer incalculable harm.

Eve also had the choice of obeying God’s law or violating it. She chose the latter. In her defense, it may be argued that she was weak and vulnerable to Satan’s importuning. Adam had no such defense. He knew what he was doing. He could obey God’s commandment and live, but without Eve. Or he could disobey and die but remain with Eve during his lifetime. He chose death, but he chose willingly, knowing full well the consequences of his decision. Free will, or the ability to decide for himself, may be at issue for Satan. He knows about free will, but he does not have the ability to choose for himself. Satan desires freedom. He does not want to be bound by God’s rules and regulations.

Satan’s rationalization is powerful. It is a recognition that even the most evil of us can find ways to justify our actions. It is also a warning about the dangers of pride and ambition. When we become too focused on our own power and glory,

we risk losing sight of what has the greatest value, not only to ourselves but to others, as well. In the end, Satan's rationalization is tragic. He chooses to rebel against God and suffer the consequences, all because he cannot accept his place in the universe. The story of Satan's decision to wage an unwinnable war is a cautionary tale about the dangers of pride and ambition, and it teaches us the importance of humility.

Finally, the evidence that Satan would truly believe it to be "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven" comes from Milton's identification of Satan from a line in the Book of Isaiah, where Satan is described as "the king of Babylon":

"That thou shalt take up this proverb against the king of Babylon, and say, How hath the oppressor ceased! The golden city ceased!" (KJV, 14:4).

If more evidence is needed, we may refer to the Book of Job, where Satan challenges God to allow him to test Job's faith (Job 1:6-22). When the Lord asks Satan, "Whence comest thou?" Satan answered, "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." Satan believes he knows men and that he can defeat the Lord in a contest over the control of men. This suggests that Satan is arrogant and believes that he is more powerful than God. Herein lies the answer to the question as to why Satan would commence the war in Heaven, a war he is bound to lose, one that no rational being would dare. He is willing to risk his own punishment in order to prove his point.

Satan is ambitious in the extreme and desires power, whatever the cost to himself and to others. He is unlike most normal beings, those who take measures to avoid pain and suffering. Narcissist to the end, he would rather be the ruler of a dark and hellish realm than serve as a subordinate in a heavenly kingdom.

Discussion

The God of Abraham inflicts cruel and unusual punishment on those who offend him. The Book of the Revelation to John, the final book of the King James Version of the Holy Bible, describes

Satan as being cast into the lake of fire, where he will be tormented for all eternity: "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10, KJV).

John is not alone in using fire as punishment for those who violate the rules of the King of Heaven. In the Gospel According to St. Matthew, Jesus says, "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'" (25:41).

We find evidence to believe that Satan is rationalizing when he makes his assertion. First, Satan's words come after he has already been cast out of Heaven. His claim is wishful thinking rather than a realistic assessment of his situation. Second, Satan's claim is a sign of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder. He is unwilling to accept the conclusion of his war, that he is not equal to God, so he would rather rule over a kingdom of his own, even if it is in Hell, than serve God in Heaven. Third, Satan's words are contradicted by his actions. After he is cast out of Heaven, Satan does not try to build a kingdom in Hell. Instead, he spends his time trying to corrupt humanity and lead them away from God. Satan's real goal is not to "reign" in Hell, but to destroy God's creation.

To summarize, there is strong evidence to suggest that Satan is rationalizing when he says, "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven." His words are motivated by his pride and his desire to destroy God's creation. They do not reflect a realistic assessment of his situation or his true goals. Satan is ultimately defeated by God, but he will never give up his pride or his desire for power. This study concludes that Paradise was lost twice, first by Lucifer as a consequence of his failed rebellion against God, the King of Heaven, and second by Adam and Eve after they disobeyed that King's commandment.

Neither loss could have happened but for the fact that each had free will. Each had the freedom to choose from among alternative paths.

Each chose a path that would lead to a catastrophic outcome. Much has been written about Lucifer's choice and even more about the choices of Adam and Eve. Less consideration, however, has been given to the underlying force connecting the two incidents of the loss of Paradise.

Can we ever know if Satan would truly find it "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven"? We find no clear answer in the Bible or in *Paradise Lost*, for in the end, both Satan and his band of fallen angels are metamorphosed into hissing snakes: "dreadful was the din/Of hissing through the Hall" (PL IX, 521-522).

Left open in the poem, and in this study, is the question of the nature of good and evil. Satan tells us that he believes he can be a more effective agent if he has power. If that is his motivation, does that necessarily make him evil? Or is it possible that there is a kind of "good" that comes from power? Do candidates for election run to enrich themselves or to acquire power to do good works? These are questions that have been debated by philosophers and theologians for centuries and will likely continue for so long as people search for answers to what appear to be imponderable questions.

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