

Thaddeus Parker

David Ainsworth

EN 335-001

8 May 2009

Evil as Justification for Redemption

The nature of good and evil is very central to the arguments presented in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Readers of *Paradise Lost* may at times feel that the exact nature of good and evil is left rather ambiguous. Consequently, numerous interpretations of good and evil may be derived from the arguments presented within each book of the epic poem. One such interpretation of good and evil assumes that while evil presents a relevant threat which is allowed by God, this threat in turn is justification for God's redemption. Such an interpretation is supported by several events which transpire in *Paradise Lost*. Among these events are the battle which takes place in heaven, the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son. Upon comparing these events, a pattern emerges which provides a unifying element to the presentation of evil in *Paradise Lost*. This pattern consists of God allowing evil to become relevant, thereby allowing evil to inflict a varying degree of harm, and God using this harm for the purpose of supplying redemption. When considering this pattern as an explanation for the nature of evil as it is presented in *Paradise Lost*, the relevant threat of evil is suddenly seen as the means through which God grants redemption. Inherently, God is presented in these events as the only force capable of both allowing evil to pose a relevant threat and defeating evil. Therefore, it may be inferred that evil is powerless in comparison to God while still remaining a force capable of harm. This paper is meant to expand on the pattern

inherent in the above mentioned events and how each of these events presents evil as both a relevant threat and a means for redemption.

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, God allows evil to possess the power to cause harm while disallowing evil that same power through the act of redemption. The war in Heaven is the first example of this which I will address. At the beginning of the battle, God sees Satan and his followers preparing to engage in combat with the angelic forces of heaven. He tells the Son that “such a foe / Is rising, who intends to erect his Throne / Equal to ours, throughout the spacious North; / Nor so content, hath in his thought to try / In battle, what our Power is, or our right” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 724-728). The Son then states, “Mighty Father, thou thy foes / Justly hast in derision, and secure / Laugh’st at thir vain designs and tumults vain, / Illustrates, when they see all Regal Power / Giv’n me to quell thir pride, and in event / Know whether I be dext’rous to subdue Thy Rebels” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 735-742). Several things are evident in the previously quoted passages. Firstly, it is evident that the Son will be given the power to defeat Satan and his rebellious forces. This power will ultimately be supplied by God, further proving that God is the source of the power of redemption. Secondly, it can be assumed that God is allowing Satan and his rebellious forces to engage in battle since God is the source of their, albeit postponed, defeat. It is in the battle of heaven that the pattern of redemption through the enabling of evil is apparent. God is both allowing Satan the chance to do battle while also supplying power through the Son to redeem heaven and the angelic forces. In further support of this pattern, the war in heaven presents evil as a relevant threat to God’s angelic forces. Satan and his forces intelligently plot against the forces of good by adapting their tactics. While recuperating from battle, Satan addresses his followers, saying, “The remedy; perhaps more valid Arms, / Weapons more violent, when next we meet, / May serve to better us, and worse our foes, / Or equal what

between us what made the odds, / In Nature none” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 438-445). While the rebellious angels are not necessarily winning during the battle in Heaven, they are equally not losing, at least when pitted against God’s forces. When describing the battle to Adam, Raphael states, “long time in even scale / The Battle hung” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 245-246). Even though God is allowing Satan and his rebellious army to engage in battle, God is also the source of power for the angelic forces during the battle. Raphael mentions the limitations imposed by God during the battle stating, “Though not destroy, thir happy Native seat; / Had not th’ Eternal King Omnipotent / From his stronghold of Heavn’ high over-rul’d / And limited thir might” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 226-229). God clearly limits the angelic force’s level of strength to match that of Satan’s forces. Furthermore, Raphael mentions that God strengthens his angels stating, “Forthwith (behold the excellence, the power / Which God hath in his mighty Angels plac’d)” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 637-638). God is presented as being the source of power for his angelic forces, both limiting their capabilities as well as sustaining them during battle. The nature of battle between the rebellious angels and God’s angelic forces further proves to emphasize the dependence that each force has on the power of God. The angelic forces are dependant upon the power of God to do battle while the rebellious angels are allowed to continue fighting because God postpones the release of the Son. When describing the fury of the Son, Raphael states, “...into terror chang’d / His count’nance too severe to be beheld / And full of wrath bent on his Enemies” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 825-827). The furious Son is able to drive the evil forces into Chaos and consequently redeem heaven from Satan’s influence. Therefore, the battle in heaven is a way through which God is able to redeem his angelic forces from the threat of Satan’s rebellious angels. God allows Satan and his rebellious forces the ability to engage in battle, presenting a relevant threat to heaven, and then uses this battle as a chance to redeem heaven through the power he places in the Son.

Another example of God allowing evil to possess power while ultimately intending to enact redemption is the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The rebellious angels are fully aware that another attempt to attack heaven directly would be futile. The walls of heaven are indeed impenetrable as God sees all things. During the council in Hell, the devil Belial states, “he from Heav’n’s highth / All these motions vain, sees and derides” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 190-191). Satan and the fallen angels ultimately choose a plan that involves corrupting mankind as it is the only perceivable way in which they may enact revenge. In reference to this plan, Beelzebub states, “This would surpass / Common revenge, and interrupt his joy / in our Confusion, and our Joy upraise / In his disturbance” (*Paradise Lost* 2: 370-373). Nevertheless, just as God sees Satan and his rebellious forces preparing to engage in battle, so he also sees Satan entering the Garden of Eden. In *Paradise Lost*, it states that God “then survey’d / Hell and the Gulf between, and *Satan* there / Coasting the wall of Heav’n” as he traverses Chaos on his way to the Garden of Eden (*Paradise Lost* 3: 69-71). God in turn tells the Son that “Man will heark’n to his glozing lies / And easily transgress the sole Command / Sole pledge of his obedience” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 93-95). The previously quoted passages are important for two reasons. Firstly, they reiterate the assumption that God has all power over evil. Even as God watches Satan entering the Garden of Eden, he does nothing to stop him. God even says that he made Adam and Eve “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 99). In allowing Satan to tempt Adam and Eve, God is clearly withholding the power which he will later give the Son. This allows evil to pose a relevant threat to mankind, even more relevant than the threat evil posed to the angelic forces as mankind will have to endure death as a punishment for their sins. The world resulting from Adam and Eve’s decision is one plagued with sin and death. When Michael gives Adam a glimpse of his future descendants, Adam is saddened upon

witnessing the ramifications of his decision to deliberately disobey God. Through the decisions of Adam and Eve, evil is allowed dominion over all creation. Through the glimpse of the future which Michael gives Adam, it is evident that evil will pose a very relevant threat to mankind. Although Adam and Eve will die for their sins, it is through their sinful act that they and their offspring will ultimately receive redemption. Upon making the proclamation that man will indeed fall, God says that “Man therefore shall find grace, / The other none: in Mercy and Justice both, / Through Heav’n and Earth, so shall my glory excel, / But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 131-134). In response to God’s willingness to give grace to man, the Son says, “Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life/ I offer, on mee let thine anger fall; / Account mee man; I for his sake will leave/ Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee/ Freely put off, and for him lastly die” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 236-240). Just as the Son received power from God to redeem the angelic forces, he will also receive power from God to redeem mankind. It is in the above situation that a pattern of redemption through the enabling of evil is apparent. God is both allowing Satan the chance to do harm to Adam and Eve while also supplying power through the Son to redeem mankind. It is through the Son that God will provide redemption. It is through allowing evil to pose a relevant threat to mankind that God will justify redemption. God knows that Adam and Eve will partake of the fruit. He allows Satan to enter the Garden of Eden while knowing the Son will be sacrificed to redeem mankind.

Another example of God allowing evil to possess power while ultimately intending to enact redemption is the death and resurrection of the Son. In order for redemption to be available to mankind, God will first have to allow death to overcome the Son. When the Son volunteers to atone for the sins of mankind, God exclaims that “Heavenly love shall outdo Hellish hate, / Giving to death, and dying to redeem, / So dearly to redeem what Hellish hate / so easily

restored” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 298-301). Through this quote, it is evident that God will give death temporary power over the Son. This is the price which must be paid for the sins of mankind. By offering the Son as a sacrifice, God is ultimately allowing evil to have dominion over the Son. Nevertheless, it is through the sacrifice of the Son that God will redeem mankind. God will allow evil to become relevant so to create a path for redemption. When Michael tells Adam about the Son who will be called the seed of woman, he states, “The Law of God exact he shall fulfill / Both by obedience and by love, though love / Alone fulfill the Law; thy punishment / He shall endure by coming in the Flesh / To a reproachful life and cursed death” (*Paradise Lost* 12: 402-406). Michael also states that “Death over him no power / Shall long usurp; ere the third dawning light / Return, the Stars of Morn shall see him rise / Out of his grave, fresh as the dawning light / Thy ransom paid, which Man from death redeems” (*Paradise Lost* 12: 420-425). Through this quote, it is once again evident that the sacrifice of the Son will make possible God’s redemption. It is through the Son’s power, which is provided by God, that he will be able to overcome death and resurrect on the third day. In giving evil power, God is allowing death, the result of evil, to be overcome.

While the instances in *Paradise Lost* where God allows evil to pose a relevant threat are few, only one is needed to conclude that God allows evil to succeed. If God did in fact intend for evil to succeed, this would inherently mean that God allows evil to have power. Consequently, this would also mean that evil is subjective to the will of God. Whether Milton justifies such reasoning is dependent on the reader’s interpretation of the events in *Paradise Lost*. Through the battle which takes place in heaven, the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son, God is able to display his power through redemption. Each of these examples involves God allowing evil to possess power and pose a relevant threat

while ultimately using the harm inflicted by evil as justification for redemption. Therefore, it can be reasoned that Milton did in fact justify God's allowing evil to possess power. While this interpretation contains unanswered questions of its own, nevertheless, it also contains a possible explanation for why God allows evil to succeed: so that good may succeed in the end.

Numerous interpretations of good and evil may be derived from the arguments presented within each book of *Paradise Lost*, one of which assumes that the power of evil itself, although given by God, is justification for redemption. Several events of *Paradise Lost* inherently cast God as the enabling force behind evil. Among these events are the battle which takes place in heaven, the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son. The pattern inherent in these events consists of God allowing evil to become relevant, thereby allowing evil to inflict a varying degree of harm, and God using this harm for the purpose of enacting redemption. When considering this pattern as an explanation for the nature of evil as it is presented in *Paradise Lost*, the relevant threat of evil can be interpreted as the means through which God grants redemption. Inherently, God is presented in these events as the only force capable of both allowing evil to pose a relevant threat and defeating evil. Therefore, it may be inferred that evil is powerless in comparison to God while still remaining a force capable of harm. However, it can be interpreted that the power of evil is justified so that good may prevail. By allowing evil to succeed, God is also giving the descendants of Adam and Eve a path to redemption.