

Cayman Caven

EN 335-001

Paper 3

April 29, 2013

The Fall of Man: Fated or Chosen?

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve's having free will changes the reading of the poem. But did they actually have free will? Or were they fated to fall and do everything the way that they did? Many scholars, myself included, feel that Adam and Eve are caught in a "middle ground" position; they are not entirely free, but they are also not entirely fated. For these purposes, having free will means that Adam and Eve can do anything they want, whenever they want to do it; whereas fate means that God has already decided everything for them and they cannot make any decisions for themselves. This "middle ground" position means that Adam and Eve are fated to be put in certain situations and face certain people, but the way they handle those people and situations is completely under their own control. Therefore, by these definitions of the fate and free will debate, Adam and Eve did in fact choose to exercise their free will, eat the fruit, and fall; which is demonstrated by closely examining *Paradise Lost*.

In Book Five, Adam and Eve discuss a dream that Eve had in which she eats fruit from the forbidden tree. In trying to comfort her that it was merely a dream, Adam says that the dream "gives [him] hope / that what in sleep [she] didst abhor to dream, / waking [she] never wilt consent to do" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 119-121). The use of the word "consent" is a very important element of this passage because it implies that they have free will. If everything is pre-ordained and decided for them, then they would not be able to consent to anything. When Adam finds the "unwak'n'd Eve / With tresses discompos'd, and glowing Cheek, / As through

unquiet rest,” the reader knows that Eve has had a bad dream (*Paradise Lost* 5: 9-11). It seems as if God fated Satan to “Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of Eve” and whisper to her in Book Four so that she would have this dream (*Paradise Lost* 4: 800); Eve says, “But of offense and trouble, which my mind / Knew never till this irksome night” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 34-35). Since her dream contained trouble that was previously unbeknownst, God must have fated her to subconsciously listen to Satan’s whispering and have this dream; she could not have dreamed about something that she had no knowledge of unless someone deliberately planted that knowledge within her. The dream serves as a warning and a preview for what is to come; however, she has free will to interpret the dream and heed its warning. In providing this dream, Milton makes the reader wonder what Eve will and will not consent to do throughout the poem. Is this dream indicative of her attitudes about the tree? Or will she later be convinced to eat from it? Milton’s discussion of the dream four books before he gets to the fall of man gives the reader ample time to begin forming some ideas about Adam and Eve and their free will. The fact that within the dream, Eve is fated to disobey God, fall from grace, and be so upset about having this dream implies that when awake, she would exercise her free will and obey God if she is tested by the serpent.

Also in Book Five, God sends Raphael to Earth to warn Adam and Eve of the danger that Satan brings to man. God tells Raphael:

. . . and such discourse bring on,
 As may advise him of his happy state,
 Happiness in his power left free to will,
 Left to his own free Will, his Will though free,
 Yet mutable: . . . (*Paradise Lost* 5: 233-237)

God wants to warn Adam and Eve not to fall for Satan's trickery, which implies that they have free will. If they were fated to fall, why would God waste time sending Raphael to Earth to warn them? If they were indeed fated, warning them would not do any good – they would fall no matter what Raphael said. They are, in fact, fated to be warned by Raphael, but they have free will to choose whether or not to heed his warning. Therefore, the fact that God wants Raphael to warn them points toward the fact that they have free will, a sentiment that is also realized in the conversation Raphael has with Adam and Eve. Raphael tells them that to persevere, God “left it in [their] power, ordain'd [their] will / by nature free, not over-rul'd by Fate / Inextricable, or strict necessity” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 525-528). Raphael also asks them, “Can hearts, not free, be tri'd whether they serve / Willing or no, who will but what they must / By Destiny, and can no other choose?” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 532-534). If hearts are controlled by destiny, or fate, there is no way to test them and see if they are faithful. Again, Milton is providing evidence through Raphael both that Adam and Eve have the opportunity to choose, and that Adam and Eve are fated to be tested for their faithfulness. He is telling Adam and Eve that God left the decision within the realm of their free will, which lets the reader know that there is no way the fall is fated. Adam and Eve may be fated to have their faith tested, but their decision has not already been made for them.

In moving to Book Nine, Milton portrays the actual fall of man. After examining the ways in which Adam and Eve have free will, the reader may blame Adam and Eve for the fall at this point in the poem. After all, our previous knowledge of this story tells us that the fall is inevitable. Why does Eve want to work alone right after the warning from Raphael? Her insistence on working alone seems like a decision that she is fated to make; however, she still has the free will to resist temptation and stay away from the Tree of Knowledge. Why is she so

easily persuaded by the serpent? Why does she not make the right decision and stay away from the tree? At this point in the poem, Eve knows that she is fated to encounter Satan, but she and Adam have been equipped with the necessary free will to decide to resist him. This idea ties into Maggie Espino's argument, which supports the idea that Eve has free will. Espino argues that Eve is not "defective by design"; she is not engineered with flaws that cause her to fall.

According to Espino, "Because Eve clearly understands God's restriction, it is not due to fated ignorance that she eats the fruit when offered by Satan, but rather by a choice informed by deception" (Espino 5). Thinking that God let all of these things happen is a chilling thought; however, if he did truly make his creation with free will, then their fall was just an exercise of their free will. Book Nine is where one may primarily apply the "middle ground" position to Adam and Eve. God knew that Satan would come to Earth and tempt them, which is why he sent Raphael to Eden to deliver a warning. However, whether or not to eat the fruit and fall was purely Adam and Eve's decision; although they were fated to be in this situation, they had complete free will to make their own decisions about it.

In this Book Milton portrays a conversation between Adam and Eve about Eve's working alone. Adam says:

. . . within himself

The danger lies, yet lies within his power:

Against his will he can receive no harm.

But God left free the Will, for what obeys

Reason, is free, and Reason he made right (*Paradise Lost* 9: 348-352)

In this conversation Milton shows that Adam and Eve know that they have free will, which means that they know they have the ability to make choices. When Eve leaves to work alone and

encounters the serpent, she knows that she is in danger, yet she listens to him anyway. Due to Raphael's warning, Eve knows that she should not leave and work alone; she is fated to be tested by Satan. However, despite the fact that she is fated to be tested, she has the free will to decide how to handle the test. She has been warned that danger is coming to Eden, but she allows the serpent to lead her "into fraud" and fool her into eating the fruit (*Paradise Lost* 9: 643). Espino notes, "When Satan indwelling a serpent's body confronts Eve in the garden, she comes to a choice to eat the fruit of her own reasoning process rather than a predestined flaw that fated her to disobedience" (Espino 4). Eve tells the serpent, "But of this tree we may not taste nor touch; / God so commanded" and "God hath said, Ye shall not eat / Thereof, nor shall ye touch it, lest ye die" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 651-652, 662-663). Here Eve clearly shows that she knows she is not supposed to eat the fruit. She does not have a predestined flaw; she clearly knows what not to do, yet chooses to do it anyway. The serpent responds with, "Queen of this Universe, do not believe / Those rigid threats of Death; ye shall not Die: / How should ye? By the Fruit? It gives you Life / To Knowledge" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 684-687). The conscious decision to exercise her free will, go out alone, listen to the serpent, and eat the forbidden fruit makes the fall purely a free choice by Eve.

In addition to the choice to eat from the forbidden tree, Eve also makes the choice to try and convince Adam to eat the fruit and fall along with her. When Eve tells Adam what she has done, he is horrified:

. . . soon as he heard

The fatal Trespass done by Eve, amaz'd,

Astonied stood and Blank, while horror chill

Ran through his veins . . . (*Paradise Lost* 9: 888-891)

This passage showing Adam's reaction to Eve's disobedience shows how upset he is to learn that she has disobeyed God. After listening to the full account of her encounter with the serpent, Adam says, "How can I live without thee, how forgo / Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join'd, / To live again in these wild Woods forlorn?" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 908-910). Despite the fact that Adam recognizes the severity of Eve's disobedience, he still allows her to convince him to eat the fruit. This decision is clearly an exercise of his free will; Milton shows Adam's thought processes about making the decision. Adam's mind is racing with thoughts:

How can I live without thee [Eve], how forgo
 Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join'd,
 To live again in these wild Woods forlorn?
 Should God create another Eve, and I
 Another Rib afford, yet loss of thee
 Would never from my heart; no no, I feel
 The Link of Nature draw me: Flesh of Flesh,
 Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy State
 Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (*Paradise Lost* 9: 908-916)

Adam does not want another Eve, and he does not want to be alone in the woods again, so he decides to do the one thing that he has been forbidden to do within Eden: eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

In order for Adam and Eve to have this aforementioned free will, God must have created them with it and allowed them to use it. In Book Three, God says, "I form'd them [Adam and Eve] free, and free they must remain" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 124). With this statement God reveals to

the reader that he made Adam and Eve with free will, which shows that they are capable of making their own decisions. In addition to admitting that he made them free, God also says:

. . . they themselves decreed

Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,

Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault . . .

. . . they themselves ordain'd thir fall. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 116-118, 128).

With this section of the poem, God himself is admitting that Adam and Eve decreed the fall. Even if God did have foreknowledge, he did not make them fall; he even says that he did not have any influence on their fault. Adam tells Eve, “For God towards thee hath done his part, do thine” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 375). God may have fated them to be put in certain situations and tested, but they were free to make their own decisions. Adam and Eve must do their part to remain pure and resist sin. God is removing all guilt from himself and saying that the fall is purely based on Adam and Eve’s decisions about what to do and how to live their lives.

A little earlier in Book Three, God again mentions the fall and absolves himself of all guilt:

. . . whose fault?

Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee

All he could have; I made him just and right,

Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall. (*Paradise Lost* 3: 96-99)

Again, Milton provides the reader with ample evidence that the conditions necessary for Adam and Eve to have free will are present. Milton even takes this idea one step further, by having God say that they are made in a way in which they can stand up against Satan, but they are also free to fall. After the fall Adam realizes this idea; he says, “But past who can recall, or done

undo? Not God Omnipotent, nor Fate” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 927-928). Adam knows that they made a choice to eat the fruit, independent of God or fate. The fact that God mentions that they can stand against Satan means that he knows they are fated to be tested, but they have the free will to choose whether or not to fall.

Milton also provides evidence that even though the temptation is fated, the fall is not. He writes, “Earth trembl’d from her entrails, as again / In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 1000-1002). If the fall was fated to happen, the Earth and nature would not be so upset by it. He also depicts the Angels’ reactions to Adam and Eve’s fall:

Th’ Angelic Guards ascended, mute and sad
 For Man, for of his state by this they knew,
 Much wond’ring how the subtle Fiend had stol’n
 Entrance unseen. (*Paradise Lost* 10: 18-21)

The Angels’ reactions again indicate that the fall was not fated. They would not be so upset if they had known all along that man would eventually fall. If anything other than the temptation was fated, the angels would have already been more prepared and not so shocked. Although they are not God, I still feel that their status as divine beings affords them some God-like knowledge of what will happen. They had no idea that anything other temptation would happen. Therefore, here Milton provides ample evidence that Adam and Eve had the free will to fall on their own, and their fall was not fated or pre-destined.

The fate and free will debate is entwined within *Paradise Lost*. Through a close examination of Books Five, Nine, Three, and Ten, the reader can see Adam and Eve’s free will. The reader is able to see this free will when Eve awakens from her dream and talks with Adam about what she will “consent” to do, when Eve chooses to work alone, when she reasons with the

serpent and chooses to eat the fruit, and when she logically reasons with herself and chooses to convince Adam to eat the fruit and fall with her. This poem supports the “middle ground” view regarding Adam and Eve’s fall; they were fated to encounter Satan, but they were free to choose whether or not they would eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. Eve chose to eat the fruit, and Adam chose to be convinced by Eve to eat the fruit as well. Despite the warnings of Raphael, Adam and Eve’s free will was too strong to be contained by another being, and they are solely to blame for making the decisions that forced mankind to fall.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y.

Hughes. New York: Odyssey Press, 1957. 211-469. Print.