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Moses as Patriarch: An Unlikely Model

Abstract: *This essay seeks to establish Moses as a successful patriarch and as a model for other mortals to follow, as his story, which includes his interaction with subordinates, use of reason, obedience to authority and mercy, follow God’s (and the Godhead’s) example and expectations of the patriarchy.*

In Paradise Lost, Milton presents the reader with multiple patriarchs, almost all of which fall short in some fashion. Adam’s disobedience, Satan’s rebellion, and Nimrod’s hubris precipitate their fall from grace in the eyes of God. But, amongst the near ubiquitous failures there are a few patriarchs that fulfill the duties required of them. This essay concerns the liberator of the Israelites from Egyptian captivity: Moses. He, as one can find through an analysis of his shared characteristics and paralleled patriarchal dynamic between God the Father and the Son, elucidates the status he holds in the eyes of Milton and the Israelites.

Firstly, that Moses models his interactions with the Israelites as the Father does with all creation. God, as he is “high Thron’d above all highth-” (Paradise Lost Book 3: 58) and is “-Omnipotent / Immutable, Immortal, Infinite / Eternal King; thee Author of all being” distances himself with creation, favoring intermediaries instead of direct relations. Hence, Michael and Raphael dictate the Father’s will through their interactions with Adam, Eve, and Satan. Ostensibly, this is due to the Father’s refusal to directly intervene in the events and lives of mortals, instead, choosing to use less than perfect spokespersons for his divine will to allow for personal freedoms. This is corroborated by the Israelites’ exclamation to Moses in book twelve, stating that “the voice of God / to mortal ear is dreadful; they beseech / that Moses might report to them his will” (Paradise Lost Book 12: 235-237). Though the word dreadful is misleading, it communicates the strength of God’s command as a forceful edict and as a result, “-God is no access / Without Mediator, whose high Office now / Moses in figure bears” (Paradise Lost 12: 239-241). Speaking to the strength of Moses’ moral resolve, he was the only one to dictate the will of God to his people. But, like the Father, Moses incorporates the use of an intermediary. Aaron, Moses’ brother, as well as the first priest of the church, dictated his brother’s, and thereby God’s will to the people. Moses deems it necessary as he pleads with God saying, “O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue (Ex. 4:10).” One would be remiss to call this a weakness, however, as Moses’ direct communication with God has elevated him to a higher station. God himself says so “And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God” (Ex. 4:15) Aaron dictates the Father’s will to the people as filtered through Moses. One can then conceptualize Moses’ speech impediment as a barrier between the will of God and the people, directly uncommunicable, but possible at a distance. The light of God is filtered into a manageable form, so the Israelites corroborate “-let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19). Moses alone can withstand the force of God’s proclamations, rendering him worthy of a similar dispensation of divine guidance.

Secondly, that Moses and Aaron’s relationship bears similarity to the Father and the Son’s patriarchal dynamic. To reiterate, just as Moses uses Aaron to speak to his people, so does the Father utilize the Son, as he is “My word, my wisdom, and effectual might” (Paradise Lost 3:170). The Son delivers the Father’s edicts; he is the word personified. Additionally, the Son and Aaron exhibit a direct link in the form of the breastplate that both wears. As in book six the Son is described being “-in Celestial Panoply all arm’d / of radiant Urim”, Urim being the same breastplate that was bestowed upon Aaron as “-the breastplate of judgment” (Ex. 28:29). Sanctified as the holy breastplate of judgement in the battle of heaven, the Son wears the Urim and as Linda Weinhouse iterates that “when Milton garbs the character of Christ in Paradise Lost in the Urim he is not only evoking Christ’s historical role as priest, he is literally arming him with “perfect lights” and “true revelation.” Being that the literal translation of the Urim and Thummim, the full description of the garment bestowed upon Aaron, means ‘revelation and truth’ or ‘lights and perfection”. Which, among other qualities that he possesses, judges the worthy and the unworthy as the Son rendered judgement unto the devils in the battle of heaven. This is a direct and deliberate link established between the old church of Aaron, and the inevitable new Church of Jesus Christ, the Son personified. Both wear the same breastplate, and both dispense judgement as the effectual might of their respective patriarchs. The Son received being and his authority from the Father to use for the glory of God as Aaron received his instruction and divine revelation through Moses.

Furthermore, Moses distinguishes himself by his exceptional use of wisdom, or reason within bounds, to establish himself as a more than competent patriarch. The Father embodies reason, as is his nature. He has perfect knowledge of all things that are, was, and will be. Though, he doesn’t expect his creation to adhere to that same standard, he does expect them to use the reason that was afforded to them; Moses does as such. Cognizant of his place in the divine order, as well as human history, Moses is the vessel through which God’s wisdom shines through as he provides the ten commandments “imperfect, and but giv’n / With purpose to resign them in full time time / Up to a better Cov’nant dsciplin’d” (Paradise Lost 12: 300-302). This is yet another extension of the will of God, in this case, it is reason inscribed onto a tablet, like the divine might imbued onto the holy breastplate of Urim. In anticipation of the new covenant to be established with the Son, Moses uses his wisdom to follow the laws given to him by God so that his people may use the law to “evince / Thir natural pravity, by stirring up / Sin against Law to fight; that when they see / Law can discover sin” (Paradise Lost 12: 287-289). He provides the Law to his people, in preparation for the coming of Christ that would “- bring back / Through the world’s wilderness long wander’d man / Safe to eternal Paradise of rest” (Paradise Lost 12: 312-314).

Additionally, Moses pays deference to God. This manifests in God’s demanding fallen man “to pray, repent, and bring obedience due” (Paradise Lost 3: 189). God’s edicts are justified as he sits, “high Thron’d above all highth-” (Paradise Lost Book 3: 58) and is “-Omnipotent / Immutable, Immortal, Infinite / Eternal King; thee Author of all being” (Paradise Lost 3: 372-374). He also expects the same deference from angels who possess their own, “Hierarchies, of Orders, and Degrees” (Paradise Lost 5: 591). For example, Michael is the chief of the archangels, second in rank only to the Son of God. He honors the Father by knowing his position in relation to creation, as does Gabriel who is “- in military prowess next” under Michael the “Celestial Armies Prince” (Paradise Lost Book 6: 44-47). In the figure of Moses, though, the reader finds that he follows God’s cosmic ordering. His steadfast faith in God, signaled by the line of him being “sent from God to claim / his people from enthrallment” as a license to Moses’ preexisting faith in God and his order (Paradise Lost Book 12: 169-170). In the Bible it is said that “By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter” and chose instead to suffer affliction with the people of God” (New King James Version, Heb. 11:24-25). It is through this obedience and identification with God’s people as part of the right order that God rewards Moses and his people. Moses, through his own will, gives himself to God though he had status. With Moses deference assured, God wills the seven plagues descend on Egypt and allows “Moses once more his potent Rod extends / Over the Sea; the Sea his Rod obeys / On thir imbattl’d ranks the Waves return and overwhelm thir war” (Paradise Lost 12: 211-214). Moses passes the first test of respect for divine authority, placing God above all.

Lastly, Moses is merciful to his flock as the Father is. The Father, as often is the charge against him, doesn’t seem to extend much mercy to mankind, or Satan for that matter. But the reader is assured that man was “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall / Such I created all th’ Ethereal Powers and Spirits, both who stood and them who fail’d / Freely they stood who stood and fell who fell” (Paradise Lost 3: 99-102). And while God doesn’t make an exception toward Satan, of which his fall was “by thir own suggestion fell / Self-tempted, self-deprav’d” (Paradise Lost Book 3: 129-130) he does make an exception for humanity who “- fell deciev’d / by th’ other first” so that “Man therefore shall find grace / the other none: in Mercy and Justice both” (Paradise Lost 3: 130-132). God extends his hand toward humanity. Through Raphael he warns Adam of, “-what enemy / Late fall’n himself from Heaven, is plotting now / The fall of others from like state of bliss” (Paradise Lost 5:239-241). He helps his creation though it isn’t necessary because they are “sufficient to stand.” Instead, he respects their choices, choosing not to directly intervene in the trials that his creation undergoes. It is the same with Moses as with the sanctity of God, he leads the IsraelItes through the “- wilde Wilderness” where “-they shall found / Thir government, and thir great Senate choose / Through the twelve Tribes, to rule by Laws ordain’d” (Paradise Lost 12: 224-226). It is here where Moses, in as far as God allows him, saves his people. In response to Moses delayed reception of the ten commandments, his people decided to “make [us] gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Exodus, 32:1). God, in a flash of fury, tells Moses to “Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.” ( Ex: 32:7). Moses, the sole advocate for his tribe, and one of God’s chosen, pleads with God asking, “Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, ‘He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from Your fierce wrath and relent from this harm to Your people.” (Ex: 32:11-12) And God, respecting Moses’ plea, stays his wrath and allows Moses to deliver unto them a lesser punishment. Time and time again had Moses saved his people, once from their Captivity in Egypt, and again for their disobedience to God. Moses, while still respecting God, advocates for his people, and upholds his status as worthy patriarch in line with divine patriarchal model.

Moses, along with following god’s patriarchal model, proves himself as an autonomous agent capable of grasping his place in history and in the divine order. He, with direct revelation from God, directs the Israelites to their eventual new covenant with Jesus Christ, preserving their status until deliverance. Forgoing the Son and the Father as the quintessential patriarchal model, as theirs is the most perfect, Moses represents an achievable standard for all patriarchs and exemplifies the status of being “lowly wise” and contenting oneself with the knowledge and power given by God.

To summate, Moses is the patriarch that follows God’s model closely. Through his use of intermediaries, right reason, obedience to authority, and merciful actions, Moses succeeds in his role as the rightful patriarch before the establishment of the new covenant. He paves the way for the Son and provides an example for all mortal creation to follow.

Works Cited

*The Holy Bible: New King James Version*. The Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>, Accessed 9 May 2023.

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