Ana Giron

Dr. Ainsworth

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Self-sacrifice as the Balancing Factor in Patriarchy

*Abstract:*

*This paper argues that patriarchy does not itself push one towards damnation and corruption, but only does so when self-sacrifice is not a central aspect of it patriarchy fails. Following the example of the Father’s immediate household of Him and the Son, we see that selflessness is the necessary balancing factor that holds patriarchy together. I argue that is due to an unwillingness to be self-sacrificial that characters fall, not merely because of the patriarchal structure.*

John Milton’s poem, “Paradise Lost,” wrestles with questions surrounding the efficacy of the patriarchal structure in both the divine and human realms. The concept of patriarchy is defined as the authoritative structure involving an authoritative head of the household and his subordinates, grounded primarily in the concept of love and self-sacrifice. In Milton’s poem, patriarchy stems principally from God the Father as the head of the household, with His subordinates also being given places of authority over others. The Father, who is “love without end, and without measure Grace” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 142), is the source and head from which the patriarchal structure stems through His household, including the angels, Adam, and Eve. A patriarchal line is created with The Father as the Head, the angels as His subordinates, Adam subordinate to them, and Eve subordinate to her husband. Milton establishes this direct line of authority in his work. Each character is subordinate to those above them, as long as they remain rooted in the Father’s established line of authority. While the subsequent authority is an aspect of the patriarchy, it is not merely a governmental and tyrannical institution as many people believe. In Milton’s work, the patriarchal structure is not just an authoritative structure; it is familial, as seen in the Father’s relationship with the Son and Adam’s relationship with Eve. Along with love, self-sacrifice is a necessary component of a successful patriarchy. Without love or self-sacrifice, the patriarchal structure crumbles, making it likely that those in the household will sever from it. It is commonly thought that the patriarchal structure is to blame for the fall of Satan, Eve, and Adam. However, I argue that it is not the patriarchal structure that is the root of evil and innately flawed, but the severing from God’s patriarchy and a refusal to love. Only when one breaks from the authoritative line established by the Father and refuses to love in the form of self-sacrifice, are suffering and damnation present, as illustrated in the fall of Satan, Eve, and Adam. I argue that patriarchy only fails when those in it are unwilling to be self-sacrificial.

From the beginning, God’s heavenly kingdom is set up in a patriarchal structure based on love. We can see in the example of the Father’s “immediate” household the example of self-sacrifice being the central ingredient for a successful household. God’s immediate household is the Father, the Son, and perhaps the Holy Spirit, but being that the Spirit is not mentioned in the poem, only the Father and the Son are included explicitly. While Milton’s trinitarian doctrine is unknown, it is nevertheless clear that the Son mirrors the Father; this is particularly seen in the language used as the Son is creating the earth. He is often referred to as God and does the will of the Father. Keerthana Manoj touches on this topic in her essay, “A Comparative Analysis of Satan and the Son as Justification of God’s Character,” writing “The Son is the embodiment of the Father’s will” (Manoj 2). The action that defines the Son is His willingness to be sacrificed for mankind after the fall. The Father asks for one to volunteer for this task, and the Son willingly offers Himself for humanity. The Son’s action is the ultimate example of self-sacrifice stemming from love. It is also notable that the Father also would have to sacrifice “temporarily“ losing his son, thus also being an example of self-sacrifice. Jennifer Jeffcoat writes in her essay “And He Saw that it was Good,” “God offer[s] a choice, not only to His Son, but God Himself must also choose to be willing to let his only son die” (Jeffcoat 7) It is this household alone that is not ever tainted by sin, as the angels and humans fell. Also, according to Christian doctrine, the Son’s self-sacrifice is the means by which humanity is reconciled to God after the fall. It was through an act of sacrificial love that humanity was brought back into the household of God, while an act of selfishness was what separated humanity from God. The first created household abides by love and self-sacrifice, providing subsequent and extended households to follow the example of Father and Son, the ideal household. This mutual self-sacrifice for the good of others, therefore, is the necessary factor for a successful patriarchy and reconciliation to the Father’s household.

This point can be first illustrated by examining the fall of Satan from heaven through his prideful rebellion against the Father. Satan was one of the highest-ranked angels and had an extensive amount of knowledge and authority over his fellow angels, yet this was the only thing he focused on. Never do readers see Satan’s motives being driven by the love of God or others; his motivations are purely selfish. He was “of the first,/ If not the first Arch-Angel, great in Power,/ In favor and preeminence” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 659-661); yet, regardless of all he had been given, he “ sdein’d subjection, and thought one step higher/ Would set [him] highest.” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 50-51). Clearly, his motivations for his actions are not based on love or self-sacrifice, but on self-promotion and exaltation. When Satan was still under the authority of the Father and loyal to the patriarchal line, he was blessed with power, authority, and all goodness that stems from the Father, but he never reciprocated any of his blessings on others and only grasped for more. Once he forsakes the Father due to his “Pride and worse Ambition” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 39), he loses all he has and is cast from heaven. In self-seeking, he was unhappy in the household of God and stored up his blessings for himself. Satan holds himself responsible for his own damnation, not God. While Satan remained within the household of the Father, he was immensely blessed, as he was connected to the source of life and goodness, which is God the Father, and thus His patriarchal authority. He never directed his given blessings in a self-giving way, like the Son, however, but only sought to exalt himself. Satan’s refusal to follow the example given to him by the Father and Son sets him up for failure, as the patriarchy can only exist when grounded in self-sacrifice. It is only when Satan chooses to sever himself from God in an attempt of self-exaltation that is he then bound to an eternity of woe, as “all good to [him] is lost” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 109).

Notably, Satan wishes he could return to his former state in heaven, now that he has experienced existence being severed from God. Satan and his fallen angels, given the choice, would rather be in Heaven and back in God’s family. Ultimately, once he breaks from the patriarchy, he is not fulfilled, but miserable. It is not the patriarchal model that caused his misery, as he was happier in heaven than in hell when as an “inferior Angel, [he] had stood/ Then happy” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 58-59). It is his breaking from the Father’s love and choosing to be self-centered that ended in his and his angels’ damnation and misery. It is only when Satan and the angels are severed from the Father due to their pride, the source of all goodness, that they are more miserable than when they were within the patriarchal line of succession. God and His direct patriarchal line are not innately flawed and the sources of suffering, as Satan and his angels freely rejected the Father’s hierarchy. Once they did, they regretted it. The angels assumed that by choosing what they thought was best for themselves, they ensured they would be happy, but it is because they choose selfishness and self-exaltation that they are miserable. By grasping for more power, it projects the image that the patriarchy is to blame, not their unwillingness to be selfless.

Eve’s fall mirrors Satan’s regarding her dislike of authority and the breaking away from God’s extended patriarchal line due to a desire for self-worship, the antipode of selflessness, which we see in the ideal household of Father and Son. Milton makes it clear that the patriarchal authority extends principally from God to the angels, Adam, and Eve accordingly. Adam is placed as the head of his household, presently consisting solely of Eve. When she desires to split up, Adam fears for her safety and warns her of the enemy, as a good patriarch would do. Unsatisfied with Adam’s answer, Eve persists. While they remained in their pure state, they both clearly expressed immense joy, peace, and satisfaction in their state of life. However, Satan temps Eve with what he knows will cause the downfall of humanity, selfishness. He convinces her that if she eats the fruit she will become “A Goddess among Gods, ador’d and serv’d/ By Angels numberless, thy daily Train” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 547-548). He tempts her with the idea of becoming equal with God, which is a sacrilegious breaking of the patriarchal succession and contrary to the necessary aspect of selflessness. He successfully convinces her to disobey and disregard the warnings given to her by those with patriarchal authority: God, the angels, and Adam by convincing her of her need to be worshiped. Once she disregards the patriarchy established by the Father, specifically by ignoring Adam’s warnings, she is tempted into sin, thus causing the fall of mankind. Eve sins due to willfully attempting to overthrow her husband, attain equality with God, and be worshipped by angels. Eve’s thought processes during the temptation are not of selflessness and concern for others, but purely of self. She did not consider that her actions would harm Adam or heed his warnings. Both Eve’s and Satan’s sin comes from their unwillingness to be sacrificial, resulting in their decision to sever themselves from the household of the Father. Eve provides another example of a patriarchal structured failure due to selfishness. But, similar to Satan’s fall, her fall does not disprove the patriarchy but demonstrates that patriarchy cannot exist without members of the household being willing to put others first.

Patriarchy itself, instead of lack of selflessness is often blamed for the fall of Eve, particularly concerning her lack of knowledge and “inequality” since she was subordinate to Adam. Jessica Stephenson makes the argument in her essay “Milton’s Match Made in Paradise” that if Eve was given more knowledge, she would not be searching for it in the form of the forbidden fruit. In her essay, “Milton’s Match Made in Paradise,” Jessica Stephenson argues that Eve is “weaker and intellectually inferior, making her more likely to be seduced by faulty arguments. If God had created her to be equal to Adam, things might have been different” (Stephenson 7). Her argument contends that if Eve was higher on the patriarchal line of succession, she would not wish for more power, thus being content in her position, as Adam was. There are two points to refute this argument by juxtaposing Satan’s fall with Eve’s. Firstly, lack of knowledge cannot be used as an argument in support of the idea that the patriarchal structure is to blame for Eve’s fall. Eve did desire more knowledge, but this does not mean it can be to blame for her fall. Satan, whose fall resembles Eve’s regarding pride, had all the knowledge he could ever want, yet he still fell. While she wanted knowledge, it is clear that by also looking at Satan’s fall alongside Eve’s, knowledge does not preserve one from the consequences of leaving the household. Likewise, the blame for Eve’s fall also cannot be placed on the patriarchal structure due to her lower placement in the line of authoritative succession. While it is true that Eve was the lowest on the line of authority, below Adam, the angels, and God, the concept of submissiveness within God’s patriarchal household cannot be blamed for her fall either. While Eve was lower on the authoritative line, Satan was at the top of all the created creatures. The poem clearly states that Satan was the highest of the angels, holding a place at the top of the patriarchal line of authority. His example illustrates that even in the most authoritative position, falling from grace is still possible, therefore her submissive state within God’s patriarchy cannot be blamed for her fall.

All that Eve lacked regarding her status and knowledge, Satan initially had; yet, he still fell. Thus, Eve’s lack thereof cannot justify blaming the patriarchy itself for her sin. What can be blamed, however, is the commonality shared by both Satan and Eve, which is their desire to be worshiped. Their unwillingness to follow the example of the Sons’ self-sacrificial attitude is the cause of their fall, not merely the patriarchy itself.

Along with Satan and Eve’s fall proving the necessity of self-sacrifice in the patriarchy, Adam’s rebellion also proves this. Once Eve falls, she brings him the fruit and asks him to eat it for them to be joined together in death. Adam’s options are to live separately from Eve and obey God or eat the fruit and be united with Eve. In both options, Adam is thinking about what is best for himself, remaining with Eve or remaining in the Father’s family. As discussed in class, there was a possible option of Adam sacrificing himself and taking Eve’s punishment. In this plausible scenario, Adam would have the role of the Son, in the sense that he would sacrifice himself for Eve to reconcile her to God, then presumably rise again, as the Son does. But Adam never considers or even thinks of what he can do to save Eve. His mindset remains only on his outcome, not Eve’s. If Adam had sacrificed himself for Eve then the fall would have been reconciled, and the patriarchal structure a success. But, since Adam remained focused on himself, the fall affected the remainder of mankind. Within the context of self-sacrifice, Adam’s household would have remained unfallen. Therefore, selflessness is a necessary aspect needed for successful patriarchy.

In his poem, Milton argues that patriarchy is the only path to life, thus not itself flawed, but fails when self-sacrifice and love are removed as the central aspect of it. As discussed previously, while Satan and Eve were within the family of the Father, they both were much happier than after they rebelled. As Milton makes it clear, the Father is the ultimate patriarch, who gives subsequent authority to those below Him, resulting in the line of authority. As discussed in the first paragraph, the Son and the Father create the original household, the model for subsequent households. The Son offers Himself for humanity’s redemption. The Father must also be selfless and temporarily lose His Son. Both members of the heavenly household exhibit self-sacrifice; it is only in this familial structure that there are no flaws because both members are selfless. This patriarchy provides the example for subsequent patriarchies and households to follow. We see, however, that Satan, Eve, and Adam all fall from a shared desire for the contentment of self. Satan and Eve both seek self-worship and illustrate an unwillingness to think of how to use their blessings for the benefit of others. Similarly, Adam chooses between the options that most benefit him, and never once considered in what ways he should sacrifice himself for Eve’s redemption. Being that the Father’s immediate household is the original example of the patriarchal structure, all subsequent structures must follow the model of the successful patriarchy. If Eve, Satan, and Adam would have remained loyal to the patriarchal line through selflessness, they would have remained in the happy state they all wished to return to after they sinned. Because Milton’s God is patriarchal and based on love and sacrifice, choosing selfishness removes the vital component of a successful household and ensures the failure of the patriarchal structure. As illustrated in the poem, it is only when those in the household are unwilling to put others first that the patriarchy fails. Therefore, it is not the patriarchal model itself that is flawed, but it fails when those within it are selfish, for it is in giving that one receives.

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