

Making a Mormon of Milton

John S. Tanner

I. THE URGE TO MERGE

On several occasions in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton invokes his muse, the Holy Spirit, to reveal to his sightless eyes insight about “things invisible to mortal sight” (3.56; see also 1.1–26; 7.1–39).¹ With the possible exception of William Blake, no other major English poet lays greater claim to the role of poet–seer. Even from his earliest poems, Milton hopes someday to “attain / To something like Prophetic strain” (“Il Penseroso,” 174). Struck by the many similarities between Milton’s great epic and Mormon doctrine, many LDS readers assume that the poet in fact attains the “prophetic strain” wished for in youth and claimed in old age. Indeed, many of my students and some of my colleagues seem to regard Milton as a sort of unbaptized Mormon: teach him that angels are really the premortal spirits of mankind and, *voilà*, he is fit for the font and full fellowship, his greatest work ready for review by the Correlation Committee.

As a Mormon Miltonist myself, I confess that I am of two minds about this view of Milton as an unbaptized Mormon. On the one hand, I recognize numerous remarkable and largely unsuspected parallels between Miltonic and Mormon theology, parallels entailing some of our most distinctive and even “heretical” teachings, such as our belief in material monism and our historic acceptance of

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¹With two exceptions, all references to Milton’s works are made to *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957). *Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence, against Smectymnuus* is in volume 3 and *De Doctrina Christiana* is in volume 15 of *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933). *De Doctrina Christiana* is more complete in the Patterson edition than is the same work, *Christian Doctrine*, in the Hughes edition; therefore the work has been quoted sometimes from the one edition and sometimes from the other. *Paradise Lost* is cited in the text by book and line; Milton’s other works are cited by title and page.

polygamy.² These shared ideas ought to be more widely known by both LDS and non-LDS readers of the poet.³ On the other hand, however, I fear that the number and degree of our shared beliefs with Milton are often overstated, resulting in significant distortion of both Miltonic and Mormon doctrine, each of which has its own integrity. We need to be more judicious in our attempts to assimilate the poet into the fold.

Because Restoration theology adopts a broadly inclusive view of truth—whatever is true is the gospel—the impulse to discover proto-Mormons among our favorite writers becomes nearly irresistible.⁴ I recall as an undergraduate at BYU that nearly every author we read was upon occasion seen as a sort of closet Mormon: from Shakespeare to Swift, Thoreau to Twain, Kierkegaard to C. S. Lewis. While this inclusiveness is admirable, it is attended by perils. Frequently our assimilative zeal is prompted by insufficient knowledge, both about the author in question and about the distinctive character of LDS theology. Assimilation often occurs at the cost of what Duns Scotus calls *haecceitas*, or the “this-ness” of a thing—that is, the particularities which render an object what it is rather than what it may resemble.⁵ Like objects, ideas have their “this-ness” too; they have a singularity and integrity which must be respected. Injudicious comparisons ignore *haecceitas*, raising general likenesses to the status of exact equivalencies and reducing to insignificance formidable discrepancies arising out of differences in history, culture, and biography. All likenesses are, of course, partial; we need not forego finding resemblances (a basic cognitive operation) simply because the world presents few clones. But we ought to attend to differences as well as similarities when drawing comparisons.

In comparing Milton to Mormonism, this means attaching crucial caveats to supposed similarities regarding shared beliefs in such things

²Words such as *heresy*, *unorthodox*, and *heterodox* are meant as relative terms; they imply no judgment. One Christian's orthodoxy is another's heresy.

³I have outlined the intersections between Miltonic and Mormon thought for non-LDS Miltonists. This essay is an attempt to do the same for LDS readers, as well as to address the problems of assimilation generally. See John S. Tanner, “Milton among the Mormons,” in *Ring the Bell Backward*, Proceedings of the First International Milton Symposium, ed. by Ronald G. Shafer (Indiana, Pa.: Indiana University of Pennsylvania Imprint Series, 1982), 123–32.

⁴For a compilation of statements regarding this inclusive view of the gospel, see Hugh Nibley's article on Brigham Young and education: “Educating the Saints,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, volume 1 in the Religious Studies Monograph Series, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University (Salt Lake City: Publisher's Press, 1978), 229–60. For a more recent reconfirmation of this catholicity, see the 15 February 1978 Statement of the First Presidency.

⁵Efrem Bettoni, *Duns Scotus: The Basic Principles of His Philosophy*, trans. Bernadine Bonansea (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1961), 60–65.



Milton, at Age 62

as human dignity and freedom, the fortunate fall, and the nature of God the Father and the Son. On these and other doctrines, surface similarities frequently conceal subsurface divergences. Yet, curiously, also beneath the surface lie a number of shared heterodoxies that surprisingly align Milton with some of Mormonism's most revolutionary beliefs. Hence, my thesis is that Milton is both less *and* more like a Mormon than is generally supposed. If this seems somehow double-minded, I take solace in the similar attitude Jesus adopted toward those on the periphery of the kingdom: "he that is not against us is for us," and, a few verses later, "he that is not with me is against me" (Luke 9:50; 11:23). There is a time to count allies and a time to close ranks.

II. THINGS AREN'T WHAT THEY SEEM

Historically Mormons have welcomed Milton as an ally. Orson F. Whitney imitated *Paradise Lost* in his *Elias, an Epic of the Ages* and dreamed of the day when the Latter-day Saints "will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God's ammunition is not exhausted."⁶ This is a dream that persists among us, judging from a recent twelve-book epic in blank verse by R. Paul Cracroft, and from the encouragement Church leaders give to Miltonic enterprises by Mormon artists.⁷ Doubtless some LDS enthusiasm springs merely from Milton's reputation as the greatest Christian poet in English, if not indeed in Western civilization, rather than from genuine familiarity with his work. Still other, more informed LDS admiration of Milton arises from his eloquent articulation of general Christian ideas. But it is incorrect to assume, as many of my students do, that because Milton espouses Christian commonplaces his work is, *ipso facto*, Mormon; for many apparent doctrinal coincidences between Milton and Mormonism derive from a common basis in Christian scripture and tradition, not from teachings unique to either the poet or the LDS church. Moreover, as contemporary Christianity sheds ever more of its historic dogmas—such as a belief in a real hell and devil, or in a war in heaven, or in an Adam, or even in a divine savior—Milton's poem may increasingly seem to have few analogues outside the LDS faith. Yet in fact it is deeply embedded in a

⁶"Home Literature," in *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 206.

⁷R. Paul Cracroft, *A Certain Testimony: A Mormon Epic in Twelve Books* (Salt Lake City: Epic West, 1979); Boyd K. Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," *Brigham Young University Studies* 16 (Summer 1976): 575–88; Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 2–5.

long, complex Christian tradition.⁸ Before we claim Milton as uniquely our own, we would do well to become more informed of what a prodigiously well-educated seventeenth-century Christian could have garnered from his own resources and of what must be his own invention—or a gift from his muse.

Without a well-informed sense of Milton's intellectual milieu, the reader may easily conflate Christian commonplaces with truly uncommon dogmas. In their first flush of enthusiasm for *Paradise Lost*, for example, my young LDS readers often urge parallels in the following areas: the nature of the Godhead, Satan's rebellion and the War in Heaven, the Creation, the fortunate fall, free will, obedience and repentance, the Atonement of the Son, and the Apostasy. With the exception of his views on the Creation and the Apostasy, however, Milton's ideas on none of these topics is peculiarly LDS in character. Many of Milton's beliefs on these subjects, moreover, are distinctly *unlike* those espoused by the Church.

Consider, for example, Milton's conception of the War in Heaven. Milton's primary sources for his description of Satan's rebellion and the subsequent war are the Bible (especially Isaiah and Revelation), traditional Christian exegesis, and classical accounts of epic warfare (especially those by Hesiod, Homer, and Vergil).⁹ The result is a war quite unlike that envisioned by most Latter-day Saints. For Mormons, the War in Heaven is seen principally as a war of words and wills—like the debates between Abdiel and Satan (5.809–907; 6.131–87); in *Paradise Lost* the war assumes the character of a pitched Homeric battle. Many Mormon readers gloss over this crucial difference. Similarly, they tend to see the fallen angels through Mormon lenses. Yet the rebel angels are not only *not* the unembodied spirits of mankind, but their war has nothing to do with human freedom, for man does not yet exist. Further, the revolt is provoked not by Satan's plan to deny men free agency, but by his envy of the Son (5.600–72). True, as a figure of magnificent intellect, enormous persuasiveness, and insatiable ambition, Milton's Satan resembles the fallen angel of light in the Pearl of Great Price; but his motives, as well as the issues and conduct of the war, are all conceived of quite differently.

⁸Book length studies treating Milton's use of scripture and exegetical tradition include J. M. Evans, *"Paradise Lost" and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), and C. A. Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

⁹For a fuller account of the sources contributing to Milton's war in heaven, see Stella P. Revard, *The War in Heaven: "Paradise Lost" and the Tradition of Satan's Rebellion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980).

Similar qualifications need to be attached to any number of other fundamental doctrinal similarities, including that most basic premise of belief: the nature of the Godhead. Owing to the many colloquies between the Father and the Son depicted in *Paradise Lost*, most LDS readers assume that Milton must share our Arian view that Christ is not consubstantial with God the Father. Milton's actual views on the Godhead, however, are not nearly so simplistically antitrinitarian as they may at first appear. Hence, his possible Arianism has long been a matter of scholarly controversy.¹⁰ One has only to read his long and labored argument for a subordinationist position vis-a-vis the trinity (*Christian Doctrine*, 932–64) to recognize that whatever Milton believed on the nature of the Godhead it is quite far removed from the unambiguous, bold declaration of modern revelation: "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also" (D&C 130:22). Milton admits that it is legitimate to conceive of God anthropomorphically, for this is how God describes himself in scripture. But the human form and attributes ascribed to God, Milton concedes, may be metaphoric: merely the way an ineffable deity accommodates his self-revelation to finite human understanding (*Christian Doctrine*, 905–6). In *Paradise Lost*, the poet typically describes the Father as light and as a bodiless voice, rarely with corporeal images. Characterized as somewhat severe and dispassionate, the epic's God often seems quite unlike the loving Father in Heaven regularly invoked by Latter-day Saints in prayer and song. The Mormon God—my God—weeps before Enoch over his wayward, rebellious creatures (see Moses 7:28–29). Milton's God, in a particularly disagreeable moment of irony, feigning to be fearful of the rebel armies, laughs the apostate angels to scorn (5.719–32).

The fall that Mormons find so fortunate, Milton regards, at best, as a mixed blessing. True, both his Adam and the Adam of modern revelation rhapsodize about a fortunate fall (12.469–84; Moses 5:10), but if God converts sin into an occasion for rejoicing by sending a savior, He also loudly decries Adam's sin: "Happier had it suffic'd him to have known / Good by itself, and Evil not at all" (ll.88–89). Similarly to Milton, man's first disobedience marks a "heinous offence," comprehending in itself a litany of sins. "For what sin can be named, which was not included in this one act?" Milton asks, and enumerates a

¹⁰W. B. Hunter, C. A. Patrides, and J. H. Adamson, *Bright Essence: Studies in Milton's Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1971) contains several important articles dealing with Milton and Arianism, as well as a useful bibliography.

catalogue of evils: “distrust in the divine veracity, and a proportionate credulity in the assurances of Satan; unbelief; ingratitude; disobedience; gluttony; in the man excessive uxoriousness . . . parricide, theft, invasion of the rights of others, sacrilege, deceit, presumption in aspiring to divine attributes, fraud . . . pride, and arrogance” (*De Doctrina Christiana*, 181). This is a far cry from the Mormon exculpations of Adam’s transgression (not sin) as a wise and mature choice.¹¹

We in the LDS church take a warmly enthusiastic view of the Fall; it is the enabling condition of progress. Milton’s theodicy implies that the Fall is truly tragic (compare 9.6), working great evil upon the human family, who had they *not* fallen might have progressed up the scale of perfection to the stature of angels (5.496–505).¹² This view of the Fall as an impediment to growth, precisely the inverse to LDS doctrine, is largely overlooked by Mormon readers in their enthusiasm for Adam’s view of the situation—and for Milton’s famous view in *Areopagitica*. It is easy to forget, however, that Milton’s magniloquent argument in behalf of growth through trial is couched in explicitly postlapsarian terms: “As . . . the state of man *now* is” (now that Adam has botched things up) we can know good only by evil; “the knowledge and survey of vice is *in this world* [i.e., this fallen world] so necessary to the constituting of human virtue” (*Areopagitica*, 729; my italics). This is not an argument about how the world might have been had Adam not fallen. For all its sweeping rhetoric, Milton’s argument is situated within the conditions governing this fallen world and, more tactically, directed to the debates prevailing in Parliament over censorship. Milton’s generalizations fall somewhat short of Lehi’s universal claims about the necessity of opposition in *all* things (see 2 Ne. 2:11–29), which they seem to echo.

Milton’s thoughts about purification by trial differ from Lehi’s on yet other counts. Struck by the resemblance between Lehi’s blessing of Jacob and *Areopagitica*, a Mormon critic whose paper I recently reviewed quoted the following phrase from Milton’s tract to corroborate the Book of Mormon parallels: “That which purifies us is trial, and trial

¹¹For a representative collection of LDS statements to this effect, see Wilson K. Andersen’s unit “The Fall—A Planned, Purposive Change,” in *The Gospel in Principle and Practice* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 183–91. Joseph Fielding Smith’s comment from 14 January 1961 is illustrative: “What did Adam do? The very thing the Lord wanted him to do. I hate to hear anybody call it a sin, for it wasn’t a sin” (ibid., 186).

¹²Dennis R. Danielson, *Milton’s Good God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 164–201; see also his chapter “The Unfortunate Fall,” 202–27.

is by what is contrary'' (*Areopagitica*, 728). What this assimilationist conveniently leaves off the quotation is the introductory clause, which reads: "Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather'' (*Areopagitica*, 728). Had he pursued Milton's meaning here, the critic would have discovered that beneath the surface similarity loom chasms of differences separating the poet from father Lehi. For as the deleted phrase implies, Milton believes in original sin; he believes man is born with congenital debilities deriving from the fall of Adam and inexorably passing themselves down from parent to child to the latest generation (*Christian Doctrine*, 981–82). We inherit an impure legacy—physical and moral. Furthermore, Milton continues, the spirit that animates our physical bodies possesses no individual existence before our birth nor separate life after our deaths, until the Resurrection (*Christian Doctrine*, 979–81). Thus, an examination of a clause excised from a sentence otherwise so LDS in sentiment leads to discovery of doctrines repugnant to our beliefs: original sin as opposed to original innocence (see Moro. 8; D&C 74:7), Miltonic mortalism in contrast to Mormon eternalism.¹³

Evidently, Mormons and Milton may be sharply differentiated on any number of doctrines. Indeed, the more one learns of the particular complexities of Milton's thought, the more hesitant one becomes to locate him under any convenient rubric, Mormon or otherwise. One final example of this comes from the latest scholarship on Milton's theology. Milton, like Mormons, is often associated with what is labelled Arminianism, a theological position deriving from the writings of Jacobus Arminius, a seventeenth-century Dutch theologian who emphasized human free will in contrast to Calvin's insistence upon human impotence in the face of absolute divine sovereignty. Given Milton's stress upon human choice (repeatedly dramatized in his work, from "Comus" to *Paradise Regain'd*), it would seem logical to associate Milton with Arminianism—until one remembers that this label was also applied to papists and High Churchmen, such as the Archbishop Laud, implacable enemy of the Puritans. Recent scholarship is now providing a corrective to our easy categorization of Milton as Arminian, reminding us that the term's religious and political meanings altered sharply over the course of Milton's

¹³Mortalism describes the belief that the soul dies with the body (Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* [New York: Penguin, 1977], 317–23; *Christian Doctrine*, 979–80). Eternalism, by analogy, defines the doctrine that the soul is coeternal with God (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1938], 352–54; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965], 49–57).

tumultuous life, as did his own views.¹⁴ At a minimum, we must recognize some incongruity in ascribing to Milton, proponent of religious tolerance and inward paradises, the very label that his contemporaries applied to Laud, enforcer of external conformity and ritual.

And I would suggest, in passing, that comparable complexities govern Mormon doctrine on the issue of works and grace. It is a mistake to align Mormonism exclusively with either Protestant individualism and interiority on the one hand, or Catholic authoritarianism and externality on the other. To stress one pole at the expense of the other is not to characterize our doctrine, but to caricature it. Similarly, Milton's thought cannot, without caricature, be neatly brought under any simple religious umbrella, as his life testifies. Milton's career traces a steady disillusionment with organized religion as he is "church-outed." Finally, composing his own theology, he becomes a "church of one" (*The Reason and Church Government*, 671). Mormonism, while finding nothing to fault and much to admire in Milton's rejection of apostate religion, is likewise itself *sui generis*.

III. WAS MILTON'S MUSE A MORMON? TWO TEST CASES

If Miltonic and Mormon thought are unique—each possessing its own individuality and integrity—it is nevertheless true that the two belief-systems also intersect, and often in singular ways. Seeing these remarkable coincidences of doctrine, we in the Church want to explain them as cases of clear inspiration: here is evidence that the poet did indeed, as he claimed, receive ideas from nightly visitations by his muse (7.28–30). It is instructive to examine more carefully the hypothesis that Milton and Joseph Smith had access to the same source of inspiration, that they shared the same heavenly muse.

In order to test this hypothesis, it is necessary to locate some point of consensus which Milton and the Prophet share virtually alone, exclusive of the rest of Christendom. While no unique convergences come to mind, I can think of two such shared anomalies. The first entails their views of creation, the second their accounts of a Christian Adam. Unlike most Christian theologians since Augustine, Milton did not believe in *ex nihilo* creation, or creation out of nothing; rather he endorsed the view that God fashioned the universe out of preexistent matter, matter which is "intrinsically good" (*Christian Doctrine*, 976). Yet Miltonic materialism, implicit in *Paradise Lost's*

¹⁴A fine discussion on this will soon be published by Dennis Danielson in the forthcoming Proceedings of the Second International Milton Symposium, in the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Imprint Series.

description of Chaos (“Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave,” 2.911), was not recognized until his long-lost theological treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, was found and translated in 1820. Previously, Milton’s imagery, if regarded at all, was dismissed as poetic license, no more radical than the imagery of Genesis itself. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, however, Milton boldly reasons that neither the Hebrew, nor the Greek, nor yet the Latin verb for *create* can possibly signify “create out of nothing” (*Christian Doctrine*, 975–76). Joseph Smith not only agrees with Milton (and a minority of other thinkers, it must be acknowledged) in rejecting *ex nihilo* creation, but he makes his argument in remarkably similar terms. The Prophet also avers that matter is intrinsically good (compare D&C 88:12; 93:33)—so good that it is an honor and a blessing, rather than a shame and a hindrance, that we (like God) have bodies. In another place the Prophet reasons that the Hebrew verb for *create* cannot mean “create out of nothing” but would be better translated “to organize”: “Hence, we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter, which is element.”¹⁵

Does this stunning coincidence of doctrine and logic provide evidence that the same voice dictated the ideas to both men? Well, yes and no. The case for whole-cloth inspiration is not incontrovertible. Others have disputed the logic-defying doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Genesis itself is more easily compatible with *creatio ex materia* than with patristic theories of *ex nihilo* creation. Moreover, even the remarkably similar linguistic reasoning may be explicable by the existence of a common third source. Milton, who knew Hebrew and things Jewish, likely knew that Ibn Ezra, author of an important late medieval commentary on the Hebrew text, mounts the same case about the verb *create*. Milton’s commentary follows that of Ibn Ezra quite closely, even adducing the same proof text from Isaiah.¹⁶ That Joseph Smith directly knew Ibn Ezra seems highly improbable. But his Jewish Hebrew teacher, Joshua Sexias, likely did. It is possible that Joseph Smith learned the substance of Ibn Ezra’s gloss on the Hebrew verb *create* from his teacher. Indeed, the lexical expertise in Hebrew evident in the Prophet’s explication of *create*, which sounds so Rabbinic, renders Sexias a likely source. Both Milton and Joseph Smith, then, may have shared indirectly a common “horizontal” source, one that

¹⁵*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 351–52; compare *Christian Doctrine*, 977: “No created thing can be finally annihilated.”

¹⁶Harris Francis Fletcher, *Milton’s Rabbinical Readings* (1930; reprint, N.p.: Archon Books, 1967), 81–83.

can partly account for the similarities in their argument.¹⁷ But does this rule out a “vertical” source for this shared anomaly—that is, revelation from on high? No, for both men still had to be receptive to ideas that were possibly prompted by things encountered in their respective environments. In their bold choices, surely the light of inspiration must be allowed to play, but we ought not to overstate the claim. Some judicious restraint is called for in making a case for inspiration from the Spirit alone—all the more so because Milton does not arrive at exactly the same conclusion about preexistent matter as does Joseph Smith. While the Prophet understands that matter is coeternal with God, Milton rejects this truly revolutionary idea as “inconceivable,” opting instead for the position that matter is coterminous with God, that creation is *ex deo*, or out of God’s own substance.¹⁸

The second shared “heresy” that provides a good test case for inspiration regards stories about postlapsarian Adam’s conversion to Christian faith. This is even more anomalous than the denial of *ex nihilo* creation. Milton is almost alone among Christian thinkers in having Adam learn about the future atoning mission of that Second Adam, Jesus Christ. The idea that Adam knew about the Atonement and became a baptized Christian is, of course, familiar to readers of the Pearl of Great Price. Once again, if we look hard for Milton’s sources, we discover obscure Jewish traditions depicting fallen Adam’s colloquies with angels, and minority Christian opinions that he became a “Christian man.”¹⁹ Milton may have known of these traditions. But it is quite unlikely that Joseph Smith knew any of these specific sources. Does this incontrovertibly confirm mutually independent inspiration? No, for it is just possible that Joseph Smith knew about these or similar traditions regarding Father Adam through his New England environment. It may be, in fact, that *Paradise Lost* itself helped shape some such popular traditions in the New England mind, since the poem was enormously popular in early America, its influence waning about the time of Joseph’s birth.²⁰ Thus, although Joseph likely never read the poem, its ideas may have filtered into even the unlettered culture of rural upstate New York.

¹⁷The terms *horizontal* and *vertical* come from George T. Boyd, “Revelation,” in *Views on Man and Religion: Collected Essays of George T. Boyd*, comp. James B. Allen, D. C. LeCheminant, and D. J. Whittaker (Provo: Friends of George T. Boyd, 1979), 65–75.

¹⁸*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 352–54; *Christian Doctrine*, 976. For a discussion of background and sources for Milton’s denial of *ex nihilo* creation, see Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, 26–53.

¹⁹Evans, “*Paradise Lost*” and the *Genesis Tradition*, 54, 291–92; Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition*, 127, 259; Georgia B. Christopher, *Milton and the Science of the Saints* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 135–46.

²⁰George F. Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), 282–305.

Yet, once again, the differences between Milton's and Mormonism's use of the tradition of a Christian Adam seem as striking as the similarities. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam's knowledge of futurity may be in part a poetic technique to implicate the reader in the narrative by tracing the consequences of the story to our day, and in another part a strategy for bringing the story around to Christ, the "greater Man" alluded to in the opening, without whose mission of restoration the poem could not become a theodicy justifying the ways of God to man but would remain a tragedy of disobedience, woe, and loss. Adam's conversion as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price, by contrast, serves by no means only as incidental embellishment for the narrative but forms an integral part of the deepest and earliest structures of Mormon doctrine. The idea that Christianity exists before Christ informs the whole Book of Mormon narrative and is a central concept in what might be termed "dispensation theology," that is, the doctrine that the gospel was possessed by some people in every age.

These two "shared heresies"—creation from matter and the Christian conversion of Adam—indicate how difficult it is to make a watertight case that purely vertical inspiration operated upon Milton as I believe it did upon Joseph Smith. For those having eyes to see, the similarities suggest that Milton was inspired, but they do not confirm that his inspiration is either identical to Joseph Smith's or without precedent. Moreover, I know of *no* similarity between the beliefs of Milton and Joseph Smith that is wholly without precedent and that must, consequently, be ascribed either to pure chance or pure revelation. Furthermore, since *Paradise Lost* was reasonably well known in early New England, no such absolute proof of mutually independent originality is even theoretically possible. But the possibility of shared sources does not destroy the thesis of inspiration either. Indeed, inspiration explains rather better than chance the enormous number of resemblances between Milton's ideas and those of the restored gospel. Further, this hypothesis allows us to take Milton at his word—and the impassioned sincerity of his claim seems self-evident to me from the text—that his muse is not merely a conventional fiction lifted from epic poetry but a messenger from God himself: "For thou art Heav'nly, she an empty dream" (7.39).

IV. MILTON AS REVOLUTIONARY

That John Milton and Joseph Smith hear the Spirit speak related but differing words need not discredit the idea of inspiration.

The LDS church has always adopted an ample, generous view of God's revelations—accounting all truth, everything leading to Christ, as given of God (compare Moro. 7:15–18). And there are a remarkable number of instances where the two men speak with nearly the same voice. Often these coincidences involve Mormonism's most revolutionary tenets, as in the two examples discussed above. Milton is our ally even in that most controversial past Mormon practice of polygamy—and the early LDS apologists knew it! Milton and Luther are the two non-LDS defenders for polygamy most frequently cited by early nineteenth-century Mormon polemicists. Milton's defense of polygamy in *Christian Doctrine* was reprinted in 1854 in the *Millennial Star* and subsequently in other LDS polemic literature.²¹ And no wonder, for Milton's reasoning on the subject is as bold as it is unassailable: "Either therefore is polygamy a true marriage," he proclaims, "or all children born of that state are spurious; which would include the whole race of Jacob" (*Christian Doctrine*, 994). By just such scriptural syllogisms Orson Pratt thoroughly outmaneuvered a congressional chaplain in a famous debate.²²

That Milton could be numbered among the "polygamophiles" to this day shocks and surprises many readers who still cling to the stereotype of the poet as a staid, conservative champion of Christian "orthodoxy."²³ Nothing could be further from Milton's reputation among his contemporaries as a radical—a notorious regicide and libertine divorcer. Mormons probably find most to sympathize with in the revolutionary Milton, an image increasingly revived by modern scholarship.²⁴

For all his erudition, Milton was scarcely a servile slave to tradition but was prepared to reconstruct his beliefs from the ground up, and was contemptuous of the timid or lazy soul who "may commit the whole

²¹*Latter-day Saint Millennial Star* 16 (27 May, 3 June 1854): 321–24, 342–45; David J. Whittaker, "Early Mormon Pamphleteering," Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1982, 363–64, 383–84, 391–92. (I wish to thank Dr. Whittaker for alerting me to early Mormon pamphleteers' use of Milton. Whittaker's excellent study contains valuable comprehensive notes.)

²²Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1940), 452–53; Robert D. Hatch, "The Pratt–Newman Debate" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1960); Orson Pratt, *The Bible and Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Steam Printing Establishment, 1877).

²³Leo Miller, *John Milton among the Polygamophiles* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 180–82. The term *polygamophile* is Miller's invention.

²⁴Hill (in *Milton and the English Revolution*) provides the most extreme major reevaluation of Milton as a radical, but the trend has existed at least since Maurice Kelley examined the relation of *Paradise Lost* to *De Doctrina Christiana* in the early forties (*This Great Argument* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941]). Although Hill probably makes Milton *too* radical (see Andrew Milner, *John Milton and the English Revolution: A Study in the Sociology of Literature* [London: Macmillan, 1981], 195–209), there is a growing consensus at least to remember Milton *was* a revolutionary, even if not so wild-eyed a one as Hill proposes.

managing of his religious affairs” to the safe “care and credit” of someone else—“make ’em and cut ’em out what religion ye please” (*Areopagitica*, 740). In the process of trying to discover what scriptural Christianity really entails, Milton successively peels back the layered accretions of creedal tradition, a tradition that he had labored so diligently to master. In his mature theology he rejects “received opinions,” relying instead upon the scriptures alone and the light of right reason, shunning principles that do not derive from the primitive apostolic church (*Christian Doctrine*, 901).

Milton knew that an apostasy had occurred. The description of it in *Paradise Lost* should stir the soul of every Latter-day Saint:

Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous Wolves,
Who all the sacred mysteries of Heav’n
To thir own vile advantages shall turn
Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
With superstitions and traditions taint.

(12.508–12)

Yet the depth of Milton’s solidarity with Mormons is not apparent from this powerful account of the Apostasy, for belief in an apostasy is common to all Protestants, and the Pauline imagery (Acts 20:29) is also common fare for anti-Catholic rhetoric. What at once sets Milton apart from even mainline Protestantism and what allies him with Mormonism is his early dating of the Apostasy. Most English Protestants dated the Apostasy from the rise of the reformers, but Milton, together with primitivist Christian sectarians, pushes the falling away back to the time of Constantine, thereby calling into question all the “superstitions and traditions” that have accrued since the early centuries of the Church.²⁵ Milton thus endorses an extreme position on the issue of Christian tradition and puts himself in the company of radical sectarians—and, of course, of Mormons.

Nor does the supposedly august poet of Christian orthodoxy shrink from endorsing other positions variously occupied by the scorned sectarians that proliferated during his time—the Ranters, Diggers, Muggletonians, Levellers, and Fifth Monarchists.²⁶ On his journey towards becoming a “church of one,” Milton breaks first with the Anglicans and then with the Presbyterians over the issue of a paid clergy and shows himself sympathetic to the idea of lay ministry.²⁷

²⁵Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, 84–87.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 93–116.

²⁷Milton’s *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* is but one of numerous attacks against a paid ministry.

He also rejects not only set liturgies, such as *The Book of Common Prayer*, but set prayer generally (*Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence, against Smectymnuus*, 124–27). He further distances himself from proponents of a state church by espousing adult baptism—so church membership would not be universal and automatic but individual and by choice. And, in common with some on the radical fringe, Milton believes in material monism, that is, that all creation is material, including spirit (5.404–43; compare D&C 131:7–8).²⁸ So long as Milton feels his beliefs are grounded in scripture and reason, he courageously charts his own course, and in the process tacks across Mormon seas. Polygamy, apostasy, lay ministry, adult baptism, spontaneous prayer, materialism—all find analogies (not exact parallels) in LDS theology.

So, too, does Milton's millenarianism. He looks for Christ to return as "our shortly expected King."²⁹ Further, he considers England to be a chosen land and the English an elect people, a saving remnant destined to be a vanguard introducing the true Christian liberty to the world and thereby preparing the world for the Messiah's return (*Areopagitica*, 743). These chiliastic sentiments find striking analogues in Mormon doctrine and history. What is more, history served to chasten, though not defeat, both Miltonic and Mormon millenarianism in similar ways. The failure of Milton's England to become that "noble and puissant nation" (*Areopagitica*, 745) he envisioned may find a corollary in our failure to realize a political Zion, first in Jackson County, then in Nauvoo, and then in the Great Basin. By analogy, Governor Lilburn W. Boggs of Missouri and the host of official government persecutors that followed him become comparable to the royalists, also bent on destroying the nascent theocratic state. Both Milton and Mormons had to redefine Zion: the Garden of Eden, like the City Beautiful, must temporarily be left behind, but its values are recovered by internalizing Paradise, which is relocated in a righteous family making its way through the world. Yet, though the idea of a kingdom of God is for the moment depoliticized, the King is still coming, and His dominion is still to be established literally upon this earth.

By the time Charles II returned from the Continent, the grand adventure in republicanism had failed, and people of Milton's radical

²⁸Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, 324–33.

²⁹Hill quotes this phrase from Milton's prose in his chapter on the poet's millenarianism (*ibid.*, 281). By the publication of *The Ready and Easy Way*, just before Charles II's imminent return, Milton gave the phrase an even more decidedly political twist: Christ is the "*only* to be expected King" (891; my italics).

persuasion had either fled in exile or been forced underground. When they spoke again, their voices were muted and their radicalism veiled, as in *Paradise Lost*. But the inspired ideas of such revolutionaries did not wholly die; they were reborn in America and lived underground in England to resurface during more tolerant times.³⁰ Such times had arrived when the first Mormon missionaries landed on British soil, bearing a message that echoed indigenous themes. Although neither the missionaries nor their converts could have known it, the restored gospel had a Miltonic ring. When I recall the stunning success of those first elders in England, I like to suppose that the “pick and flower of England”³¹ they drew into the gospel net were, in their humble way, the spiritual posterity of Milton’s inspired radicalism, the remnants of his chosen people.

And what of Milton himself? Would Milton have accepted the missionaries’ message had he “been living at [that] hour”? One can only wonder. He was a proud and independent man. This much is sure: although he shares much common turf with us, in his own day he was not an unbaptized Mormon. He may, however, be a baptized Mormon now. For on 24 December 1878, in the St. George Temple, “John Milton, Poet,” was baptized by proxy into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³² We find means to make our favorite poets Mormon—one way or another.

³⁰For a discussion of what happened to the radical ideas that flourished during the English Revolution, see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 306–8; and *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).

³¹The phrase is Charles Dickens’s, from *The Uncommercial Traveler*, cited in *Among the Mormons*, ed. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 337.

³²St. George Temple Records, No. 110097, Book H, 570. It is surprising that proxy baptism for Milton was not performed earlier, when Wilford Woodruff was baptized on behalf of most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the presidents of the United States, and other “eminent men”—including, among others, Christopher Columbus, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, David Garrick, William Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Friedrich von Schiller, Robert Burns, and Lord Byron (Wilford Woodruff Journal, 21 August 1877).