

On Hope in *Paradise Lost*

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Throughout *Paradise Lost*, the word ‘hope’ appears fifty-two times. According to the Oxford Dictionary, it is a word that functions in both the plane of emotion and the plane of logic, defined as ‘desire combined with expectation’. While the connection between these two experiences is inherent in human psychology, this is not the case when examined in the context of Christianity. Desire in Christianity is a mechanism of the seven deadly sins; lust and greed in particular commonly manifest through desire either for sex or money. Desire can therefore be considered an experience only relevant to the fallen. However, expectation is more relevant to the unfallen—it is a conclusion most often reached through the progression of reason, and reason is the image of God himself. Reason is only attained by those who have God’s essence within them, and thus inherently *cannot* be relevant to the fallen the way that desire is. Since both expectation and desire exist in hope, the word itself becomes a paradox when observed in a Christian context, and Milton both recognizes and exploits this in *Paradise Lost*. In the contrasting circumstances in which he uses the word ‘hope’, Milton subtly implies that the ways in which the fallen and unfallen experience hope are inherently opposite—the unfallen experience hope as expectation, a mechanism of reason and preservation, while the fallen experience it as desire, a mechanism of sin and corruption.

The most prominent example of hope as experienced by the unfallen occurs in book 6, during the angelic war. As Michael sees Satan approaching him on the battlefield, he is “glad as hoping [there] to end intestine war in Heav’n, th’ arch-foe subdued” (VI: 258-259). Essentially, he hopes to end the war in heaven by subduing their leader, Satan. In this instance, hope is an emotion channeled because of the presence of reason—Michael logically determines that subduing Satan will end the war, and thus prevent further suffering and destruction. Since reason

is considered to be the image of God, this experience of hope reveals Michael's close relation to God—he is not only unfallen, but also a paradigm of the reason and virtue God represents. The noble intent behind his reasoning only adds to this aura of virtue—in hoping to end the war, Michael hopes to prevent further suffering, and preserve God's creation.

In direct contrast to Michael's unfallen experience of hope as a way of being closer to God, the fallen only experience hope in a way that widens the distance between them. This is most prominent in the scene where Satan gives his speech regarding the creation of cannons. He states that the materials which exist as “plant, fruit, flow'r ambrosial, gems and gold” when “touched with Heaven's ray” can be transformed by the fallen into “infernial flame”, and allow for the creation of cannons (VI: 475, 479-480, 483). It is this statement that rallies the fallen angels to action, causing “their languished [hopes to be] revived” (VI: 497). In this instance, hope is channeled because of the possibility of corruption—the fallen angels seek to transform God's creations from mediums of life, like flowers, into gunpowder for a cannon, which will later become a medium for death under humanity. Through this depiction, Milton implies that for the fallen, hope can only be achieved by reversing the nature of the universe, and willingly opposing the intentions of God. Where God intends for there to be life, the fallen corrupt in ways that create death. Therefore, for them, hope becomes a mechanism of corruption rather than preservation.

Not only can hope only be experienced by the fallen as a mechanism of corruption, but the fallen can also only understand the hope of others through their fallen perspective. This is exemplified in the way that Satan interprets Michael's hope of ending the war by subduing him. Rather than understanding it as a mechanism of reason and preservation, Satan views it as an act of convenience, questioning if Michael thinks it so much “easier to transact with [him] that [he

should] hope, imperious” to end the war by subduing him (VI: 286-287). Just by perceiving Michael’s hope, Satan corrupts and distorts it, only able to understand it as a mechanism of sin. Specifically, he understands it as a mechanism of sloth—by subduing him and ending the war, Michael would not have to engage in as much fighting.

By splitting the human definition of the word ‘hope’ into two separate experiences for angels and demons, Milton implies that humanity exists in a constant state of tension. Since Satan manipulated humanity into falling, we are influenced by demonic forces, and experience hope from the perspective of the fallen. However, because Jesus died for humanity’s transgressions, we are also influenced by angelic forces, and capable of experiencing hope from the perspective of the unfallen. We are a paradox—we are inclined to both preservation and corruption; we exist both as beings of reason and beings of sin. Thus, as Milton argues through the entirety of *Paradise Lost*, we choose our own path—once built to stand though free to fall, we are now fallen, but capable of salvation. That is humanity’s hope.

Works Cited:

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