

MILTON'S ANTI-TRINITARIANISM AND PARADISE REGAINED

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John Milton's Trinitarian heterodoxy was revealed in 1825 when Charles R. Sumner printed the previously unpublished De Doctrina Christiana, with his own translation. The question of the degree of that heterodoxy has yet to be answered. Similarly, the question of whether or not Paradise Lost displays anti-Trinitarian tenets began at the same time and continues to be hotly debated. The first question is not likely to be answered to the satisfaction of all scholars in the near future because of the considerable problem that arises when critics attempt to conclusively define the terms of the discussion. One needs to be an astute scholar of the Greek language and a learned theologian to bring enough ability to this question to answer it with any degree of success.

Fortunately, however, it is not necessary for my purpose in this report to determine the degree of Milton's heterodoxy. What I do wish to examine is whether or not Paradise Regained, a poem not often referred to

by those discussing Milton's position on the Trinity, displays orthodox Trinitarian beliefs. It is my thesis that although Milton may have been involved in anti-Trinitarian speculation when he composed Paradise Regained, he left the poem open to orthodox interpretation. By orthodox Trinitarianism I mean the belief that there is absolute equality among the Father, Son and Spirit--a belief that will tolerate no subordination of one person of the Trinity to another. Because of the subject matter of the poem my paper will focus chiefly on the status of the Son of God. In limiting my discussion of Paradise Regained to the question of its position on the Trinity I have left out many important aspects of the poem which do not bear directly on my subject.

First of all, focusing on Book I, Chapter V of De Doctrina Christiana, "Of the Son," I would like to examine some elements of the contemporary controversy concerning Milton's alleged "Arianism." In 1941 Maurice Kelley published This Great Argument: A Study of Milton's De Doctrina Christiana as a Gloss upon Paradise Lost.¹ Mr. Kelley assumes that the question of whether Milton expressed Arian views in De Doctrina Christiana has already been answered satisfactorily in the affirmative. He goes on to present the idea that Paradise Lost is an "Arian document."² However, William B. Hunter, Jr. backs up a step to deny that De Doctrina Christiana exhibits Arian views.³ He points out that Milton never mentioned Arius

¹This Great Argument (reprinted 1962). See pages 4-7 for a review of early reaction to De Doctrina Christiana.

²Ibid., p. 122

³"Milton's Arianism Reconsidered," Harvard Theological Review, 52 (1959), pp. 9-35.

with any hint of kinship; that contemporary biographers never accuse Milton of Arian views; that Arians seldom used Scripture, Milton's avowed source for all his theological conclusions; and that Arians insisted that the Son was generated "out of nothing" while Milton says that the Son was begotten from God's own substance. He goes on to say that while Arius declared:

1. that the Father acted in time of his own free will;
2. that the Logos was not eternally generated; and 3. that the Logos was created "out of nothing," the Council of Nicaea condemned only the last statement. Mr. Hunter concludes that Milton avoids the only real charge of Arianism that might be brought against him by saying that the Logos was created out of divine substance. He summarizes with this statement: "It seems that we may assert positively that Milton was not an Arian. Sub-ordinationism as such has not been branded heretical, though it is not the view of the Trinity found most widely today--or in the seventeenth century for that matter."⁴ While denying that Milton can be described as Arian, Mr. Hunter acknowledges that his theological speculation concerning the Son of God is unusual for his time and for ours. J.H. Adamson accepts Hunter's opinion and adds the point that Arians abhorred metaphor while St. Athanasius, a vigorous opponent of the Arians, used the device frequently.⁵ Athanasius often described the Father as sun, fountain and archetype while describing the Son as radiance, stream and image--metaphors that Milton uses frequently in his poetry. This is not to

⁴"Milton's Arianism Reconsidered," Harvard Theological Review, 52 (1959), p. 34.

⁵"Milton's Arianism," Harvard Theological Review, 53 (1960), pp. 269-276.