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MILTON AND MOSES BAR-CEPHA

By GRANT MCCOLLEY

During recent decades students of *Paradise Lost* have more and more directed their attention toward that amorphous genre usually termed hexaemeral literature.¹ Numerous works representative of the genre have been compared with Milton's epic, and much new light cast upon both the poet and his poem. The present note will continue this line of inquiry, and discuss briefly a treatise easily available to and seemingly well-respected by the seventeenth century, the *Commentarius De Paradiso* of Moses Bar-Cepha.²

Chiefly because of its partially Biblical basis, but in part as a result of the conventionality of its exponents, the hexaemeral literature generally consisted of a more or less expanded recital of commonplace themes and episodes. This fact explains much the

¹ Cf. Frank E. Robbins, *The Hexaemeral Literature* (Chicago, 1912), pp. 89 ff.; P. E. Dustoor, "Legends of Lucifer in Early English and in Milton," *Anglia*, LIV (1930), 213-268, *passim*; Maury Thibaut de Maisières, *Les Poèmes Inspirés du Début de la Genèse . . .* (Louvain, 1931), Part II, chs. viii-x, and *passim*; George Coffin Taylor, *Milton's Use of Du Bartas* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934); Arnold Williams, "Commentaries on Genesis as a Basis for Hexaemeral Material in the Literature of the Late Renaissance," *SP*, XXXIV (1937), 191 ff., and *passim*; Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," *ELH*, IV (1937), 164 ff., and *passim*; and Grant McColley, "Paradise Lost," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXII (1939), 181-235, *passim*.

² The commentary of Bar-Cepha, translated from the Syriac into Latin by Andreus Masius, was published in Antwerp in 1569. This translation was three times reprinted during the seventeenth century, twice by La Binge, *Magna Bibliotheca*, Vol. X (1618) and Vol. I [?X], 1654; and once by J. Pearson, *Critici Sacri*, I, part ii, 1698. A more available reprint of the Masius translation is that of Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca Posterior, CXI, 1863, coll. 479-608, which I have used in this note. Material drawn from extremely short chapters of the *Commentarius* is cited only by Part and chapter; that taken from more extended chapters, by Part, chapter, and column in Migne.

Moses Bar-Cepha, born at Balad about the year 813 and died 12 February, 903, was a Syrian writer and Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to *De Paradiso* and a variety of other works, he wrote an *Hexaemeron*, a manuscript copy of which is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

greater part of the similarities present in *De Paradiso* and in related sections of *Paradise Lost*.³ There remain however two groups of corresponding ideas sufficiently unsteretyped to merit discussion. Of these, the first emphasized various reasons which supposedly led Satan to seduce mankind. In presenting this group Milton and Bar-Cepha employed contrast and comparison, placed in the mouth of Satan a monologue or soliloquy, stressed his tormenting self-pity, and painted him as reacting profoundly to the sight of the fortunate Adam. Both writers also caused Satan to dwell upon his exile; to describe Adam as the recipient of honors that rightfully belonged to him, the Apostate; and to compare the dignity of his nature and first estate with the baseness of Adam's earthly origin. In addition, Satan's reference to his tragic fall was followed immediately by a lament because he, shorn of his glory, now consorted with beasts, or was constrained into a beast. However, as the omissions in the illustrative excerpts suggest, it will be noted that Milton devoted greater space to the Apostate angel than did Bar-Cepha:

“ Instead / Of us, outcast, exiled, his new delight,
Mankind, [God] created, and for him this World. . . .”⁴

³ In keeping with hexaemeral tradition, Milton (*P. L.*, IV, 210 ff.) and Moses Bar-Cepha (*De Paradiso*, I, 2, 16-17, 21) devoted extended space to the Garden in Eden. Both urged with enthusiasm the conception that the Garden itself was far more delightful than the pleasant and spacious region in which it was located. This partially utopian theme emphasized both the place and the goodness of God in preparing it for man. The lovely Garden stood upon a high mountain and, physical law to the contrary, was irrigated by a *large* river which flowed through Eden. Having burst forth into the Garden, the river spread out over the land, and at last fell precipitously down the steep.

Other commonplaces employed by Milton and Bar-Cepha include the conventional reasons for the creation of man, comparison of the Virgin and Eve, praise of the naked glory of “our first parents,” and the idea that Satan insinuated himself into the body of the serpent. The two men likewise presented the relatively unconventional belief that prior to the Temptation, the serpent did not “walk” on his belly. In harmony with a majority of religious writers, they also stressed the point that the sin of Adam and Eve was disobedience of God's commandment, and not the eating of the fruit. The emphasis normally placed upon this point indicates that it is scarcely precise to describe as a “taboo” the conventional hexaemeral interpretation of the Divine interdiction of the Tree of Knowledge.

⁴ *P. L.*, IV, 105 ff.

The Fiend / Saw undelighted all delight . . . [Adam and Eve]
Seemed lords of all . . . and in their looks divine
The image of their glorious Maker shone . . .⁵

“O Hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold? . . .
Creatures . . . to Heavenly Spirits bright / Little inferior . . .
[But] Hell shall unfold, / To entertain you two, her
Widest gates . . . [and] receive / Your numerous offspring . . .⁶

Rocks, dens, and caves! But I in none . . . / Find place . . .
[God] Determined to advance into our room
A creature formed of earth, and him endow, / Exalted
From so base original, / With heavenly spoils, our spoils . . .
Him Lord pronounced . . . / Subjected to his service Angel-wings . . .
I . . . glide obscure . . . / O foul descent! that I, who erst
Contended / With Gods to sit the highest, am now constrained
Into a beast, and, mixed with bestial slime . . . Who aspires
Must down as low / As high he soared . . . [I shall have] revenge . . .
On him who next / Provokes my envy . . . this Man of Clay . . .”⁷

Moses Bar-Cepha placed Satan’s imaginary soliloquy in the midst of his discourse on the Apostate:

When Satan fell from his place of high dignity and glory, and saw Adam created from clay (*lutum*), made in the image and similitude of God, and all things on earth subjected to his rule; particularly [when he observed] the dwelling-place of Paradise filled with all delight, and Adam’s enjoyment of the society of angels, while he himself was utterly cast down and dejected, a powerful hatred and envy moved him against Adam and Eve, so that he seduced them. Truly, he was tormented by such thoughts as these: “I who am spiritual am exiled; but Adam, who is corporeal, is taken in. I am driven away and deprived of all glory; Adam is clad and arrayed in glory. I have fallen to the depth; he stands on the height. I move among beasts; he among angels. I haunt desolate solitude; he lives among the delightful trees of Paradise.” . . . Satan knew from what had befallen him, that if Adam sinned . . . he either should die or be driven from Paradise, and afterward . . . that he [Satan] would hold rule over Adam and over all of his posterity.⁸

With this group of ideas may be discussed the unusual conception that Satan first learned of the forbidden tree by overhearing Adam

⁵ *Ibid.*, 285 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 358 ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, IX, 118 ff., 148 ff.

⁸ *De Paradiso*, I, 27; col. 519. Satan’s lament occurs as follows in the Latin translation by Masius: “Ego qui spiritalis sum, exsulo; at Adam qui corporeus est, intro est receptus: ego profigatus omnique gloria exutus: illa gloria indutus vestitusque: ego in imo; ille in summo: ego apud bestias; ille apud angelos: ego in vasta solitudine; ille inter amoenissimas paradisi arbores versatur.”

warn Eve against it.⁹ In *De Paradiso*, Bar-Cepha considered at some length the question of whether Satan could have overheard God's warning to Adam, or Adam's warning to Eve, and concluded

⁹ This unusual correspondence was mentioned by Todd, but apparently has been ignored or overlooked by most recent editors of *Paradise Lost*. The one exception I have noted is Professor Merritt Y. Hughes, who remarks in his gloss on IV, 512 (*Paradise Lost*, Garden City, 1935, p. 129), that "A work of Moses Barcephas, published in 1569 (according to Todd), may have given Milton the Talmudic tradition that Satan overheard Adam tell Eve about the taboo of the Tree of Knowledge." We should recall, however, that Bar-Cepha does not present the conception as a "Talmudic tradition," but as the belief of the famous Deacon of Syria, "Dominus Ephrem," and of an unidentified group of followers. The treatises of St. Ephraem seemingly most likely to include the conception are his two commentaries on Genesis, the second of which contains numerous sections written by Jacob, Bishop of Edessa. I have notwithstanding been unable to locate any discussion of the idea in the Rome, 1737, edition of the two commentaries (*Opera Omnia*, 1732-46, I, 1 ff., and 117 ff.). It may occur in altogether different works, or in a lost or unpublished MS. version of one or both of the two treatises.

A second apparent contribution of St. Ephraem to the hexaemeral tradition was the important conception of the Holy Spirit employed by Milton in *P. L.*, I, 19 ff., and VII, 234 ff.:

Thou from the first / Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss, / And mad'st it pregnant. . . .
On the watery calm / His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspread,
And vital virtue infused, and vital warmth, / Throughout the fluid mass.

Following Robbins (*op. cit.*, pp. 39 ff., 48), present-day scholars open discussion of this conception with St. Basil (*In Hexaemeron*, Homilia II, 6). However, Basil specifically set forth the idea not as his own, but as that of "the man of Syria": "Dicam tibi non meam, sed viri Syri sententiam. . . . Illud, inquiebat, verbum, 'ferebatur,' interpretantes sumunt pro verbo 'confovebat,' et ita naturae aquarum vim tribuebat fetificandi, instar incubantis avis, et vitalem quamdam facultatem iis quae foventur impartientis." St. Ephraem had presented the conception in Chapter I of both his commentaries on Genesis, in the second of which (ed. cit., I, 117-118) he stated: "'Spiritus Dei,' hic est Spiritus Sanctus Dei Patris, qui ab eo sine nota temporis procedens . . . isque dicitur incubasse aquis; ut nimirum illis virtutem prolificam inderet. . . . Indicandum autem fuit Spiritum Sanctum incubasse. . . . Spiritum Sanctum suam interposuisse operam, quod per incubationem satis ostenditur . . . ut nimirum hinc disceremus, Spiritus Sanctum aquas vitali quodam calore fovisse, imo velut infuso ardore et ebullitionem concitasse, & per hunc modum ipsis impertiisse foecunditatem. Habes in gallina quodam hujus rei specimen: incubat enim ova sua, excitatoque per ipsam incubationem calore foecundat." The strength and permanence of the contribution which

that "when Adam spoke to his wife ['concerning the precept'] Satan heard perfectly (*exaudisse Satanum*)."¹⁰ Milton described Satan, in the form of a beast, as approaching very close to the newly created pair. Almost immediately Adam repeated to Eve God's precept regarding the Tree. When discussion had given place to conjugal caresses, the listening Satan demonstrated he had heard perfectly the warning by declaring:

Yet let me not forget what I have gained
From their own mouths . . . / One fatal tree there stands,
Of Knowledge called, / Forbidden them to taste.¹¹

Together with innumerable other writers, Milton and Bar-Cepha made the temptation of Adam and Eve an extended episode, each step of which was developed with care. A majority of the details and themes were wholly conventional; a few were not. To the latter class belongs the conception that Eve believed in all seriousness that eating of the forbidden fruit made her superior to Adam. The Eve of *Paradise Lost* thought at first to withhold the fruit from her husband, to the end that she might "keep the odds of knowledge in my power/Without copartner," and become "more equal, and perhaps . . . sometime/Superior" to him.¹² Bar-Cepha declared that Eve ate the fruit before calling Adam "because she desired herself first to be made into a God, and excel the man in Divinity who surpassed her as a human being. By such a method she would obtain rule over him and control the administration of affairs."¹³

Both the Syrian of the ninth century and the Englishman of the seventeenth included the conventional idea that Eve recounted to Adam the arguments which Satan had urged upon her, but joined with it the relatively uncommon conception that they incurred no danger in eating the fruit, and that rather than dying would become

Ephraem appears to have made is suggested by Milton's employment of both the conception and a number of the terms used by the Saint in presenting it, including the words *virtue*, *vital heat*, and *infused*. It perhaps is unnecessary to add that the many similarities between the discussions of Ephraem and Basil, a number of which I have not mentioned, support adequately the conclusion (*Basilii . . . Opera Omnia*, Paris, 1839, I, 25 n.) of Julian Garnier and others that in all probability the "man of Syria" referred to by Basil is "Ephrem Diaconum Syrum."

¹⁰ I, 28; coll. 549-550.

¹² *P. L.*, IX, 820 ff.

¹¹ IV, 512 ff.

¹³ *De Paradiso*, I, 28; col. 555.

as Gods. The usual points then were made that Eve solicited Adam to eat, and that he chiefly was moved to do so by physical love. Next followed the not unique but quite uncommon ideas that subsequent to Adam's eating of the fruit, he and Eve grew intoxicated, and indulged in lustful cohabitation. Because of cohabitation Adam and Eve "soon found their eyes now opened," and discovered that through sin they had forfeited their immaterial but glorious "ornaments." The first glory of the naked body was spoiled and lost.¹⁴ In the version of Moses Bar-Cepha:

The man inquired concerning the fruit, and the woman repeated to him the arguments [literally, the *words*] which the Serpent-Devil set forth to her. . . . Eve replied to Adam that she took the fruit from the serpent, and that not only would they not die, but that without danger they would grow to be as Gods. . . . Master Ephraem wrote truly that Eve urged the man with many entreaties (*pollicitatio*). . . . Adam was not persuaded by hunger to eat of the Tree, but by physical desire (*libido*). . . . Because they partook of the fruit, which in truth they ate, they became inclined toward lechery . . . and at length were made intoxicated. . . . Moreover, they were followers of wanton lust, to go whoring, to be defiled with adultery. . . . "And the eyes of both were opened." . . . Sin had removed from them the garment of glory. . . . They were covered with shame. . . . After they had sinned, the glory of the body was spoiled.¹⁵

The occurrence in *Paradise Lost* and *De Paradiso* of a number of rare conceptions, together with the common employment of relatively unconventional groups of ideas, suggests the probability that in composing his epic, Milton was in some degree indebted to Moses Bar-Cepha. It is not however my purpose to raise at this time the question of the extent or nature of Milton's borrowings from the Bishop. I wish rather to emphasize the point that in *Paradise Lost* an English Protestant of the seventeenth century set forth with some exactness many of the conceptions which had been repeated and in part collected by a Syrian Roman Catholic of the ninth.

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¹⁴ *P. L.*, IX, 863 ff., 997 ff., 1007 ff., 1053 ff., 1074 ff., 1114 ff. The principal cause of the rarity of the idea that immediately after the fall Adam and Eve indulged their lust was probably the widely-held belief that they did not cohabit in Paradise.

¹⁵ *De Paradiso*, I, 28; coll. 555-557. I have on occasion changed the tense of the Latin translation.