

MILTON AND THE ENDS OF TIME

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Milton and the millennium

Barbara K. Lewalski

John Milton lived in a milieu rife with calculations about the date and signs of the endtimes, and with speculation that the Second Coming of Christ to rule the world with his saints was on – or just over – the horizon. The apocalyptic events inaugurating that thousand-year reign according to seventeenth-century millenarians were much more awesome than those foreseen (wrongly as it happened) for Y2K. Milton's culture expected rampant wickedness and apostasy, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse – war, pestilence, famine, and death – wreaking universal havoc, fearsome battles between the Saints and Antichrist leading to Armageddon, and Christ coming in terrible majesty to judge the world. But for the saints the millennium would constitute a new Golden Age, with nature restored and the social and political order perfected.

At Christ's College, Cambridge, Milton would have had some contact with the famous exegete of the Apocalypse, Joseph Mede, who was a prominent Fellow of the college, and with Mede's elaborate system of synchronizing contemporary history with the Book of Revelation, as well as with the prophecies in Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and elsewhere. That system was spelled out in his highly influential treatise, *Clavis Apocalyptica*, first published in 1627 while Milton was in residence at Christ's, later republished in Latin and translated into English as *The Key of the Revelation* in 1643.¹ During the English Revolution the widespread belief that the world was in the last age intensified at certain signal moments of revolutionary change: the casting out of the bishops root and branch, the army of God winning definitive battles against the royalist armies, the execution of a king seen to be in league with Antichrist, and the founding of a republic. Some millenarians undertook precise calculations of the date when Christ would begin his reign on earth. William Burden was one of several who arrived at the date 1666.² Nathanael Homes in *Resurrection Revealed* (1654) worked out the complicated mathematical schemes by which various exegetes of the Book of Revelation arrived at

their dates: for Elias Reusner the millennium would begin around 1670, for Ephraim Huet around 1662, for Thomas Brightman around 1680.³ Radical Fifth Monarchists, making much of the prophecies of the four beasts in Daniel (Dan. 7:22, 26) and the image destroyed by a stone “cut out without hands” (Dan. 2:31–35) – both said to represent the four great empires of history – looked to institute the rule of the saints immediately and probably by force. In *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy* (1653), William Aspinwall wrote that the saints’ reign began with the execution of Charles I: “It is said, *That judgment was given to the saints, and they executed judgment on the little horne* [of the fourth beast], Dan. 7.22, 26, which was fulfilled 1648.”⁴

In 1653 these groups supposed the Barebones Parliament would install the reign of the saints, but when it relinquished power to Cromwell after a session of barely three months many of them substituted Cromwell for Charles I, as the “little horn” of the fourth beast, usurping the place of King Jesus. In 1657 the Fifth Monarchist Thomas Venner planned an aborted uprising against Cromwell and in 1661 he mounted one (with about forty men) against the restored Charles II. After the Restoration millennial fervor receded, but the series of calamities in 1665–66 – the Dutch War, the Great Plague, and the Great Fire – rekindled it, as descriptions of those events invited association of them with the woes expected at the apocalypse. The Quaker D. Roe makes the connection explicit:

*O England, England, what Lamentation may be taken up for thee, for the great calamity that is coming upon thee, and which is already begun in thee, which thou canst not escape . . . yea the viols of the Wrath of God is pouring upon the nations, and the destroying Angel is gone forth, for the Harvest is ripe, and the Lord is sending forth his Angels, saying, Thrust in your sickles, for wickedness is grown up to full height . . . Thus sayeth the Lord, I will terribly shake the Nations, and I will bring down the mighty from off their Seats, and I will overturn, overturn, all, until he comes to reign whose right it is, and then shall there be rulers as at the first, and Judges as at the beginning; . . . yea, the time is near at hand in which the Lord this work to pass will bring.*⁵

An anonymous pamphlet published in 1665 predicted “the Downefall of Babylon in [16]66,” to be followed immediately by the return of the ten lost tribes to Jerusalem and the conversion of the Jews; the immediate precursor of the millennium, the preaching of the Gospel “throughout the whole World” would be achieved by 1672.⁶

From early to late, the millennium is important for both the argument and the imaginative vision of Milton’s poetry and prose. In *De Doctrina*

Christiana, in a section probably written early and later revised, Milton collects the relevant scripture texts and from them outlines a scenario very like Mede's, in which Christ's judgment of the world is coextensive with his thousand-year reign on earth with his saints; then Christ will defeat Satan in a final fierce battle and the rebel angels and all humankind will be judged – each (Milton underscores) “according to the light which he has received” (*CP* VI: 625).⁷ But it is instructive to recognize what Milton does *not* do with this narrative. Neither here nor elsewhere does he offer an exegesis of the symbols in the text of Revelation. He proposes no direct historical equivalents for the seven heads and ten horns of the beast, nor for the seven vials and the seven trumpets. He never refers to specific contemporary events – wars, plagues, fires, apostasies, blasphemies – as signs of impending apocalypse. And he makes no mathematical calculations about dates and times. Nor does he ever look to the Book of Revelation for a model of or sanction for government by the saints now. Arminian that he was, Milton did not suppose that the saints could be identified with any certainty, and in any case, he always supposed that it is for Christ to install their rule, not for them to preempt it. When reformation seemed to be going well, he imagined that the millennium might be close at hand, and when it was in difficulties he deduced, as he declared in what is probably a late addition in *De Doctrina*, that Christ “will be slow to come” (*CP* VI: 618). The reason, he explains, is that the Lord gives more time because he is longsuffering, “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).⁸

But while changing political circumstances led Milton to adjust his views as to the timing of the millennium, he appealed from beginning to end to the idea of the millennium to urge personal, ecclesiastical, social, and political reformation, and also certain kinds of political action as preparation for that eventuality. The projected downfall of all tyrants at the millennium offered support to his other arguments from scripture and natural law for eradicating bishops, idolatry and kingship, disestablishing the church, and promoting religious and intellectual liberty. And from 1648 on the projected millenarian reign of Christ as the only rightful earthly king regularly served Milton as an argument for republican government. His core belief, sometimes intimated, sometimes stated explicitly, is that the millennium will come when the English (and presumably others) have become virtuous and free, rejecting all the forces that promote servility, be they popes or bishops or kings or any other such idols.

In 1629, two years after Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* predicted a millennium shortly to come, Milton's Nativity Ode critiques that mindset. The poet at age twenty-one portrays awestruck Nature responding to Christ's first coming as if it were his second, and depicts himself as similarly misled, as his enraptured imagination evokes the music of the angelic choirs and the music of the spheres and is led by that music to leap forward to the millennial golden age. But then he reproves such readiness to expect the millennium soon, abruptly recalling himself to the nativity moment – "But wisest Fate says no" (l. 154) – to take account of all the history that must transpire before the moment when "our bliss / Full and perfect is" (ll. 165–66).⁹ The final section of the poem treats that period, the kingdom of grace inaugurated at the Nativity, when the "old Dragon" is partly restrained in his powers and all the pagan idols begin to flee from all their shrines. Critics used to think this catalogue much too long (it comprises almost a third of the poem) but Milton intends to suggest, by a kind of formal mimesis, the long and difficult process that must precede the millennium: ridding humankind of all its idols, lovely as well as hideous. The passage has contemporary reference to the "popish" idolatry in the English church and its liturgy being promoted by the newly elevated bishop of London, William Laud. It may also comment, as Stella Revard proposes, on the royal birth expected by Queen Henrietta Maria in a few months' time, already being heralded, through allusions to Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, as an event to inaugurate a Stuart golden age.¹⁰ Milton's Nativity poem insists that the divine child, not the royal one, foreshadows the millennial golden age, but that the millennium can arrive only when idols old and new have been cast out.

In *Lycidas* (1637) Milton devises for St. Peter a fierce jeremiad castigating the Laudian church and clergy. His scornful paradox, "Blind mouthes" (l. 119), brilliantly exposes the ignorance, ambition, and greediness of those bad shepherds who seek only to feed their own bellies, leaving the hungry sheep "swoln with wind" (l. 126) produced by Laudian ceremony and conformity, and subject to the ravages of the Roman Catholic "grim Woolf" (l. 128) raging freely in the Caroline court, especially among the queen's ladies. St. Peter's invective, voicing God's wrath, is not explicitly apocalyptic, but that final divine retribution is one reference point for the formidable if ambiguous "two-handed engine" that stands ready "at the door" to smite the guilty and cleanse the church (ll. 130–31).

In 1641 Milton was at times caught up in the widespread expectation that the millennium might soon begin, and indicated as much by

occasional bursts of prophetic and poetic fervor. But his emphasis was always on the duty of the English nation and people to prepare for that event by reforming the church. His first antiprelatical tract, *Of Reformation*, ends with a prophecy that constructs the king, in his role as head of church and state, as simply a placeholder for Christ, the “Eternall and shortly-expected” Messiah King (*CP* 1: 616). In that millennium Milton imagines a fierce vengeance on the vaunting prelates and their supporters, upon whom the other damned will exercise a “*Raving and Bestiall Tyranny* over them as their *Slaves* and *Negro’s*” (*CP* 1: 617). He cries out in prophetic lamentation and prayer as he considers the immense obstacles to the church’s reformation, but then he imagines himself in a bardic role, celebrating and helping to create a reformed English society that will herald Christ’s millennial kingdom, in which there will be no more earthly kings. On the verge of that millennium, the Miltonic bard will find his highest poetic subject:

Then amidst the *Hymns*, and *Halleluiahs* of *Saints* some one may perhaps bee heard offering at high *strains* in new and lofty *Measures* to sing and celebrate thy *divine Mercies*, and *marvelous Judgements* in this Land throughout all *AGES*; whereby this great and Warlike Nation instructed and inur’d to the fervent and continuall practice of *Truth* and *Righteousnesse*, and casting farre from her the *rags* of her old *vices* may presse on hard to that *high* and *happy* emulation to be found the *soberest*, *wisest*, and *most Christian People* at that day when thou the Eternall and shortly-expected King shalt open the Clouds to judge the severall Kingdomes of the World, and distributing *Nationall Honours* and *Rewards* to Religious and just *Common-wealths*, shalt put an end to all Earthly *Tyrannies*, proclaiming thy universal and milde *Monarchy* through Heaven and Earth. (*CP* 1: 616)

In *Animadversions* (also 1641) Milton again assumes a prophetic voice, offering a long, passionate, poetic prayer couched in imagery from Revelation for the full perfection of the church in the millennial kingdom, once more imagined as near at hand:

Who is there that cannot trace thee now in thy beamy walke through the midst of thy Sanctuary, amidst those golden *candlesticks* . . . O perfect, and accomplish thy glorious acts . . . When thou hast settl’d peace in the Church, and righteous judgement in the Kingdome, then shall all thy *Saints* addresse their voyces of joy, and triumph to thee, standing on the shoare of that red Sea into which our enemies had almost driven us. (*CP* 1: 705–06)

Again Milton imagines himself as a prophet-poet singing of and in that millennial kingdom:

And he that now for haste snatches up a plain, ungarnish't present as a thank-offering to thee . . . may then perhaps take up a Harp, and sing thee an elaborate Song to Generations . . . Thy Kingdom is now at hand, and thou standing at the dore. Come forth out of thy Royall Chambers, O Prince of all the Kings of the earth, put on the visible roabes of thy imperiall Majesty, take up that unlimited Scepter which thy Almighty Father hath bequeath'd thee; for now the voice of thy Bride calls thee, and all creatures sigh to bee renew'd. (*CP* I: 706–07)

In 1644, with *Areopagitica*, Milton no longer speaks of Christ's Second Coming as imminent, but he does refer to an England being prepared by God for some great change: "all concurrence of signs" and "the general instinct of holy and devout men" indicate, he declares, that God is beginning "some new and great period in his Church, ev'n to the reforming of Reformation it self," and he is revealing this "as his manner is, first to his English-men" (*CP* II: 553). Here the emphasis falls on the duty and responsibility of the English to respond rightly to the challenge of this reforming era. Parliament must not hamper by licensing laws those who are busy collecting pieces of the torn body of Truth, which will be wholly reconstituted only at the Second Coming – an event being rightly prepared for by multitudes of prophets in the new English Israel. As is usual with him, Milton associates their prophecy not with sudden supernatural illumination but with painstaking scholarship:

Behold now this vast City; a City of refuge, the mansion-house of liberty . . . there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty the approaching Reformation: others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement . . . What wants there . . . but wise and faithfull labourers, to make a knowing people, a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies. (*CP* II: 553–54)

The next sentence sounds like a prediction of imminent apocalypse: "We reck'n more then five months yet to harvest; there need not be five weeks, had we but eyes to lift up, the fields are white already." But the allusion – to John 4:35 – refers not to apocalypse but to preaching and gathering a harvest of souls.

After the king's execution on 30 January 1649, Milton appeals occasionally to millennial prophecy as reinforcement for natural law and popular sovereignty arguments supporting the regicide and the republic. He finds it especially effective in countering biblical texts which seem to support divine right kingship. In a passage added to the second edition of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (September 1649), he castigates the

Presbyterians now decrying the regicide by evoking the millennium when there will be no more earthly kings, only Christ

who is our only King, the root of *David*, and whose Kingdom is eternal righteousness, with all those that Warr under him, whose happiness and final hopes are laid up in that only just & rightful kingdom (which we pray uncessantly may com soon, and in so praying wish hasty ruin and destruction to all Tyrants), eev'n he our immortal King, and all that love him, must of necessity have in abomination these blind and lame Defenders of *Jerusalem*; as the soule of *David* hated them, and forbid them entrance into Gods House, and his own. (CP III: 256)

The passage suggests that the English tyrannicide began preparations for Christ's arrival – soon, Milton hopes – and that the republic now established is the only political structure that properly recognizes Christ as the only rightful king. Here the millennial ideal serves to reinforce proper attitudes to hold now, toward monarchs, tyrants, and republics.

In the final pages of *Eikonoklastes* (October 1649), Milton makes his most direct application of apocalyptic symbols to contemporary politics, as he links the justice meted out to Charles in the regicide with the honor accorded the saints in Psalm 149:8, commonly applied to the endtimes:

Therefore *To bind thir Kings in Chaines, and thir Nobles with links of Iron*, is an honour belonging to his Saints; not to build *Babel* (which was *Nimrods* work the first King . . .) but to destroy it, especially that spiritual *Babel* [the Roman Church]; and first to overcome those European Kings, which receive thir power, not from God, but from the beast; and are counted no better then his ten hornes . . . untill at last, *joyning thir Armies with the Beast*, whose power first rais'd them, they shall perish with him by the *King of Kings* against whom they have rebell'd . . . This is thir doom writ'n [Rev. 19], and the utmost that we find concerning them in these latter days. (CP III: 598–99)

Milton's move here is to answer scripture with scripture: to set this dire prophecy of Christ's apocalyptic destruction of kings against Charles's claims in *Eikon Basilike* of God's special favor to kings as the greatest patrons of law, justice, order, and religion on earth. Milton does not claim that the regicide inaugurated the millennium, but that it accords with, and is a proper preparative to, the millennial "doom" (Rev. 19) to be visited on kings "in these latter days." In the *Defensio* (1651) he flatly denied the royalist analogy which his literary and political adversary Salmasius so often invoked between divine and human kingship, citing in evidence Christ's sole kingship at the millennium: "who, in fact, is worthy of holding on earth power like that of God but some person who far surpasses all others and even resembles God in goodness and

wisdom? The only such person, as I believe, is the son of God whose coming we look for” (*CP* IV 1: 427–28).

Milton probably hoped that the Barebones Parliament which assembled on 4 July 1653 would do something about ensuring religious liberty and church disestablishment, but he did not accept the MPs’ claims to special political rights as elect saints. In 1654, referring in the *Defensio Secunda* to the dissolution of that parliament, Milton offered a clear-sighted judgment on their ineptitude:

The elected members came together. They did nothing. When they in turn had at length exhausted themselves with disputes and quarrels, most of them considering themselves inadequate and unfit for executing such great tasks, they of their own accord dissolved the Parliament. (*CP* IV 1: 671)

In 1655, in the sonnet “On the late Massacher in Piemont,” Milton calls down God’s vengeance for the horrific slaughter of the Waldensians by the Roman Catholic forces of Savoy, echoing prophetic language from Lamentations, Psalms, Isaiah, and especially the Book of Revelation. As with the two-handed engine of *Lycidas*, the lines derive much of their power from ambiguity as to just what that vengeance might be, when it might come, and who might wield it:

Avenge O Lord thy slaughter’d Saints, whose bones
Lie scatter’d on the Alpine mountains cold,
Ev’n them who kept thy truth so pure of old
When all our Fathers worship’t Stocks and Stones,
Forget not: in thy book record their groanes
Who were thy Sheep and in their antient Fold
Slayn by the bloody *Piemontese* that roll’d
Mother with Infant down the Rocks. Their moans
The Vales redoubl’d to the Hills, and they
To Heav’n. Their martyr’d blood and ashes so
O’re all th’*Italian* fields where still doth sway
The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow
A hunderd-fold, who having learnt thy way
Early may fly the *Babylonian* wo.¹¹

The first four lines seem to call for immediate divine retribution for these “slaughter’d Saints” who retained their gospel purity of worship while the rest of Europe was sunk in pagan or Roman Catholic idolatry; they echo Rev. 6:9–10, “the souls of them that were slain for the word of God . . . cried out with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” The second segment (lines 5–10) modulates from the immediacy

of “Avenge” to “Forget not,” as the speaker calls on God to record the martyrs’ “groanes” and the redoubled “moans” in the book by which humankind will be judged on the Last Day.

After the turn within line 10, the resolution refers to some kinds of immediate retribution in all the regions ruled by the papal “triple Tyrant”: allusion to the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3) in which the seed of God’s Word “brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold,” and to Tertullian’s aphorism, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” suggests that the Waldensians’ slaughter will result in widespread conversions to Protestantism. But allusion to the myth of Cadmus, who sowed dragons’ teeth that sprang up as armed warriors, intimates that Protestant armies might execute God’s vengeance soon. And the echo of Jeremiah 51:6 in “Babylonian wo” – “Flee out of the midst of Babylon, and deliver every man his soul: be not cut off in her iniquity; for this is the time of the Lord’s vengeance” – predicts violent divine retribution in, perhaps, an imminent apocalypse. In this complex resolution vengeance is the Lord’s, now or later, but the human responsibility is to flee the Roman Babylon, as well as, perhaps, to inflict some foretaste of the prophesied “wo” now, as part of Cromwell’s proposed Protestant military coalition.

In 1660, in the first edition of *The Readie and Easie Way*, Milton voiced his most caustic judgment of Fifth Monarchist aspirations to theocracy, insisting that separation of church and state is the only route to peace and settlement. Parliamentary elections would then be free of the factional strife unleashed when “every one strives to chuse him whom he takes to be of his religion; and everie faction hath the plea of Gods cause.” Also, “ambitious leaders of armies would then have no hypocritical pretences so ready at hand to contest with Parlements, yea to dissolve them and make way to their own tyrannical designs; [and] . . . I verily suppose there would be then no more pretending to a fifth monarchie of the saints” (*CP* VII: 380). This reference may look back to Cromwell, but it targets most obviously the recent machinations of Generals Lambert and Fleetwood. In the second edition of this tract, published on the eve of the Restoration, Milton appeals with special force to Christ’s millennial kingship to reinforce his now desperate republican arguments. No man can rightfully hold royal dominion over other men, except for Christ, “our true and rightfull and only to be expected King . . . the only by him [God] anointed and ordaind since the work of our redemption finisht, Universal Lord of all Mankinde” (*CP* VII: 445).

In *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) there are brief references to the Last Judgment and the millennium in Michael’s prophecy, offered as some

counterweight to the tragic history he has recounted: “so shall the world goe on,/To good malignant, to bad men benigne,/Under her own waight groaning, till the day/Appear of respiration to the just /And vengeance to the wicked, at return/Of him so lately promis’d” (12.537–42).¹² This tragic vision of an external paradise irretrievably lost, along with the promise of “A paradise within thee, happier far” (12.587) might seem a recipe for quietism and retreat from the political arena after the Restoration. But Michael’s prophecy shows that in every age the just few have the responsibility to oppose, if God calls them to do so, the Nimrods, or the Pharaohs, or the royalist persecutors of Puritans, even though – like the loyal angels in the War in Heaven – they can win no decisive victories until the Son appears. Millennial expectation is offered to encourage Adam’s progeny to continue their resistance to these wicked oppressors, and also to console them for the loss of Eden by describing the blighted earth at last transformed all to paradise, “far happier place/Than this of *Eden*, and far happier daies” (12.464–65). In describing the eternity to follow upon the Son’s final victory against Satan, Michael focuses less on heavenly bliss than on the material world: “*Satan* with his perverted World” will be destroyed in flames, from which will arise a wholly purged and refined creation, “New Heav’ns, new Earth, Ages of endless date/Founded in righteousness and peace and love/To bring forth fruits Joy and eternal Bliss” (12.547–51). Milton’s monism dictates this emphasis on the restored earth, as it does also in *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he again describes the earth recreated as an Edenic paradise, and explains that the happiness of the just will be enhanced by the possession of heaven and earth and “all those creatures in both which may be useful or delightful” (CP VI: 630–32).

Milton said nothing directly about the series of catastrophes in the mid 1660s – notably the Great Plague and the Great Fire – or about that target date for the millennium, 1666. But his last works, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, published together in 1671,¹³ emphasize the fallacy of expecting the millennium soon, while at the same time underscoring the continuing necessity to prepare rightly for it by rigorous moral and political analysis and personal reformation, under the harsh conditions that obtained for dissenters after the Restoration. In *Paradise Regained* a central issue for Jesus is the expectation on all sides that he should at once assume the throne of David, liberate Israel, defeat Rome, and begin his reign on earth. Satan expects God to advance him in “the head of Nations . . . /Their King, their leader, and Supream on Earth” (1.98–99). Jesus first thought himself called “To rescue *Israel* from the *Roman* yoke, /

Then to subdue and quell o're all the earth / Brute violence and proud Tyrannick pow'r, / Till truth were freed, and equity restored" (1.217–20). The apostles, anticipating millenarian Puritans, imagine the moment at hand for the Messiah's kingly reign in Israel:

Now, now, for sure, deliverance is at hand,
The Kingdom shall to *Israel* be restor'd

.....

God of Israel,
Send thy Messiah forth, the time is come;
Behold the Kings of the Earth how they oppress
Thy chosen, to what highth thir pow'r unjust
They have exalted, and behind them cast
All fear of thee, arise and vindicate
Thy Glory, free thy people from thir yoke.

(2.35–48)

With the line, "but to a Kingdom thou art born, ordain'd / To sit upon thy Father *David's* Throne" (3.152–53) Satan points directly to the kingly role prescribed by Christ's office, typically taking literally the prophecy that Jesus is to reign as King of Israel. Countering these expectations, Jesus in the course of the temptations clarifies the several manifestations of his kingship in history. First, it is the kingdom within "which every wise and virtuous man obtains": by his temperance and ethical knowledge Jesus defines that kingdom and offers a trenchant critique of the values and practices of secular monarchies. Second, it is his own spiritual kingdom, the invisible church, which he comes by stages to understand and explain. Finally, at some uncertain future date, it is the millennial rule he will exercise over all realms and monarchs.

The exchanges between Satan and Jesus over this issue are fraught with contemporary political implications. Holding up Judas Maccabaeus as a model, Satan goads Jesus to seize his kingdom at once, and so free his country from Roman rulers who have violated God's Temple and God's Law. Jesus' answer applies to his historical situation but also to that of the defeated Puritans; its terms reprove expectation of an imminent millennium and repudiate Fifth Monarchist uprisings – such as Venner's rebellion of 1661. But they also urge continued expectation of and right preparation for that millennial kingdom by waiting on God's time and learning from present trials:

What if he hath decreed that I shall first
Be try'd in humble state, and things adverse,
By tribulations, injuries, insults,

Contempts, and scorns, and snares, and violence,
 Suffering, abstaining, quietly expecting
 Without distrust or doubt, that he may know
 What I can suffer, how obey? (3.188–94)

Then Satan shows Jesus the massive display of Parthian armaments and troops, insisting that he can only gain and maintain the throne of Israel and deliver the Ten Lost Tribes enslaved in Parthian territory by conquest of, or league with, Parthia and its military might (3.354–70). This offer of the wrong means to establish Christ's kingdom alludes to that constant target of Milton's polemic, the use of civil power by Protestant magistrates to establish, defend, or maintain the church. Jesus insists that his spiritual kingdom, the invisible church, has no need whatever "Of fleshly arm, / And fragile arms. . . / Plausible to the world, to me worth naught" (3.387–93). He describes the Ten Lost Tribes in terms applicable to their expected return and conversion just prior to the millennium, but also applicable to the English who, as Milton put it in *The Readie and Easie Way*, chose them a Captain back for Egypt when they supported the Restoration of the monarchy and the Anglican church. Jesus cannot liberate those who enslave themselves by deliberate participation in idolatry, but he holds out hope that God will – in his own good time – call Israelites and Englishmen to repentance and freedom:

Should I of these the liberty regard,
 Who freed, as to their antient Patrimony,
 Unhumbld, unrepentant, unreform'd,
 Headlong would follow; and to thir Gods perhaps
 Of *Bethel* and of *Dan*? no, let them serve
 Thir enemies, who serve Idols with God.
 Yet he at length, time to himself best known,
 Rememb'ring *Abraham*, by some wond'rous call
 May bring them back repentant and sincere,
 And at their passing cleave th' *Assyrian* flood,
 When to their native land with joy they haste.
 (3.427–37)

Imperial Rome, with its splendid architecture, sumptuous banquets, and every manifestation of dominion and glory is the great kingdom of "all the world," described in terms appropriate to the reign of the degenerate emperor Tiberius but also inviting the usual Protestant associations of Rome with the Roman Catholic church, and that church with the great Antichrist depicted in the Book of Revelation, whose defeat will begin the millennium. Satan urges Jesus to expel the "monster" Tiberius from

his throne and so free the Romans (and Israel as part of the Empire) from their “servile yoke” – thereby inaugurating his earthly reign. However, Jesus refuses to free Romans who abandoned republican virtue and so are “Deservedly made vassel” – a refusal which extends to Roman Catholics enslaved to the pope and to English Anglicans and Puritans who invited that danger by restoring the Stuarts. But he then prophesies, in metaphor, how his millennial kingdom will – at last – subdue all others:

What wise and valiant man would seek to free
 These thus degenerate, by themselves enslav'd,
 Or could of inward slaves make outward free?
 Know therefor when my season comes to sit
 On *David's* Throne, it shall be like a tree
 Spreading and over-shadowing all the Earth,
 Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash
 All Monarchies besides throughout the world,
 And of my Kingdom there shall be no end:
 Means there shall be to this, but what the means,
 Is not for thee to know, nor me to tell. (4.143–53)

The tree seems to refer to the power of his kingdom to transform the earth, and the stone to its power to crush all earthly monarchies and their evils, according to the usual exegesis of the prophecy in Daniel 2.31–45. But Jesus refuses to say when or how his millennial kingdom will come, intimating that it will come when people are ready for it.

The storm and the tower episodes carry adumbrations of Jesus's passion and resurrection, and of his final victory over Satan, with relevance for Puritan dissidents subjected to the storms and tempests of royalist oppression and continually invited, as Jesus was by Satan, to read their plight as a portent of God's displeasure and their coming destruction.¹⁴ But the bright day which follows the storm reminds readers that the resurrection followed the passion, and Christ's victory over Satan on the Tower foreshadows his victory at the Last Day. So may the Puritan dissenters expect a better day – and in due time a victory – if they endure their trials patiently, avoid precipitous action, analyze moral and political issues accurately, and develop their spiritual strength. Jesus' victory is celebrated with an angelic banquet and a long hymn of praise which carries some adumbrations of the millennium through its shifts in tense and perspective. The angels proclaim that Jesus has “Now . . . aveng'd / Supplanted Adam” and “Regain'd lost Paradise,” but also that he is about to “begin to save mankind” (4.606–608, 634–35). Because he now understands himself and has been exercised in all the “rudiments” of his great

warfare, he has already won the essential victory. But that victory must be worked out in history as others respond to his teaching and are thereby enabled to become virtuous and free. Then the millennium will come.

There is nothing of millennial renewal in *Samson Agonistes*, but there are adumbrations of apocalypse in Samson's cataclysmic act of pulling down the Philistine temple, evoking the final destruction of Antichrist's forces as well as stories of divine vengeance in the Book of Judges, which, as David Loewenstein notes, radical Puritans readily applied to their own times.¹⁵ After Samson's act Manoa imagines a new future in which Samson's story might inspire other valiant youth to "matchless valor and adventures high," and in which Israel might recognize Samson's act as providing a political *occasione* in Machiavelli's sense: "To *Israel* / Honor hath left, and freedom, let but them / Find courage to lay hold on this occasion" (ll. 1714–16). Milton's dramatic poem is, however, a tragedy: Samson cannot stand in for Christ at the apocalypse and his victory in death is very partial. Also, as we know from the biblical record, Israel continued in corruption and servitude and the Danites became open idolaters. The Samson paradigm shows that all human heroes are flawed, and that Israelites and Englishmen are more disposed to choose "Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty" (l. 271), so that when God raises up his Samsons, or Gideons, or Cromwells their political gains soon collapse under the weight of sin and weakness in themselves and the people. Yet in the drama's historical moment that future is not yet fixed and proper choices are still possible: if the Israelites, or the English, could truly value liberty, could reform themselves, could benefit from the "new acquit / Of true experience" (ll. 1755–56), moral and political, which Samson's story offers the Danites and Milton's dramatization of it offers his countrymen, liberation might just be possible.

As first published, the poem has a coda, ten added lines designed for insertion into the dialogue between Manoa and the Chorus speculating about the fearsome noise heard as the Philistine temple is destroyed. But these lines appear at the end under a bar, with the label, "Omissa." As Stephen Dobranski observes,¹⁶ we cannot know whether Milton hoped the printer could add them in their right place (as lines 1527–35 and 1537) or wanted this presentation, which allows a glimpse of an alternative, apocalyptic ending. The Chorus imagines Samson with his vision miraculously restored, "dealing dole among his foes" and walking over "heaps of slaughter'd." God, they argue, has done as much for Israel of old and to him "nothing is hard." This coda allows Milton to have it both ways. In their proper place within his text these lines are a fantasy, a false

hope of Samson fully restored to himself and victorious. As published, they intimate an alternative scenario, if God should again raise up champions for his English Israel, and if a reformed people could lay hold on a new occasion. *Samson Agonistes* ends with an apocalyptic moment of destroying oppressors, but its potential for liberating those enslaved can be realized only if a virtuous citizenry understands the political stakes and values liberty. This drama makes a fit poetic climax to Milton's lifelong effort to help create such citizens.

NOTES

A version of this chapter was originally presented as a paper at the annual dinner meeting of the Milton Society of America on 28 December 1999, in Chicago.

1. Joseph Mede, *Clavis Apocalyptica, ex innatis et insitis visionum characteribus eruta et demonstrata* (Cambridge, 1627); trans. *The Key of the Revelation* (London, 1643); rptd. in *Works*, 2 vols. (London, 1664). For Mede's system, see Sarah Hutton's chapter in this book.
2. William Burden, *Christs Personal Reign on Earth, One Thousand Yeers with his Saints* (London, 1654).
3. Nathanael Homes, *Resurrection Revealed: or The Dawning of the Day-Star, About to rise, and radiate a visible Incomparable Glory . . . For a Thousand yeers Yet to come, before the ultimate Day, of the General Judgement . . .* (London, 1654).
4. William Aspinwall, *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy* (London, 1653), p. 14.
5. D. Roe, *Gods Judgments Still Threatned against thee O England* (London, 1666), pp. 4, 7, 16.
6. *The Last Letters to the London-Merchants and Faithful Ministers concerning the Further Proceedings of the Conversion and Restauration of the Jews; with most strange and wonderful Miracles performed . . . A Prophecie touching the Downefall of Babylon in 66, and the time of the Gospel to be Preach'd throughout the whole World* (London, 1665).
7. Milton's scenario for the last days is described in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book I, Chapter 33.
8. For the debate about the millenarianism of *De Doctrina Christiana*, see the chapters by William Hunter and John Shawcross in this book.
9. Unless otherwise indicated, Milton's early poems are quoted from *Poems of Mr. John Milton* (London, 1645).
10. Stella P. Revard, *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair* (Columbia, Mo., and London, 1997), p. 81.
11. This sonnet was first published in *Poems, &c. Upon Several Occasions. By Mr. John Milton* (London, 1673), and I quote from that edition.
12. Cited from *Paradise Lost. A Poem in Twelve Books* (London, 1674).
13. I quote these two poems from *Paradise Regain'd. A Poem in IV Books. To which is added Samson Agonistes* (London, 1671).

14. See, for example, [George Starkey], *Royal and other Innocent Bloud crying . . . for due Vengeance* (London, 1660); David Lloyd, *The Picture of the Good Old Cause* (London, 1660); and Roger L'Estrange, *Toleration Discussed* (London, 1663, 1670).
15. David Loewenstein, "The Revenge of the Saint: Radical Religion and Politics in *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 33 (1997), pp. 159–80. See also Barbara K. Lewalski, "Samson Agonistes and the 'Tragedy' of the Apocalypse," *PMLA* 85 (1970), pp. 1050–62.
16. Stephen Dobranski, *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 41–61.