

The Devil's Advocate: A Response to Clay Daniel*

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In Book 17 of *The City of God* St Augustine briefly discusses the uses and misuses of allegory as a hermeneutic tool for students of scripture. In his younger days he had been quite facile in his application of ingenious allegorical interpretations (of Genesis in particular), often at the expense of the literal level. He has come to revise his hermeneutic practice, however, and now makes an important distinction: "I do not censure those who may have been able to carve out some spiritual interpretation from every historical fact recounted, so long as they take good care first and foremost to adhere to the historical fact" (17.3).¹ I believe this is solid advice in our approach to allegory in general, and it has for me two useful correlates: 1) never be careless about the literal level in an attempt to look for deeper allegorical meanings, and 2) be careful to distinguish the various levels of interpretation.

As I read Clay Daniel's thought-provoking reading of *Paradise Lost* I was often reminded of Augustine's advice. The literal level of *Paradise Lost* concerns the cosmic struggle between God and Satan, including the fall of humanity and the redemptive work of Christ (even if the latter is only foretold). Both the tree in the garden and the cross of Calvary refer within the poem to historical facts (in Augustine's sense) that in the poem function on the same interpretative level. It is true that in biblical typology an earlier fact (such as the Edenic tree) may prefigure a later fact (such as the cross), but Daniel argues for something much more radical: the archangel Michael (in *PL* 12.415-18), and by extension Milton himself, "metaphorically reassigns [the] Crucifixion to Adam's—and God's enemies," that is,

*Reference: Clay Daniel, "Crucifixion Imagery in *Paradise Lost*," *Connotations* 8.2 (1998/99): 153-74.

concludes Daniel, to Satan and his devils (153). The devils' torment in hell thus prefigures Christ's suffering on the cross; indeed Daniel throughout books 1 and 10 of *Paradise Lost* sees Satan as an ironic foil to Christ, "reassigned" not only to the crucifixion but also to other christological events such as baptism and resurrection. To picture Satan as crucified was to me a novel thought, whetting my appetite to find out what had been missing in previous readings of the poem. In that respect Daniel's article is stimulating and engaging. Yet upon further thought I feel a resistance to the claims made. To stimulate further debate I shall therefore assume the role of "the devil's advocate" in this rejoinder.

One of my problems with the essay is that Daniel never clarifies the theological or narratological point of this reassignment of christological features to Satan. In short, the essay lacks a broader interpretative context. This is sorely needed since Daniel's basic contention goes against the grain of Christian teaching, as well as biblical typology. Equally worrisome, the methodology used too often violates Augustine's strictures on allegorical readings. (While Daniel never uses the word, his "metaphorical reassignment" is clearly based on an allegorical methodology.) In its absence we are left with a number of less than persuasive points of contact between interpretative levels. Individual words or phrases—such as "Adamantine Chains," "darkness visible," "Pilot," or "Mast" —picked seemingly at random among the thousands of words available in book 1 are made to carry a heavy interpretative load. At other times doubtful comparisons twice or thrice removed from the text are adopted. For example, the devils' battle cry is tied to Jesus' cry on the cross, which through Matthew 27:49-52 is linked to earthquakes. Daniel then goes on to Milton's commentary on the scriptural passage, leading up to the claim that "the devils are still 'Sons of God'" (163), because, if I understand this correctly, both Milton and the Church Fathers connect the earthquakes with the Harrowing of Hell. Somewhere along this chain of proof Daniel loses me, and even more so when we are told that Milton did not believe in the Harrowing of Hell anyway, which somehow makes it "more appropriate" for the poet's purpose of portraying Satan as a false messiah (164).

To take another example, a confusion of both typology and metaphorical levels occurs in sections VI and VII, where, based on the analogy of Moses

lifting his staff at the crossing of the Red Sea, baptism is associated with Satan brandishing his spear. The crossing of the Red Sea is of course a well-known typological sign of baptism. However, as Daniel himself acknowledges, when Milton connects the devils with the Old Testament event, the comparison is not with Moses and his redeemed people, but with the punishment of the drowned "*Memphian Chivalry*" (PL 1.307).² The point is not unimportant. It is Moses and the People of Israel (or Noah and his Ark) that prefigure baptism and redemption, not the people who drown in the Red Sea or the Flood. The drowning enemies may well suggest the sins of the "old life" being washed away in baptism, but it is not *they* who are baptized. A parodic use of "baptism" as applied to these enemies, whether Satan or the Egyptians, is therefore misleading besides being theologically heterodox. The latter possibility might be Daniel's hidden agenda, since he starts out by contrasting his readings with Milton's "brief, orthodox account" of the Crucifixion (153). This is certainly a legitimate critical approach, but it then needs to be made explicit and better argued. As it stands, Daniel's contention leads to some startling juxtapositions of allegorical levels, such as the claim that the devils "have rejected 'ingrafting in Christ,' effected by baptism" (158). If we want to attend to the historical and literal level, at what point in the poem are the devils given the option of Christian baptism? Just the thought seems surreal.

Equally problematic to me is the essay's violating Augustine's stricture on care about the literal level, that is the basic semantics of a text. For example, Daniel claims that the devils' "torture" in hell is their punishment "for provoking Heaven's king, which recalls that Jesus was crucified for challenging the princes [sic] of this world" (154), that is, Satan is to God as Jesus is to Pilate and Herod. The problem is of course that Jesus' well-known saying (in John 12:31, 14:30 and 16:11) reads "prince of this world" in the singular. The phrase has always been interpreted as referring to Satan, not to any human rulers, which would create a circular argument by which Satan is to God as Jesus is to Satan.

However, much more damaging to Daniel's whole argument is the fact that the initial claim that Milton reassigns the crucifixion to the devils is based on careless citation: "But to the Cross he nails thy Enemies . . . and

the sins / Of all mankind" (12.415-18, cited on p. 153). In Daniel's elliptical citation "thy Enemies" and "the sins" are presented as parallel events, with the enemies assumed to refer to Satan and his crew. A restored citation, however, reads as follows:

But to the Cross he nails thy Enemies,
 The Law that is against thee, and the sins
 Of all mankind, with him there crucifi'd,
 Never to hurt them more who rightly trust
 In this his satisfaction; . . . (12.415-19)

First, to say with Daniel that Milton "appeared to avoid the subject of the Crucifixion" because it is so "brief" does not seem to fit a passage that in its entirety runs some 40 lines (12.393-435), but more importantly, the "Enemies" prove to be not the devils at all but "the Law . . . and the sins," which according to St Paul were abrogated through Christ's propitiatory death. Of special relevance is Colossians 2:13-15 (here cited from the Authorized Version), a passage I would claim is a significant subtext behind Milton's lines:

And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he [i.e., God] quickened together with him [i.e., Christ], having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us [i.e., the law], which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.³

This passage first of all supports a reading of sin and law as the enemies nailed to the cross *together with Christ*. Of greater importance to our discussion, it also places the "principalities and powers," traditionally identified with Satan and his demons, in the context of the crucifixion. Not, however, because they like the law were nailed to the cross, but because the crucifixion of Christ overthrew their schemes. It was Christ who turned the defeat of a criminal's death into a victory over the enemies, "triumphing over them in it," i.e., on the cross. As all of *Paradise Lost* shows, this was an act of humility that would have been completely alien to Satan.

NOTES

¹Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke, and trans. Gerald G. Walsh et al. (Garden City: Doubleday-Image, 1958).

²Citations from *Paradise Lost* are taken from John Milton, *The Complete English Poetry*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1963).

³See also Romans 5:12-20, 7:4-25, or Galatians 2:19-20, 4:4.