



David V. URBAN, *Milton and the Parables of Jesus: Self-Representation and the Bible in John Milton's Writings*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2018, 316 pp., ISBN: 978027108994.

*Milton and the Parables of Jesus* is an exceptionally daring work. Taking only the title, the reader might easily picture him/herself crushed under the scholarly weight of both subjects, whose scope is indeed large. But nothing could be further from the truth: David Urban wears his erudition lightly, allowing all academic readers to join him for the duration of this exploration, inviting them in rather than shutting them out, thanks to the clarity of his writing. Placing himself under the interpretive *aegis* of Paul Ricoeur, but also of Biblical scholars such as Craig Blomberg and of miltonists such as Dayton Haskin (among a multitude of others, duly referenced in the introduction and at all relevant places throughout), David Urban sets for himself a major task: to examine Milton's integration of four specific parables of Jesus through all his literary career, looking attentively at how they resonated in him, and how his understanding of them evolved and changed as he returned to them through the years, both in verse and prose. In an author as self-centered as Milton, this will inevitably involve some discussion of how his own poetic personality changed and evolved through his dynamic apprehension of the parables, at different moments of his life.

David Urban is, above all, a canny and patient reader, able extract new shades of meaning from *loci* one would think have been explored enough already. Take, for instance, his approach to the much-anthologised sonnet 19. The central movement of that sonnet, from the speaker's anxiety and self-doubt in the octet to the quietening intervention of Patience in the sestet, is justly remembered by all miltonists, but Urban manages to show its exact place in the development of Milton's progressive understanding of himself as a poet-prophet and as a conscientious, if weary and worried, servant of God. The balance between the octet and the sestet of that sonnet is also the result of Milton's intimate balancing between his understanding of the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30) and that of the laborers (Matthew 20: 1-16). The fears and anxieties that beset the speaker, and which correspond to his interpretation of the first of these parables, are temporarily quieted by his commitment to the second parable, and by his understating of himself in the context of the wider, larger perspective of God's unfolding plan.

Several texts that have not received as much critical attention as sonnet 19 are re-read productively in the light of Milton's understanding of the parables.

Sonnet 9, for instance, is the object of a detailed but fascinating discussion that takes us from Milton's youth and his early fame among the students there as the "Lady of Christ's college", through the jocular sixth *Prolusion* (which may manifest some signs of masculine anxiety) and also through the *Mask performed at Ludlow Castle*, in which the protagonist's virtue is beset by enemies, tempters and detractors, all of which tends to refer back, not only to Milton himself, but also to the female subjects of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25: 1-13). Might Milton, then, be using this parable to refer to himself in Sonnet 9? Or perhaps he may be referring to Mary Powell, his first wife, as has often been argued? Urban's answer considers carefully both possibilities, and concludes that the solution must itself be double: we should see the sonnet as actually addressing a specific woman (Mary Powell), but we should also see it as addressing Milton himself. In the process, Urban considers the positions of Reformation theologians and of the poet's own contemporaries, so as to fully justify his own position among the interpreters of the sonnet.

The late epics are also wisely revised, especially in the moments which are directly or indirectly related to one of the four parables that Urban has chosen as particularly influential for Milton. A brief but magnificent example is to be found in his discussion of the angel Abdiel, who can be seen, *via* the parable of the talents, as an rightful servant of God, one who becomes an idealized version of Milton himself (that is: a Milton who would be completely devoid of ego, if we can ever imagine this). The central drama of the Fall in *Paradise Lost* is also examined carefully through the parable of the wise and foolish virgins: scenes which have been endlessly over-interpreted reveal themselves here as echoing that parable or offering room for a renewed and engaging discussion through it. The wrong choices taken by Adam and Eve, their strategic mistakes and their failure to watch over their virtue and protect it adequately are seen here, in a surprising variety of ways, as a descent from the "wise virginity" they once enjoyed. Urban's approach to the relationship between Mary and her son Jesus in *Paradise Regained* also shines most clearly as an example of his hermeneutic technique: both her determining influence on her son in Biblical matters and her own role as a "store-house" of "things / and sayings laid up, portending strange events" (*PR* 2., 95-108) allows us to see her as the Spirit-guided householder in the last of the four parables that Urban explores (Matthew 13: 52).

Among Milton's three major late poems, it is perhaps *Samson Agonistes* that emerges most vitally enriched by Urban's reading. The dramatic poem is first seen as echoing themes of the parables of the talents and of the laborers, which are themselves explored in sonnet 19; the tragedy can thus be fruitfully seen

as offering an extended treatment of the themes of that sonnet, which in turn strengthens the interpretation of *Samson Agonistes* in the light of the combative context of Milton's two *Defences* (1651 and 1655), even though it was written mostly, or in its final version, after the Restoration. Samson is seen here as the servant who manages to withhold his "talent" until the adequate moment and actually succeeds in doubling its value, acting as well as one of the late laborers who were called to work in the last hour. The parable of the foolish and wise virgins can also be productively applied to the character of Samson: his marriage to Dalila corresponds to his early and unwise infidelity to God, from which we see him moving towards a renewed sense of sexual purity, and hence towards what can be seen as a "recovered virginity", understood in the sense of a new faithfulness to the law. In his final act of spiritual recovery, Samson is acting as a divine householder similar to the one in the parable, bringing new treasures for himself and for others (though certainly not for the Philistines), and discerning adequately the "rousing motions" that he rightly identifies, almost at the end of the tragedy, as coming to him from the Spirit itself.

But none of these conclusions are reached without giving a painstaking attention to all the relevant bibliography written in the last decades, both in the book and in its abundant and richly rewarding notes, which in this case must be seen as a continuation of the discussion itself. All of the book can indeed be read as showing a major intellectual engagement on the part of Urban, in which he carefully contrasts his critical views with those of other miltonists, always doing so with an exquisite sense of deference, but never hesitating to assert his own interpretation over other possible ones when there are serious reasons for doing so. The theological equipment required for such a task is certainly daunting, but Urban manages to incorporate it into his text with amazing clarity and rigor. This book, then, becomes that rarest of academic objects: a scholarly *tour-de-force* in which didacticism is never in conflict with specialized knowledge. And we may be excused for imagining that John Milton himself, as a Biblical poet and as a reader of the parables of Jesus, would have been pleased to know that his work would offer ample room for a discussion as inspiring and enlightening as this.

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