

Finding Our Paradise Lost

Reaching Within: What traditional art offers the heart

By Eric Bess June 21, 2020 Updated: June 25, 2020

As we come close to the middle of 2020, I'm left asking "What else will happen?" It's been an eventful year so far, to say the least. I've been thinking deeply about the events that have occurred this year, and I believe the time is ripe to reflect on ourselves and question what it means to be good human beings. I, myself, was encouraged to reflect when I came across the illustration by William Blake titled "The Casting of Rebel Angels Into Hell," based on John Milton's "Paradise Lost."

John Milton and 'Paradise Lost'

John Milton was a 17th-century English author, whose greatest work is "Paradise Lost," an epic poem about the conflict between God and Satan and its effect on human beings. He wrote with the help of an assistant after going completely blind.

The second edition of "Paradise Lost" was published in 1674 and contained 12 books, which included prose arguments defending the ways of God at the beginning of each book. According to the Poetry Foundation website:

"In the first two books the aftermath of the War in Heaven is viewed, with Satan and his defeated legions of angels having been cast down into Hell, a place of incarceration where they are tormented by a tumultuous lake of liquid fire ... Book 6 describes the war in detail as the rival armies of good and evil angels clash ... God the Father empowers the Son to drive the evil angels from Heaven. Mounting his chariot, the Son, armed with thunderbolts, accelerates toward the evil angels and discharges his weaponry. To avoid the onrushing chariot and the wrathful Son, the evil angels, in effect, leap from the precipice of Heaven and plummet into Hell."

In hell, the fallen angels give arguments for how they should proceed against God and heaven. Beelzebub, a chief lieutenant of Satan, suggests "that the earth and its newly created inhabitants [human beings] should be assessed and then overcome by force or seduced by guile."

To get back at God, Satan takes this mission himself and leaves hell to revive "the possibility of victory on the middle ground of earth." In other words, Satan, believing direct war with God would result in defeat, decides to fight for the souls of God's new creation: human beings.

The Fall of the Rebel Angels

William Blake was a religious 19th-century English author and artist who often had spiritual visions. As a mature artist, he illustrated spiritual stories from the Bible, and from works by Dante and Milton.

In 1808, Blake created a series of watercolor illustrations for Milton's "Paradise Lost," one of which is titled "The Casting of the Rebel Angels Into Hell." The piece illustrates the war between God and the rebel angels that's described in Book 6 of "Paradise Lost."

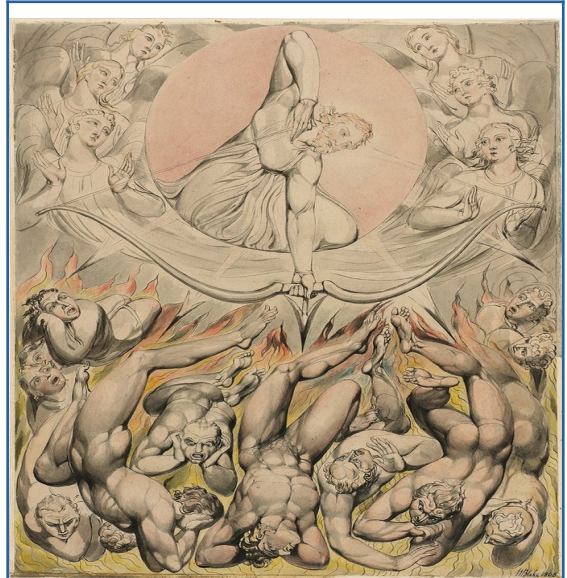


Figure 1: "The Casting of the Rebel Angels Into Hell," from the Butts Set of Illustrations for "Paradise Lost," 1808, by William Blake. Watercolor, illustration. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Public Domain) Fine Arts & Craftsmanship

Blake, however, interpreted the war a little differently than Milton described it. Blake did not depict the Son shooting thunderbolts at the rebel angels from a chariot. Instead, he divided the composition into upper and lower halves.

The upper half contains the Son, who sits in a circle and aims an arrow at the rebel angels in the lower half. The Son is dressed in white—a color that denotes purity—and is surrounded by angels on both sides, who watch him draw back the arrow on his bow. A total of seven figures are in the upper half of the composition, and the number 7, in a biblical sense, represents “completeness and perfection,” according to the website BibleStudy.

In the lower half of the composition, there are 13 heads, and “the number 13 is symbolic of rebellion and lawlessness” against God. These 13 heads represent the rebel angels whom the Son casts down into the fires of hell. For those whose faces can be seen, all of them look frightened except one: the central figure, Satan, who looks intently below with his hands behind his head.

Choosing Righteousness

Milton tells a fascinating story about the battle between good and evil. By its mere presence, righteousness seems to frighten evil just as the righteousness of the Son caused the rebel angels to leap from the precipice of heaven in fear. Evil may momentarily scurry away, but it seems to use underhanded means to find its way back into an age-old war.

For Milton, evil finds its way back through manipulating God’s new creation, the human being. With our hearts and minds, we human beings have the ability to choose righteousness or evil.

But what does it mean to be righteous? According to the symbolism in Blake’s illustration, righteousness would align with purity, completeness, and perfection. Righteousness also expels evil from the kingdom of heaven. Thus, if we are to be righteous, we must—with our hearts and minds—choose to be pure, complete, and perfect in God, and only then will we expel the evil from our kingdom of heaven, for as Blake might say, the kingdom of God is within us.

And what does it mean to be evil? The symbolism in the lower half of the composition would suggest that evil aligns with rebellion and lawlessness against God, that is, against righteousness.

If the kingdom of God is within, then wouldn’t rebellion and lawlessness against God really be rebellion and lawlessness against what we are innately, which, in this case, would be righteous? And what are the consequences for rebelling against the righteousness that we authentically are? We hurt ourselves by choosing the evil of inauthenticity.

And what are we choosing for ourselves, now? In what direction are our hearts and minds going as individuals, as families, as a nation? Will we resign ourselves to the lower half of the composition, justifying the evil of our actions because we want to follow a herd into a lake of liquid fire we can’t see? Or will we align ourselves with righteousness and bring forth the kingdom of heaven that lays dormant within us all?

References

Bess, E. (2020, June 21). Finding Our Paradise Lost. *The Epoch Times: Life & Tradition*, pp. 4-5.