

## RECENZIO – BOOK REVIEW

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David URBAN: *Milton and the Parables of Jesus: Self-Presentation and the Bible in John Milton's Writings*, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018, xii + 316 pp.

David Urban's *Milton and the Parables of Jesus* offers a thoroughgoing interpretation of how certain key parables in the New Testament were reinterpreted and adapted in John Milton's works. Discussing all genres of Milton's *oeuvre* from the earliest poems to the polemical prose to the dramatic works and the late masterpieces, Urban engages both historical and recent criticism to provide the first comprehensive treatment of the subject in Milton scholarship. Urban's main argument is that Milton regularly resorted to Jesus's parables in his self-presentation in conformity with the prevalent early modern Protestant practice of "finding a biblical 'place' for oneself in certain passages of scripture" (I), a point that he delivers with characteristic élan, never afraid to enter into amicable controversy with fellow Miltonists.

In the "Introduction," Urban first establishes the threefold (hermeneutic, stylistic, and imaginative) significance of parables in Milton's works, then proceeds to define parable as a genre. In the process, he also provides an overview of several historical schools of interpretation whose main concern seems to have been the extent of the parables' significance ranging from allegorical exegesis (which assigns meaning to almost every element of the parable) to the "single main lesson" method to the so-called "restrained allegorical approach" (which stresses the significance of only the most salient elements) and the conception of parables as "metaphorical narratives." According to Urban, although early modern texts exhibited a variety of interpretive methods, Milton's own interpretive technique seems to have been close to the "restrained allegorical approach," which, consequently, "provides scholars with an effective tool for better understanding Miltonic connection with specific characters in Jesus's parables" (I2). In line with James Holly Hanford's insight that Miltonic characters often reflect different aspects of Milton's personality, Urban proceeds to argue for the importance of parables in Milton's self-presentations throughout his life. His investigation can thus justly claim to complement contemporary understandings of "Renaissance self-fashioning" with a set of relevant biblical contexts.

The main body of the text falls into three parts, each of which explores the development of Milton's interpretation of a selection of Jesus's parables. Thus, Part I throws new light on some of Milton's most well-known works by linking them through the parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14–30) and the parable of the labour-

ers (Matt. 20.1–16). The subchapters of this section deal with Milton’s lyric poetry (especially Sonnets 7 and 17), *Samson Agonistes*, and the figure of Abdiel and the Son in *Paradise Lost*. Urban documents how the anxiety over misused or unused talent is complemented and rewritten by “a relief from past failures and divine hope for an uncertain future” (52) through references to the Gospel’s late-called labourer. In the third subchapter Urban also discusses *Paradise Regained*, and points out how, intriguingly, the Son is paradoxically associated with the figure of the late-called labourer (78). This is most apparent in the fourth book of the brief epic, where the incident on the temple pinnacle, Satan’s final (and grievously misdirected) temptation, is informed by the contrast between Satan’s false sense of urgency and the Son’s timeless patience (78–84).

The four subchapters of Part 2 consider Milton’s self-referential adaptations of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25.1–13) in his early works (Sonnet 9 and *A Mask*) as well as in *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. As the gender of the characters in this parable is not a marginal aspect of their interpretation, it is easier to trace the parable’s adaptation in the earlier works featuring “ladies” (e.g. in Sonnet 9 or in *A Mask*). In addition to these early versions of the wise virgins, Urban also reflects on Milton as “the Lady of Christ’s College,” a label whose ironic potential even Milton explores in one of his Prolusions (92–96). As we proceed towards the later masterpieces, the application of the parable and its self-referential potential become more complex and less apparent. Thus, according to Urban, unfallen Adam and Eve could be considered wise virgins, since they “display an innocent obedience to God that presumes both perfect prelapsarian wisdom and sexual happiness” (142). In the case of Samson and the Son, “wise virginity” is detectable in making the right choices – with Samson serving as a more realistic, and the Son as a more idealized instance of Milton’s self-presentation.

Part 3 presents Milton’s use of the short parable of the householder (Matt. 13.52). According to Urban, the interpretation of this parable hinges on the spiritual legitimacy of Milton’s various projects, ranging from the biblical underpinning of his stance on divorce to his self-conception as an inspired poet-prophet. Such spiritual legitimacy can only be attained through moral purity, hence Urban regularly reminds the readers that Milton’s adaptation of the parable of the householder strictly depends on, and follows from, the instances of his self-presentation as a “wise virgin.” Urban yet again embraces the whole of Milton’s oeuvre in this section: the three subchapters range from the divorce tracts and the *De Doctrina Christiana* through the early poetry to *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Even among Milton’s contemporaries (e.g. Andrew Marvell), the question of spiritual legitimacy raised concerns about Milton’s views on inspiration; reviewing such early modern sources as well as modern criticism, Urban argues, however, that “Milton’s professed fidelity to scripture in no way reduces his prophetic ambitions” (208). Further, in Milton’s last poems, the interpretation of the parable is seemingly ridden with contradiction: whereas the presentation of the Son and Mary in *Paradise Regained* reflects

a “careful, meditative hermeneutic” (221), Samson’s final actions seem to be based on an unpremeditated decision. Urban, however, demonstrates that Samson’s actions are in effect divinely directed. Samson, thus, allows “the new revelation of internal scripture to guide him to a more perfect adherence to the external law of God,” and in this sense becomes like the householder in Jesus’s parable, who “bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old” (233).

It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Milton’s works that the poet of *Paradise Lost* was actively and creatively engaging with the biblical tradition. Urban’s book, however, provides the first systematic treatment of Milton’s interpretation of a New Testament narrative genre and, as such, contributes greatly to our understanding of the dynamic of Milton’s exegetic practice and his self-presentation. Although the book lacks an index of biblical passages, the documentation of sources and the elucidation of various critical positions is exemplary in all other respects: the copious notes are worth reading on their own for their in-depth coverage of both recent and historic Milton criticism. *Milton and the Parables of Jesus* will thus be an important source for critics and students alike.