JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY'S USE OF JOHN MILTON: 
TRINITY AND HERESY

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By the 18th century John Milton was judged a literary success. One sign of his acclaim was the popularity of *Paradise Lost* which was reprinted 120 times between 1705 and 1801. At the same time some were beginning to question Milton's theological and literary orthodoxy. These questions were not without merit. John P. Rumrich has even argued that, "It is distinctly paradoxical that John Milton—who opposed infant baptism, supported regicide, defended divorce, and approved of polygamy—should be heard as a voice of orthodoxy."²

In contrast to Milton, John and Charles Wesley held firmly to the doctrines of the Church of England. Both supported infant baptism, fought against separation of Methodists from the Church of England, and have been credited by Halévy with averting a revolt of the poor in England similar to that in France.³ They also seem to be at odds with Milton on their view of the Trinity. The brothers held an orthodox view of the Trinity, but Milton seemed to deny the divinity of Christ earning him the label of Arian or Socinian by the early 18th century.

Yet it is evident that the Wesleys had great respect for Milton. Elizabeth Hannon has argued that the "most fundamental point of compatibility is their theology."⁴ This can only be defended if one limits the scope of this assessment. In some important doctrines like their Arminian theology they agree, but as we have noted they seem to be at odds in some very important doctrines. Could Hannon actually be observing a result, not the cause of their reliance on Milton? Perhaps John and Charles’ theology was formed in part because of their exposure to his writing. If that is the case, how is it that they could accept some of the doctrines which would be outside the orthodox tradition while ignoring others? In other words how could John and Charles Wesley praise and rely on someone whose beliefs differed from theirs in so many important ways?

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⁴ Elizabeth Hannon, "The Influence of Paradise Lost on the Hymns of Charles Wesley" (Master's, University of British Columbia, 1985), 9.
In the 17th century anti-Trinitarianism was one of the results of the new emphasis on reason. For instance, the “Socinians rejected the doctrine of Christ’s divinity on the grounds that [it] was unreasonable.” Arianism also rejected some orthodox doctrines because they were irrational. Arianism denied the Trinity, the divinity of the Son, the eternal generation of the Son, and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Arianism also believed that Jesus earned the title of God because of his actions instead of his shared essence with the Father. In England, holding anti-Trinitarian beliefs resulted in burning at the stake as late as 1612, although Edward Wrightman was accused of holding ten other heresies in addition to Arianism. Such punishment may explain why many who held to this belief were hesitant to make it public. This remained the case until after 1688. Maurice Wiles noted, “The most important single event to hasten the process of change was the accession of William and Mary in 1688 and the freer discussion of religious ideas to which it gave rise. The publication of heterodox views was made still easier when the Licensing Act was allowed to lapse in 1695.” In spite of persecution, people like John Locke and Isaac Newton were looking at the concept of the Trinity with more scrutiny. Locke seemed to accept that some things are unexplainable. Because he believed reason could not explain all things he could accept an orthodox view of the Trinity based not on reason, but on revelation.

In contrast to Locke, Isaac Newton and John Toland used the inability to describe or understand the Trinity to argue that it was unreasonable. Since they could not accept the unreasonable nature of trinitarian doctrine, they rejected the orthodox view of the Trinity. Newton did this quietly, but Toland was vocal about his rejection of it. According to A. M. Allchin, this anti-Trinitarian view would become the dominant tendency of theology in 18th-century Britain. Laura Bartels agreed that anti-Trinitarianism was embraced by many in the 18th century. She noted, “The 18th century Trinitarian controversy was a concern for the Anglican Church, but the intensity of that debate was not matched in the Methodist movement.”

According to J. D. C. Clark, “the doctrine of the Trinity was used as ‘the

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7 Wiles, 63.
8 Wiles, 67.
9 Wiles, 70-76.
11 Bartels, 26.
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intellectual underpinning of Church, King, and Parliament'." Bartels also noted that holding heterodox beliefs had political consequences. Therefore, she argues that “during this period of church history, the defense of the Trinity should be seen as the defense of both the established church and the state government.” John Milton and the Wesleys were on opposite sides of these issues. The Wesleys supported the state government while Milton worked to overthrow it. The Wesleys supported the established church but Milton was not a part of it. It should not be surprising that the Wesleys held to an orthodox view of the Trinity while Milton’s orthodoxy was questioned.

It was within this intellectual atmosphere that John and Charles Wesley read Milton. It was a time when the matter of the Trinity was a major issue. It was also a time when some were painting Milton with the Arian label. John Toland was one of the first people to make reference to Milton’s heresy. In 1698 he reflected, “As to the choice of his subjects, or the particulars of his story, I shall say nothing in defense of them against those people who brand’em with heresy and impiety.” In this Toland was not accusing Milton of heresy – because he may have subscribed to some of the same beliefs as Milton – but he was making reference to others who attacked Milton for some form of “heresy and impiety.” In the same year Charles Leslie “condemned Milton for making ‘the Angels ignorant of the blessed Trinity’.” In the early 18th century John Dennis and Daniel Defoe made similar accusations. Dennis claimed Milton was tainted with Socinianism because he looked on Jesus as a created being. One place this belief is evident is Paradise Lost Book III, line 383-395. In this passage Milton described the “Begotten Son” as “of all Creation first,” and also as having been created by the Almighty Father. The use of this passage by Charles and John Wesley will be discussed later. In 1734 Richardson alluded to the charge of Arianism in his Explanatory Notes on Milton’s Paradise Lost. The debate continued in the Gentleman’s Magazine and the Daily Gazetteer in 1738-1739. When he published his translation of De Doctrina Christiana in 1825, Bishop Charles Sumner “listed Newton, Trapp, Todd, Symmons, Warton, and Calton as previous readers who, without ever having seen de doctrina, regarded Milton’s poetry as heretically Arian.” Based on this it is obvious that many in the 18th century viewed Milton as an Arian even before his heresy was more clearly spelled out in De Doctrina Christiana.

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13 Bartels, 30.
14 Rumrich and Dobraski, 76.
15 Rumrich and Dobraski, 76. References to Paradise Lost are listed by book line.
17 Rumrich and Dobraski, 76.
There is no question that John and Charles Wesley held to an orthodox view of the Trinity. In fact Allchin believed that the “anti-incarnational and anti-Trinitarian tendencies of their time made them particularly conscious of these structures of Christian teaching.”¹⁸ In “An Address to the Clergy” John asked his preachers if they knew the Scripture well enough to answer the objections to the text raised by “Jews, Deists, Papists, Arians, Socinians, and all other sectaries, who more or less corrupt or cauponize the word of God?”¹⁹ Charles Wesley articulated his contribution to the controversy regarding the Trinity when he published his “Hymns on the Trinity.”²⁰ This hymnal was a lyrical endorsement of William Jones’ orthodox tract entitled, “The Catholic Doctrine of the Trinity, proved by above an hundred short and clear arguments, expressed in terms of Holy Scripture (1756).”²¹

Based on these differences one would not expect John and Charles Wesley to be critical of Milton’s writings, but, on the contrary, he was well received by the Wesley family. Samuel Wesley – John and Charles’ father – was “an editor of The Athenian Gazette, which often praised Milton or quoted him in its pages.”²² In 1697 Samuel Wesley defended the style of Paradise Lost in an Essay on Heroic Poetry.²³ This not only shows the Samuel’s support, but also implies that some were already having problems with Milton’s literary style. In this instance it seems that some were bothered by Milton’s failure to follow the rules of epic poetry. Samuel Wesley instead argued, “As for Milton’s Paradise Lost its an Original, and indeed he seems rather above the common Rules of Epic than ignorant of them.”²⁴ Samuel may have learned to love Milton and his poetry because of the friendship Milton shared with one of his wife’s ancestors, Arthur Annesley, who was one of the people who visited with Milton frequently after the Restoration.²⁵ This love was passed on to his sons and daughters. There are even indications that Milton was read in the home. John Wesley said, “My sister Harper [Emilia] Vas the best reader of Milton I ever heard.”²⁶

Frank Baker has called John Milton, John Wesley’s favorite poet.²⁷ The evidence seems to support this assertion. Entries in John’s journal show that

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¹⁸ Allchin, 69.
²⁰ Wesley and others, Hymns on the Trinity, Christian Year and Occasional Hymns; No. 6 (Madison, N.J.: Charles Wesley Society, 1998).
²¹ Wesley and others, Hymns on the Trinity, vii.
²² Shawcross, 114.
²³ Shawcross, 114.
²⁴ Shawcross, 114.
²⁵ Hannon, 10.
²⁷ Wesley, Milton for Methodists, xi.
he did a detailed study of *Paradise Lost* after he graduated from Oxford. According to Baker, he transcribed notes, learned the geography, and began to collect extracts in 1725. In September 1726, he purchased his own copy of *Paradise Lost*. During 1730, his journal showed a renewed interest as he prepared poetical and explanatory notes that he probably used with his pupils. In 1735, he took a copy of *Paradise Lost* with him to Georgia. There he read it with Mark Hind and Sophy Hopkey. His reading with Sophy was limited.\(^{28}\) He recorded in his journal, “But I expressly desired we might leave out the love parts of the poem, because (I said) they might hurt her mind.”\(^{29}\)

In 1743 and 1744, Wesley published a three-volume set called *A Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems*. These volumes begin with two hymns drawn from *Paradise Lost*. The first titled, “Morning Hymn” was taken from Book V, line 153-208 and the second “Creation” from Book VII, line 210-492, 499-534, 548-550. In 1745, he arranged for copies of *Paradise Lost* to be available in the small libraries he was starting and in 1746, the Conference ruled that all preachers should read *Paradise Lost*.\(^{30}\) The importance Wesley placed on Milton can be more fully appreciated when looking at the books he considered “at least the nucleus of a good library.”\(^{31}\) In a letter to Arthur Keen on April 20, 1787 he gave the following instructions on how to help a preacher’s widow who lost her books in a fire.

I desire Brother Rogers to send her by the first opportunity the Large Hymn-book, *Notes on the New Testament*, quarto, the *Appeals*, bound, the four volumes of *Sermons*, Life of Mr[.] Fletcher, of D[avid] Brainerd, and of Madame Guyon, [Young’s] *Night Thoughts*, Milton.\(^{32}\)

Wesley also defended Milton in his sermons. In the sermon, “God’s Approbation of His Works”\(^{33}\) he called *Paradise Lost* a “truly excellent poem,” which was “termed by Mr. Hutchinson, ‘That wicked farce’!”\(^{34}\) Wesley’s interest and thoughts about Milton’s *Paradise Lost* can most closely be studied in his extracted edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1763, in which he marked the passages that should be set to memory.\(^{35}\) It seems clear that John had little problem with *Paradise Lost* and in fact it may be argued that he influenced more people to read *Paradise Lost* through his varied efforts than any other person of his day.

This admiration of Milton does not mean that Wesley accepted Milton’s work without criticism. Even though both were “Arminian” in their outlook, 


\(^{31}\) Wesley, *Milton for Methodists*, x.

\(^{32}\) Wesley, *Milton for Methodists*, x.


\(^{34}\) Wesley, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” 207.

\(^{35}\) For a more detailed description see Baker’s introduction to *Milton for the Methodists*. 
Wesley edited out passages of *Paradise Lost* which seemed too close to Calvinism. The clearest example of his correction of Milton is his omission of, “Some I have chosen of peculiar grace / Elect above the rest; so is my will.” Wesley was also willing to criticize Milton when necessary. In his sermon, “Of Hell,” he noted the following about Milton’s description of Hell:

Nay, our great poet himself supposes the inhabitants of hell to undergo a variety of tortures; not to continue always in the lake of fire, but to frequently,

By happy furies, haled

Into regions of ice; and then back again through

Extremes, by change more fierce:

But I find no word, no tittle of this, not the least hint of it in all the Bible. And surely this is too awful a subject to admit of such play of imagination. Let us keep to the written word. It is enough to dwell with everlasting burnings.

It appears that Wesley read Milton with appreciation, but was still willing to question his writings when he felt it necessary.

III

The external evidence of how Charles Wesley viewed *Paradise Lost* is limited. He never kept as detailed a journal as John and the recovery of his letters for use is still in its first stages. As the letters are published in future years perhaps more external evidence will come to light. Until then we are limited primarily to Charles’ use of Milton in his Hymns. According to Elizabeth Hannon, the critical edition of the 1780 hymnal lists 53 references to *Paradise Lost*. Some of these allusions are doubtful, but in her research she discovered another 20 to 30. Some of these allusions come from the pen of John, but most of them are from Charles. This study will examine hymn #212 from the critical edition of the 1780 hymnal, looking at two of three possible passages that are alluded to in this hymn. Other hymns from the 1780 hymnal that refer to the same passages in *Paradise Lost* will also be examined.

In stanza two of the hymn Charles used the same material that John Wesley published in the “Morning Hymn” noted above. This is the morning

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38 Hannon, 11.
song of praise Adam and Eve lift to God. Charles did not follow the order closely but combined some of his ideas with the thoughts of Milton to accomplish his own new purpose. Charles Wesley wrote:

Thee the first-born sons of light,
In choral symphonies[6]

These lines come from the middle of Milton's hymn where Adam and Eve, having noted the character and power of God, implore the angels to sing his praise.

Speak yee who best can tell, ye Sons of light,
Angels, for yee behold him, and with songs
And choral symphonies, Day without Night[6]

Charles used this verse to highlight how the angels praise God. He challenges the congregation to vie "with that happy choir / Who chant thy praise above." This chant is the "Holy, holy, holy, Lord, / Eternal praise be thine!"

Note that he did not mention whether the angels can speak it best. Maybe he omitted this because of the challenge to vie with the angels in verse three. Hymn #141 referred to these same "first-born sons of light." In this hymn Charles described how even the angels cannot understand the depth of God's love. Humanity may not be able to fully comprehend God's love, but Mary was able to experience his love by sitting at the master's feet and John experienced it by laying his "weary head upon / The dear the Redeemer's breast!"

Maybe our ability to experience God's love in a redemptive form allows us to compete with the praise of that happy choir. The Hymn continues:

Praise by day, day without night,
And never, never cease;
Angels and archangels all
Praise the mystic Three in One,
Sing, and stop, and gaze, and fall
O'erwhelmed before thy throne.4

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4 Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 212.9-10.
5 Paradise Lost V.160-162.
4 Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 212.7-8.
5 Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 141.9.
6 "Stronger his love than death and hell; / Its riches are unsearchable: / The first-born sons of light / Desire in vain its depths to see; / They cannot reach the mystery, / The length, and breath, and height" (Hildebrandt, ed., Hymn 141.7-12).
4 Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 141.19-30.
4 Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 212.11-16.
This allusion comes from this same section:

And choral symphonies, Day without Night,
Circle his Throne rejoicing, yee in Heav’n,
On Earth joyn all ye Creatures to extol
Him first, him last, him midst, and without end. 46

Two things are important to note in this passage. First, where Milton focused on, “Him first, him last, him midst, and without end,” Charles turned his praise to, “the mystic Three in One.” Instead of repeating a passage that praised the oneness of God, Wesley changed it to emphasize the Trinity. What caused this change? Was Charles uncomfortable with the theology expressed by Milton, or is he merely using his poetic license? Second, Charles ended by capturing a deeper passion for worship. He not only emphasized the act of worship, he also captured the emotion of worship. Where Milton encouraged the worshipers “to extol Him . . . ,” Wesley implored them to “sing, and stop, and gaze, and fall / O’erwhelmed before thy throne.”

John Wesley also referred to this passage in his writings. Frank Baker noted that this passage was, “Wesley’s most frequently-quoted passage.” 47 In his extracted edition every line of this passage is marked with a star 48 except, “Unspeakable, who sitst above these Heav’ns.” 49 He may have left this passage out because it expressed too much mystery for his taste.

The next section, which the critical edition of the 1780 hymnal lists as comparable, seems to have a very weak connection. The only connection seems to be that they both speak of the giving of the Son to die. Charles emphasized that the Father gave the Son to die, while Milton emphasized that the Son offered to die. Could Milton’s emphasis betray his Arian tendencies? Did he have the Son offering to die to reflect the Son’s role of earning his title of Son? Did Charles change the language because he recognized this danger? Charles did use language from this section in Hymn 33 when he proclaimed with Milton, “O unexampled love!” 50 Charles not only quoted this phrase, but also agreed with Milton that Jesus moved swiftly to save the human race. Milton wrote:

No sooner did thy dear and onely Son
Perceive thee purpos’d not to doom frail Man
So strictly, but more to pitie enclin’d

46 Paradise Lost V.162-165.
47 Wesley, Milton for Methodists, xvi.
48 John says in the preface to this extracted edition, “To those passages which I apprehend to be peculiarly excellent, either with regard to sentiment or expression, I have prefixed a star. And these, I believe, it worth while to read over and over, or even to commit to memory” (Wesley, Milton for Methodists, xiii).
49 Paradise Lost V.156.
50 Hildebrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 33.31, Paradise Lost III.410.
He to appease thy wrath, and end the strife
Of Mercy and Justice in thy face discern’d,
Regardless of the Bliss wherein hee sat
Second to thee, offered himself to die
For man’s offence, O unexample’d love,
Love no where to be found less than Divine!

Charles alluded to this passage in stanza six:

O unexampled love!
O all-redeeming grace!
How swiftly didst thou move
To save a fallen race!

In this passage Charles borrowed both language and ideas from Milton. The importance of this reference is that it is one of the passages believed by many to be Arian. It seems odd that if Charles recognized this passage as Arian he would call it to mind by referring to it in a hymn. Maybe he thought by changing the emphasis from the Son offering himself and leaving out the reference to the Son as being second to God, that it did no harm. What is even harder to explain is how John could mark this passage with stars in his extracted edition if he thought it expressed Arian ideas.

IV

What can we conclude from these short passages? Nothing can be certain from such a limited sample, but we may propose some ideas to be explored. John did not seem to recognize that the passages he marked for memorization had Arian theology, or if he did, it did not bother him. How could this be? One explanation is that he was willing to publish some things with which he did not agree if he found them of significant value. Because of this we should be careful how we approach documents John has edited because they may tell us much less than we think, especially in what they leave in tact. In contrast to this, Charles seemed to make changes that would clarify his trinitarian position. He did this in spite of his brother’s seeming acceptance of these passages. Did he make these changes for theological or literary reasons? In the passages we looked at it seems theology drives the changes. Charles not only changed passages to have a trinitarian emphasis, he also made changes to emphasize the passion he felt for his Savior. What could explain John’s acceptance of the passages which Charles changed? Maybe the type of document can explain this difference. The hymns could

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51 Paradise Lost III.403-411.
52 Hildbrandt, Beckerlegge, and Dale, Hymn 33.31-34.
53 Wesley, Milton for Methodists, 25-26. Apart from changes in spelling, there is only one minor word change – changing ‘and’ to ‘then’ – in line 378.
not express heterodox theology, but extracts John published did not have to meet the same high standard. From this it seems clear that both John and Charles Wesley knew that Milton’s theology was unorthodox. In spite of this they both used and promoted his works.