

8. Poets Milton and Wither-The Whole Man Dies in Death

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The calibre and competence of some of the seventeenth-century champions of Conditionalism are impressive. We cite JOHN MILTON (1608-1674), greatest of English sacred poets, Latin secretary under the Commonwealth, and religious and political polemicist. He was educated for the church, and trained for holy orders at Christ's College, Cambridge, showing remarkable literary talent. But upon graduation, alienated by the tyranny that he felt had entered the church, he contemplated the study of law. However, he turned instead for the next six years to the intensive study of literature, becoming conspicuously proficient in the classics, Latin and Greek. Along with these languages he obtained a good knowledge of Hebrew, French, and Italian. To this earlier period belong most of his Latin poems, [1] famous for their classical elegance.

In 1638 Milton toured the Continent. He met many notables, such as Grotius, and Galileo, then a prisoner of the Inquisition. Returning to England, Milton began a private school in London. But at the time of the Long Parliament, in 1640, he was drawn into ecclesiastical and political disputes.

He made a brilliant appeal for civic and religious liberty and church reform, writing *Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline* in England (1641) and *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelacy* (1642). These were followed by *Areopagitica*, a masterful plea for a free press. About this time he first drafted the outline of his great epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

1 John Milton, Ad Patrem, L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus, Lycidas.

As for his personal religious faith, Milton was an Anglican of Puritan leanings, then he became an Independent. He was decidedly not a freethinker or materialist, as charged by some.

After the execution of Charles I and the establishment of the new Commonwealth in 1649 Milton was made Latin secretary to Lord Protector Cromwell and the Council of State, at White hall, serving throughout the turbulent period of the Protectorate. His political writings began at this time.

Three years later, in 1652, his sight gave way and he became totally blind but continued the duties of office of state, with the aid of assistants, until 1659. In 1660, at the Restoration, his prosecution was ordered, and he had to conceal himself in the home of a friend until the peril passed. In his blindness he sought consolation with his harp, and although he lived in darkness he became one of the bright lights of English literature. In 1655, under Cromwell's instruction, Milton dictated the stern letter to the Duke of Savoy protesting the atrocities visited upon the Vaudois, or Waldenses, in the "Bloody Easter" massacre. Milton expressed his own personal feeling in his gripping sonnet, the opening lines of which read:

"Avenge O Lord thy slaughtered Saints, whose bones Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold, Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old, When all our Fathers worship'd Stocks and Stones." [2] It was at this same time that he began the actual writing of *Paradise Lost*, finishing it in 1665, and receiving for it the trifling sum of £18. For splendour of concept and majesty of language it is one of the noblest poems in the English tongue, and its fame will endure as long as English literature shall last.

Paradise Regained was completed in 1671.

I. Milton the Outspoken Proponent of Conditionalism

Milton was a prolific writer of prose as well, and engaged with zest in religious polemics and political controversy all through this time of re-evaluation of church and state. And he was a disputant in his own right. A man of high principles, he possessed a never-failing zeal for truth and freedom. As might be expected, with such a background he too was a stalwart Conditionalist.

1. MAN A UNIT, NOT A COMPOUND.

This is forcefully presented in his *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, written originally in Latin. [3] He went straight to the heart of the issue when he wrote:

"It may be inferred, unless we had rather take the heathen writers for our teachers respecting the nature of the soul, that man is a living being, intrinsically and properly one and individual not compounded or separable, not— according to the common opinion— made up and formed of two distinct and separate natures as of soul and body; but that the whole man is soul, and the

soul man; that is to say, a body or substance, individual, animated, sensitive and rational; and that the breath of life was neither a part of the Divine essence, nor the soul itself, but as it were, the inspiration of some Divine virtue fitted for the exercise of life and reason, and infused into the organic body; for man himself, the whole, man, when finally created, is called in express terms, 'a living soul.' " [4]

2. DEATH OF BODY IS EXTINCTION OF LIFE.

Declaring that the grave is "the common guardian of all till the day of judgment," and denying that the soul of man is separate from the body, with independent and intelligent existence, he adds that such a view is "nowhere said in Scripture; and the doctrine is evidently at variance both with nature and reason." In chapter thirteen, dealing with "Of the Death of the Body," Milton states:

"The death of the body is the loss or extinction of life. The common definition, which supposes it to consist in the separation of soul and body, is inadmissible. For what part of man is it that dies when this separation takes place? Is it the soul? This will not be admitted by the supporters of the above definition. Is it then the body? But how can that be said to die, which never had any life of itself? Therefore the separation of soul and body cannot be called the death of man." [5]

2 Milton, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," Complete Poetical Works (ed. H. F. Fletcher), vol. 1, p. 43.

3 J. Milton Angli de doctrina Christiana Libra duo posthumio. Charles R. Sumner, the translator, was bishop of Winchester, and the English translation was published in 1825.

3. WHOLE MAN SUFFERS PRIVATION OF LIFE.

Appealing for a restudy of the soul question, Milton presents the problem and gives his own convictions, based on Scripture:

"Here then arises an important question, which, owing to the prejudice of divines in behalf of their preconceived opinions, has usually been dismissed without examination, instead of being treated with the attention it deserves. Is, it the whole man, or the body alone, that is deprived of vitality? And as this is a subject which may be discussed without endangering our faith or devotion, whichever side of the controversy we espouse, I shall declare freely what seems to me the true doctrine, as collected from numberless passages of Scripture; without regarding the opinion of those, who think that truth is to be sought in "schools of philosophy, rather than in the sacred writings." [5]

4 Milton, The Prose Works of John Milton, vol. 4, p. 188.

5 Ibid., p. 279.

6 Ibid.

4. SENTENCE OF DEATH EXECUTED UPON WHOLE MAN.

Continuing his line of reasoning, Milton insists that the "whole person" dies, and invokes the testimony of patriarch, prophet, and apostle in support:

"Inasmuch then as the whole man is uniformly said to consist of body, spirit, and soul, (whatever may be the distinct provinces severally assigned to these divisions), I will show, that in death, first, the whole man, and secondly, each component part suffers privation of life. It is to be observed, first of all, that God denounced the punishment of death against the whole man that sinned, without excepting any part. For what could be more just, than that he who had sinned in his whole person, should die in his whole person? Or, on the other hand, what could be more absurd than the mind which is the part principally offending, should escape the threatened death; and that the body alone, to which immortality was equally allotted, before death came into the world by sin, should pay the penalty of sin by undergoing death, though not implicated in the transgression.

"It is evident that the saints and believers of old, the patriarchs, prophets and apostles, without exception, held this doctrine." 7

5. CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS NOT YET RECEIVED.

This contention he proceeds to support by many Old and New Testament texts. Here is just one example:

"1 Cor. 15.17-19. If Christ be not raised (which resurrection took place for the very purpose that mankind might likewise rise again) then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ, are perished; whence it appears that there were only two alternatives, one of which must ensue; either they must rise again, or perish: for 'if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable'; which again indicates that we must either believe in the resurrection or have our hope in this life only; v. 29, 30, "if the dead rise not at all, why stand we in jeopardy every hour?" v. 32, 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die;' that is, die altogether, for otherwise the argument would have no force. In the verses which follow, from v. 42. to v. 50. the reasoning proceeds on the supposition that there are only two states, the mortal and the immortal, death and resurrection; not a word said of any intermediate condition. Nay, Paul himself affirms that the crown of righteousness which was laid up for him was not to be

received before that last day. If a crown were laid up for the apostle, it follows that it was not to be received immediately after death. At what time then was it to be received? At the same time when it was to be conferred on the rest of the saints, that is, not till the appearance of Christ in glory." [8]

7 *Ibid.*, p. 271. In support Milton cites Jacob (*Gen. 37:35*), Job (*Job 3:12-18; 10:21; 14:10-13; 17:13, 15, 16*), David (*Ps. 6:5; 88:11-13; 39:13; 146:2*), Peter (*Acts 2:29, 34*), Hezekiah (*Isa. 38:18, 19*). Also *Isa. 57:1, 2; Jer. 31:15. Cf. Matt. 2:18; Dan. 12:2*— with many additional texts from the New Testament, citing Christ, Paul, and Peter.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 272, 273.

6. SOULS NOT IN HEAVEN DURING DEATH.

Eleven pages are devoted by Milton to proving from Job, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Peter and Paul that in death the whole man— body and soul—sleeps unconsciously until the resurrection.

Nine leading texts are cited and analysed in support. Milton here categorically denies that at death the soul is "received immediately into heaven." [9] The souls are in their graves, and "either they must rise again, or perish." [10] So, he concludes, "The soul ... is subject to death." [11] Then he adds:

"Nor do we anywhere read that the souls assemble, or are summoned to judgment from heaven or from hell, but that they are all called out of the tomb, or at least that they were previously in the state of the dead." [12]

7. SOUL OF LAZARUS NOT RECALLED FROM HEAVEN.

Speaking specifically of the Master's calling of Lazarus from his "sleep," Milton asks pointedly:

"It the soul of Lazarus, that is, if Lazarus himself was not within the grave why did Christ call on the lifeless body which could not hear? If it were the soul which he addressed, why did he call it from a place where it was not?" [13]

Milton held consistently to the absolute necessity of resurrection to obtain life immortal and the reward of the righteous at the second coming of Christ. And he repeats: "It is evident that the saints and believers of old, the patriarchs, prophets and apostles, without exception, held this doctrine." [14]

8. NATURAL PROPAGATION, NOT SPECIAL CREATIONS.

Entering into the issues of the hour, Milton held that since the creation of Adam "the human soul is not created daily by the immediate act of God, but propagated from father to son in a natural order"—as Tertullian, Apollinaris, Augustine, and Jerome held. He denied that God continues "to create as many souls daily as there are bodies multiplied throughout the whole world, at the bidding of what is not seldom the flagitious wantonness of man." [15]

9 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 273.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 275

12 *Ibid.*, p. 278.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 190.

II. Conditionalism Even Woven into Paradise Lost

Milton's Conditionalist convictions are even woven into *Paradise Lost*, as seen in the following excerpt. Milton portrayed man as formed of the dust of the ground; God then "infused" into him the "breath of life" (*Ps. 104:29, 30*). Thus man received "animation from one and the same source of life and breath" (*Job 12:10*). As a consequence "man became a living soul" [16]

"He formed thee, Adam, thee, O man, Dust of the ground, and in thy nostrils breathed. The breath of life; in his own image he Created thee, in the image of God Express, and thou became a living soul." [17]

And "when God takes back to himself that spirit or breath of life," then man ceases "to exist." [18] Man was indeed mortal from the day of the Fall, as forewarned, though he did not die bodily on that same day, rather, death followed as a consequence:

"My sole command Transgressed, inevitably thou shall die, From that day mortal; and this happy state Shalt lose, expelled from hence into a world Of woe and sorrow." [19] Death, he continues, encompasses the "whole of man," each part, "the body, the spirit, the soul"—the spirit "principally off ending"—all suffering "privation of life." So he wrote impressively:

"It was but breath -Of life that sinned; what dies but what had life And sin? The body properly had neither. All-of me then shall die: let this appease The doubt, since human reach no further knows." [20]

16 Ibid., p. 188.

17 Milton, Paradise Lost, book 7, II. 524-529, in Complete Poetical Works.

18 Milton, Prose Works, vol. 4, p. 188.

19 Milton, Paradise Lost, book 8, II. 329-333, in Complete Poetical Works.

20 Ibid, book 10, 11.

III. Milton Answers Nine Stock "Objection" Passages

In chapter three of A Treatise of Christian Doctrine, "Objections Considered and Explained," Milton answers the common contention that "when divested of the body," the immortal soul immediately "wings its way, or is conducted by the angels to its directly to its place of reward or punishment where it remains in a separate state of existence to the end of the world." [21] The proponents of such a view "found their belief principally" in nine scriptures with which he proceeds to deal. These are the gist of his reasoned replies:

1. SOUL REDEEMED FROM POWER OF GRAVE.

"Psalm 49.15, 'God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave,' is cited by some as evidence for Immortal-Soulism. This, on the contrary, "proves rather that the soul enters the grave with the body," whence it "needs to be redeemed, namely, at the resurrection." As for those who are not redeemed, "their redemption ceased forever" (verse 8), [22]

2. SPIRIT RETURNS TO GOD, BODY TO GRAVE.

"Eccl. 12.7, 'The spirit [Heb., ruach] shall return unto God that gave it.' " But the wicked do not return to God at death," rather they "depart far from him." "The Preacher had moreover said before, Eccl. 3.20. 'all go unto one place.'" For God has "given" and will "gather to himself the spirit of every living thing, whilst the body returns to dust." "Every constituent part returns at dissolution to its elementary principle"—the spirit or breath of God, and the body to dust. The dead, during death, are "devoid of all vital existence." [23]

3. BODY, TEMPORAL LIFE; SOUL, SPIRITUAL LIFE.

"Matt. 10.28, 'Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.' " The "body" here "must be taken for the whole human compound," or the "temporal life," and the soul for the "spiritual life" with which it "shall be clothed after the end of the world." [24]

21 Milton, Prose Works, vol. 4, p. 277.

22 Ibid., p. 278.

23 Ibid., pp. 278, 279.

24 Ibid., p. 279.

4. INTERVENING TIME "ANNIHILATED" FOR THOSE WHO SLEEP.

"Phil. 1.23, 'having a desire to depart . . . and to be with Christ,' " that is, to "attaining" the "ultimate object of his being," but not being received immediately into Heaven.

Rather, it is to be with Christ at His appearing. "One who is 'going on a voyage desires to set sail and to arrive at the destined port, . . . omitting all notice of the intermediate passage." In like manner the "intervening time" for those who have fallen asleep is "annihilated to the departed, so that to them to die and be with Christ will seem to take place at the same moment."

The "time at which we shall be with him [Christ]" is when "I [Christ] will come again and receive you unto myself." (John 14.1-3). [25]

5. GRAVE "COMMON GUARDIAN OF ALL" TILL JUDGMENT DAY.

"1 Pet. 3.19, 'by which also he [Christ] went and preached to the spirits that are in prison' literally, 'in guard' or as in the Syriac. 'in the grave,' meaning the same—"for the grave is the common guardian of all till the day of judgment."

What the apostle states plainly in 1 Peter 4:5, 6—that the gospel was "preached also to them that are dead."—he now "expresses in this place by a metaphor, 'the spirits that are in guard' it follows, therefore that the spirits are dead." [26]

6. SOULS UNDER ALTAR NOT SEPARATED FROM BODY.

"Rev. 6.9, 'I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain.' " III "Scripture idiom" the soul "is generally often put for the whole animate body." Here it is "used for the souls of those who were not yet born"—for the fifth seal was not yet opened "in the time of John." Similarly, in the "parable of Dives and Lazarus" (Luke 16), the narrative "speaks of that as present which was not to take place till after the day of judgment and describes the dead as placed in two distinct states," but "he by no means intimates any separation of the soul from the body." [27]

25 Ibid., p. 280.

26 Ibid., pp. 280, 281.

27 Ibid., p. 281.

7. OBSCURE MUST NOT OVERRIDE MANY CLEAR PASSAGES.

"Luke 23.43, 'Jesus said unto him, verily I say unto thee, to-day shalt thou be with me in paradise.' " Some would "alter the punctuation" of the passage, placing the comma after "to-day" the day when Christ seemed the "most despised and miserable of all men." Yet He declared and assured the thief, "Thou shalt hereafter be with me in paradise." One is reminded that "paradise" is not "heaven," neither did the thief "ask to go to heaven when he died," nor did Christ "ascend to heaven that day. Milton then lays down the principle that "so much clear evidence should not be rejected on account of a single passage, of which it is not easy to give a satisfactory interpretation." [28]

8. CHRIST COMMITTED BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT TO GOD.

"Luke 23.46, 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit.' But the spirit is not therefore separated from the body, or incapable of death," for in Psalm 31:5 David, who was not about to die, uses the same language—"into thine hand I commit my spirit while it was yet abiding in, and with the body." And Stephen, in Acts 7:59, said the same and "fell asleep." "It was not the bare spirit divested of the body that he commended to Christ, but the 'whole spirit and soul and body' as it is expressed, 1 Thess. 5.23.

Thus the spirit of Christ was to be raised again with the body on the third day, while that of Stephen was to be reserved unto the appearing of the Lord." [29]

9. NOT SEPARATION OF SOUL FROM BODY.

"The ninth passage is 2 Cor, 5.1-20. The object of this passage is not to inculcate the separation of the soul from the body but to contrast the terrestrial life of the whole man with the Spiritual and heavenly." The 'house of this tabernacle' is opposed not to the soul, but to 'a building of God, an house not made with hands,' that is, to the final renewal of the whole man," being "clothed upon"—not for the "separating of the soul from the body, but for the perfecting of both." So the expression "absent from the body" and "present with the Lord" is to be "understood of the consummation of our happiness," and the "body" is to be "taken for this frail life," and the "absence," spoken of, for our "eternal departure to an heavenly world." In verse 9. to be "present" and "absent" "both refer to this life." And 2 Peter 1:13-15. "as long as I am in this tabernacle," means "in this life." [30] Thus Milton resolved to his own satisfaction the stock objections. And that was the open witness of the gifted Milton— trained for the cloth, peerless classicist, master poet, effective writer of prose, and conscientious Conditionalist Christian.

28 Ibid., pp. 281, 282.

29 Ibid., p. 282.

IV. Poet George Wither—Man a Candidate for Immortality

We must also note GEORGE WITHER, or WYETHER (1588-1667), a contemporary English poet and satirist. First a student of Magdalen College, Oxford, he then studied law at Lincolns Inn in London, but devoted his life principally to writing. He had been a major general in the Royalist Army, became a Puritan in 1643, and professed adherence to the foundation principles of early Christianity. His English translation of a work, The Nature of Man. [31] by fourth or fifth-century Bishop Nemesius, was

significantly on Conditionalism. As previously observed, Nemesisius had been a Neo-Platonist, but became bishop of Emesa. (Pictured on page 151.)

Wither's comments on the treatise indicate that his own beliefs were in harmony with those of Nemesisius and in conflict with the "orthodoxy" of his day. Moreover, he was the friend of Milton, and of Canne, Qverton, and other Conditionalists of that period—a significant association in those days when pressure and persecution were rife.

Wither was author of numerous works, but his English translation of Nemesisius had as its full title *The Nature of Man*.

A learned and useful tract written in Greek by Nemesisius, surnamed the Philosopher; sometime Bishop of a City in Phoenicia, and one of the most ancient Fathers of the Church. Englished, and divided into Sections, with briefs of their principal contents: by Geo. Wither (London: 1636).

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 282, 283.

31 See Abbot, *Literature of the Doctrine of Future Life*, nos. 7, 8.

1. SOUL NONEXISTENT APART FROM BODY.

Here are tell tale excerpts from Wither's translation, with its quaint spelling, contending that the soul "has not an existence" apart from the body:

"The Hebrews affirm that MAN was made from the beginning, neither altogether mortal, neither wholly immortal, but, as it were, in a state between both those natures, to the end that if he did follow the affections of the body, he should be liable to such alterations as belong to the body; But if he did prefer such good things as pertain to the soul, he should then be honoured with immortality.

"Moreover, it is not to be believed, that God would so hastily have repented Himself, and made Him to be forthwith mortal, who was created absolutely immortal." "When the soul cometh into the body it perfects the living creature. Gen. ii. So then, in a perfect living creature, neither can the soul bee at any time without the body, neither the body without the soul: for the soul is not the body itself; but it is the soul of the body: and therefore it is in the body, yea, and in such a kind of body: for it hath not an existence by itself." [32]

2. LIFE "DOTH PRINCIPALLY FORM THE SOUL."

The close ness with which he identifies the soul with the body, in the functioning of man, is seen by this additional statement:

"For the soul doth not cease to work, even in them that are asleep, but a man even in sleeping, is nourished, and grows, and sees visions, and breathes, which is the chief symptom of life. For, indeed, it is nothing else but life which doth principally form the soul." [33] These excerpts clearly show, first, that Phoenician Bishop Nemesisius understood death to be the cessation of life, and that the soul had no separate existence or function apart from the body. But they also show that this early-century view was obviously shared by seventeenth-century Wither, more than a thousand years later, in another transition hour, when ecclesiastical pressures were heavy. It cost something to be a Conditionalist in Wither's day.

32 George Wither, *The Nature of Man*, pp. 23ff.

33 *Ibid.*

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