

Abraham Stoll. *Milton and Monotheism*.

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Abraham Stoll's *Milton and Monotheism* is a densely written and thoroughly researched contribution to the ongoing debates over Milton's figure of God. Stoll's approach is to ground his discussion in the seventeenth-century debates on what he calls (following Jan Assmann) "the Mosaic distinction" between monotheism and polytheism. In the course of following Stoll's argument, I found myself agreeing, disagreeing, and at times wanting to argue outright with his conclusions, but without ever finding the process anything but engaging and well worth the time and effort.

Stoll's introduction and first chapter work to establish the distinction between the uses of polytheism and monotheism in poetry, concentrating on the difficulties a "pure" monotheism presented to poets of the period, and "the way the narrative presence of polytheism became a point of anxiety in seventeenth century Christian

poetry” (32). Stoll takes his readers through the positions of Prynne, Tasso, Du Bartas, Davenant, and others, and is especially illuminating in his discussion of the influence of Selden’s work (most notably *De diis*) on the poets of this period. Discussing the influence on Milton, and book 1 of *Paradise Lost* in particular, Stoll argues that “Selden . . . seems to be his chief mythographer” (33).

Stoll’s second chapter moves into a discussion of abstract, or occult, monotheism, covering arguments over the pagan religions’ relation to monotheism, as “writers such as Purchas, Vossius, Fuller, and Alexander Ross give particular attention to the polytheistic gods, and . . . confront whether pagan religion worshipped a hidden monotheism” (79). Returning to Milton, Stoll argues that it is within the context of these arguments that “Milton builds his God, and his economy of heavenly beings,” and describes the operant perspective as one “made unstable by its own skepticism” (98).

It is in the third chapter where we get “the heart of the matter: the problems of narrating God” (97) for Milton. Here Stoll provides an extended analysis of the relation between Genesis 18 and *Paradise Lost*, and it is here where I most often alternated between enthusiastic extremes of agreement and disagreement. Stoll notes that it is because “Milton’s God is at once too mechanical and too personal” that we can make “sense of the ongoing debate over God’s goodness” (114). Stoll seems to want to solve this problem by insisting that Genesis 18 be read from the “mechanical” rather than “too personal” perspective. Stoll begins with Lenn Evan Goodman’s argument that “the monotheistic God must not be a personality so much as a performer of fixed and knowable rules” (102), then goes on to assert that “Milton reads the latter half of Genesis 18 in exactly the same way as Goodman” (103). Once that assertion is made, all else follows, including the assertion that Milton’s theodicy in *Paradise Lost* “has frequent recourse to the absolute conception of God’s justice, which he finds in Genesis 18:25” (104). I find the notion of “absolute justice” at work here anachronistic, and am left to wonder if Stoll is arguing that Milton read scripture as if it had been written in his own time and place. Stoll goes on to acknowledge the complexity of Milton’s reading, however, when he notes that Milton “is rather trying to complicate God’s relationship to the Son” (112), and in doing so, is creating “an unstable ontological being, perhaps looking most like the deconstructed subject familiar from literary theory” (113).

Stoll’s remaining chapters move from historical considerations of Deism and Socinianism to readings of the Son in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and a provocative chapter on *Samson Agonistes* in which “Dalila stakes out a relativistic perspective” in her final argument to Samson, that resembles a “nascent comparative religion” (297), while *Paradise Regained* “represents a serious experiment in the Socinian view — an imaginative response to the often persuasive claims of the Socinians” (233).

In short, this is an excellent book, and a welcome contribution to the historical and theological debates that surround Milton’s works. There is much here to consider, agree with, argue with, and return to, as Stoll’s book is one that will reward repeated readings.

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