

John K. Hale  
University of Otago, NZ  
[John.Hale@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:John.Hale@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)

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1. By surveying Milton's use and non-use of certain biblical images, this essay records his loss of political innocence, and also something of his pluralism. In doing so, it shows in action his view of the relation between church and state. It charts his implied view of Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty--negative and positive, the absence of external constraints as opposed to spiritual fulfilment or self-realization--to conclude that Milton favours the first for the sake of the second. He drew the corollary, that freedom mattered last as well as first. He was, in short, a more consistent thinker than is often acknowledged.
2. I move toward these conclusions rather gradually, for two reasons. First, it is worth illustrating from the writings and speeches of Milton's contemporaries how much more moderate Milton's political imagery from the Bible was than that of many with whom he shared political and religious commitments. The imagery needs substantial quotation for the reader to recognise its dynamism, and to accept that it was used extensively, not only by religious cranks and the weak-minded. Secondly, I survey Milton's own writing widely, not only to show where he does share the fervour of the sectarians but also to illustrate the degree to which he does *not* share it even though the occasion and subject might have seemed to have suited such fervour.

## The Image of England as Israel in Other Writers [1]

3. The greatest of all crises for ancient Israel was the Exodus. "Exodus" means literally the "coming-out" from Egypt, but extends to the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness, before they crossed Jordan and entered the promised land of Canaan. They were led by Moses, who at Sinai brought them the Law which governed their lives thereafter. This normative crisis was used in England, by Parliament and Protestants generally, to image their own long struggle against King and Anglican bishops, to arrive at true Reformation. It was more than a rallying cry: on the contrary, it was their habitual, best image of where they thought God was leading their nation.
4. Beyond the Exodus metaphor, naturally, lay the subsequent story of Israel, including the figures of Joshua and Samson, the strife between prophets and kings, the struggle with idolatrous neighbours and world powers, the exile, the return, the desecration of the rebuilt Temple, and more. These also appear as images in the writings of the Civil War and after, alongside images of Exodus, though subordinated to it. All images so far interpret the present in terms of Israel's past. But by going to the prophetic books of the Bible, above all Daniel and Revelation, extreme Protestants could interpret England's present from Israel's future, the future to end all futures, as a millennial consummation of prophecy, in which they were fighting against the Whore of Babylon, Rome, and could expect a fifth and final Monarchy, that of the Messiah, to end the four known evil world-monarchies, of which the fourth was Rome. At this time, the lost tribes of Israel would be gathered. Jews, it was argued, should be readmitted to England in order to fulfil the preconditions of the Fifth Monarchy.

## The Imagery and the Political Groupings

5. Such strange reasoning had large practical implications. All Protestant groups shared Cromwell's reasoning, though agreeing on little else at that time (1653-6). The imagery of England as Israel, a chosen people, serves to distinguish one sect or pressure-group from another and also serves as a guide to the rapid changes in political climate. In fact, we may understand attempts to monopolize this image as wars of words among the factions, in which both the government of Cromwell and its opponents were belligerents.
6. Once Cromwell had become head of state, the image of England as Israel on Exodus under Moses acquired new force. Colonel John Spittlehouse's title spells it all out: "A Warning-Piece Discharged: Or, Certain Intelligence Communicated to His Excellencie the Lord General Cromwell . . . As also, A brief and full *Parallel betwixt the History of Israel and our late and present Series of Affairs. In which Simile, Our present General is compar'd with Moses, as he was their Deliverer, Judge, and General . . .*" (my emphases) [2] Spittlehouse's book works the parallel. Cromwell himself used the image memorably to his new Parliament in 1653: the Exodus is "the only parallel of God's dealing with us that I know." He compliments England, but also himself as the Moses of this "only parallel," which guided not only his view of the past, but also his plan for the future, moving England "towards a place of rest." Yearning, or threatening, he repeated "I say, towards it."
7. Others who did not support him used the same parallel for leverage. Gerrard Winstanley, the Leveller, complained in 1649 that conquerors "to this day" are "killing the poor enslaved English Israelites." [3] In 1652, he said to Cromwell, "God hath honoured you with the highest honour of any man since Moses time, to be the head of a people, who have

cast out an oppressing Pharaoh."[\[4\]](#) This flatters and attempts to influence Cromwell, while not quite equating him with Moses. But the image could also be used to humble. When Cromwell intervened in the vitriolic dispute of two sectarians, one of them recalled the words of two Israelites in Egypt whom Moses had tried to reconcile, "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?"[\[5\]](#) This superb deflation not only showed Cromwell his intractability, but also it meant that they were all still in Egypt.

8. Nonetheless, Cromwell commanded the army, held the power, and was the only candidate to play Moses. Others had to justify themselves with different imagery. Some went no further than the earlier or subsequent history of Israel, with Cromwell as a Jacob or a Gideon. But his most vociferous critics (after the Levellers and Diggers had been crushed) were the Fifth Monarchy Men, under James Naylor. They believed that after four world empires would come the fifth, the rule of Christ through his saints at the end of time. To bring about this millennia, the self-appointed saints attempted to overturn all carnal institutions--parliaments as well as kings. The rule of the saints, "the new Israel," would follow.
9. So Puritans of every stripe used these images of the nation, or some part of it, as Israel. Since they had become the vocabulary of public debate, anyone who thought or spoke on politics had to use them.[\[6\]](#)

### **Marvell's Poems, Political and Other**

10. It was not only prose zealots who employed the imagery. Andrew Marvell, so aloof and elusive in some poems, manifests an attachment in other poems to precisely this "only parallel."
11. In "Bermudas" Marvell has his religious exiles sing praise to God "That led us through the watery maze"[\[7\]](#)--wittily changing the wanderings in the wilderness to perils on the Atlantic in a small boat.
12. "Upon Appleton House" compares mowers cutting a swathe to "Israelites / Walking on foot through a green sea"--making the Red one green.[\[8\]](#) This allusion is not serious, but in 1654 Marvell devotes some fifty lines of his poem on "The First Anniversary of the Government under O.C." to the apocalyptic imagery of Daniel and Revelation.[\[9\]](#) Here we meet the Whore and the Beast, and the need to welcome the Jews and so bring in the Last Days. He scorns the "lying prophecies" of the Fifth Monarchists, along with their plots, not as bigotry, but as misapplication. Cromwell is the one to fulfil "the holy oracles" (108). Or again (144), "If these the times, then this [Cromwell] must be the man." Clearly, Marvell is striving, like Spittlehouse, to win the millenarian parallel for Cromwell.[\[10\]](#)
13. When Marvell wrote a further panegyric for Cromwell upon his death, he reverted to the past of Israel. The Exodus figure looms large, but it is combined with allusion to Israel's subsequent exploits, as well. Joshua and David join Moses as the heroes whom Cromwell resembles: Joshua continues Moses' role and leads the chosen people into the promised land; David becomes Israel's greatest King (chosen, not born). Cromwell is compared with the three. They welcome him promptly upon his arrival in heaven. Preposterous as the compliments may seem, they are all apt. For instance, Cromwell like David loved music. As propaganda, they send precisely the right signal.
14. It would be curious, then, if Milton--who shared an office (both literally and metaphorically) with Marvell, and who shared a broad political and religious allegiance with Cromwell and his coalition -- were not to use similar imagery for his political praise-poetry. The main thrust of my paper examines so how this is so, and what explanations can be provided.

### **Milton's Relation to This Imagery and to Its Other Users**

15. Milton and Marvell worked together as translators in Cromwell's Foreign Office: in fact, Milton procured the job for Marvell. That neither makes their politics, nor their political vocabulary, identical but it does suggest a comparison. The painters' cliché of Cromwell and Milton as close colleagues, man of action and blind visionary respectively, is wrong.[\[11\]](#) Nevertheless, we must ask whether Milton ever adopted the language of his overlord that provided the ideological underpinnings for Milton's employment and, indeed, Cromwell's whole power base. If he did not, that would itself be a notable finding.
16. "Decorum" might provide a simpler explanation. This view would mean that the presence and absence of Old Testament imagery depended on the topic, occasion and genre chosen. If this were so, we might reason on the basis of my examples, that politicians making speeches would naturally use exuberant, simplistic imagery. Conversely, poets would be unlikely to employ such imagery in their private ruminations. The imagery, in other words, would become a major rhetorical tool in winning over an audience. It might bore a sophisticated audience, such as the poet himself.
17. The evidence of Marvell's work does not show him limiting Old Testament imagery to popular appeals; on the contrary, he uses the imagery for all sorts of occasions. It does not appear where we might expect it, nor is it absent where we could expect it to be avoided. Further, all these writers choose whether to speak or not, and what genre to use. Nevertheless, as occasion and genre do play some part in Milton's practice, I shall observe chronology and genre in exploring Milton's development.

### **Premonitions: Milton's Verse before 1642**

18. Before 1642 Milton's verse shows signs of becoming interested in the "only parallel." His two earliest English poems are translations of Psalms 114 and 136, both of them concerned with the Exodus, in which he amplifies the Biblical joy with his own. He returned to Psalm 114 again eleven years later, at the age of 26, rendering it into rousing Homeric hexameters. This is the psalm entitled "In exitu Israel de Egypto," "When Israel came out of Egypt." He records that he

woke up with the Greek version ringing in his head, and that he knew not why or how.<sup>[12]</sup> Though one can only speculate that the "why" included a glimpse of its applicability to pre-revolutionary England, we must note the recurrence of his interest in the theme of Exodus.

19. Not only did Milton translate psalms of Exodus, but also in two poems written before 1642 he resorted to biblical imagery of divine intervention, one from the time of the Kings, and one from the gospels. In 1637 Milton called on the Lord to intervene in protecting his friend, the religious exile Thomas Young: "let God act now to scare away the armies of the Catholic enemy as once he drove away the Assyrian hosts!"<sup>[13]</sup> Then in 1637, in *Lycidas*, he imagines the intervention of St Peter, to punish the greedy clergy:

The hungry sheep look up and are not fed . . . (125)

so

. . . that two handed engine at the door  
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more! (130-31)

This (whatever its exact meaning may be) draws on gospel or apocalyptic imagery to express some new divine deliverance of God's people, a miraculous tribulation of the same kind and degree as the plagues on Egypt or the parting of the Red Sea.

20. Moreover, Milton looked back with satisfaction on this denunciation as prophetic, because in 1645 with hindsight he could declare, ". . . the Author . . . by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy then in their height." Deliverance had come in the ousting of the bishops. The stage was set for Milton to identify the newly delivered English with the children of Israel.

### Milton's Prose of 1640-49

21. In his prose writings of the early 1640s Milton moved closer to the Exodus image we are considering. *Of Reformation* (1641) uses it to attack. The bishops, then still *in situ*, are "Egyptian taskmasters." Leaping to the other end of the Bible, from the past to the far end of the future, he imagines the people of England at the Last Day "to be found the wisest, soberest and most Christian people when thou, the eternal and shortly expected King, shalt open the clouds to judge the several kingdoms of the world." He terms his image a "supereminence of beatific vision," a theophany or apocalypse of the end-time. In this work Milton ransacks the Bible for such hopeful, exhortatory images.
22. *Animadversions*, of the same year, sounds a similar note in terms drawn more exactly from Exodus: "When thou hast settled peace in the Church . . . then shall all thy Saints . . . triumph to thee, standing on the shore of that red Sea into which our enemies had almost driven us. . . should'st thou bring us thus far onward from Egypt to destroy us in this wilderness though we deserve." Soon he moves over to a more future-directed, apocalyptic imagery of God's chosen people: "thy Kingdome is now at hand, and [echoing *Lycidas* 131] thou standing at the dore. Come forth out of thy Royall Chambers, O Prince of all the Kings of the earth . . . take up that unlimited Scepter."<sup>[14]</sup>
23. In *Areopagitica* (1644), pleading now for liberty of expression as a means to Reformation, he envisions England as "fields ripe unto harvest," employing gospel imagery this time (John 4.35). Neither Exodus nor the Apocalypse are used as metaphors in this poem. He compares England to Samson, "a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks" (Hughes 745). Milton goes further when he recalls the Reformers Wycliffe, the Lollards, and Henry VIII: "God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his Church, even to the reforming of reformation itself: what does he then but reveal himself to his servants, and as his manner is, first to his Englishmen?" (Hughes 743). The hyperbolic imagery closely identifies with the chosen people, even if Milton is also obvious trying to persuade Parliament to abandon censorship.

### Milton's Verse of the 1640s

24. Milton's poems of the 1640s are not numerous. They comprise one Latin ode, more psalm versions, and about ten sonnets. Despite the tremendous victories for Parliament and the cause of Reformation, he wrote no victory-odes or panegyrics, though in prose he enthused about the "reforming of Reformation itself." What is more, he wrote no more prose pamphlets until after the King's execution with *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*.
25. The Latin ode, *Ad Rousium*, is suggestive here. The ode is to Bodley's Librarian, John Rouse, and marks the end of the siege of Oxford. This was a huge victory for Parliament and its army under Cromwell, since Oxford had been the King's new capital. Yet what Milton celebrates is the end of hostilities, the resumption of civilized activities, like the reading of books. The poem is, in fact, about sending a replacement copy of his own poems to Bodley's Librarian. It imitates Roman poems exchanged between friends and family members who found themselves on opposite sides of civil wars, just as Milton and his brother Christopher did. In other words, the ode celebrates the resumption of non-partisan intercourse.
26. The Psalm translations are different, yet no more indicative of partisan views. Dated with unusual precision to "April 1648," they may be connected with public events. Suggestions have favoured either the Westminster Assembly, which wanted a new liturgy, meaning new metrical psalms, or else the anguish felt by Independents, re-arming for a second civil war because the Presbyterians were switching to the King's side. The first suggestion would suit psalms of Exodus,

the second less so. Regardless, Psalms 80-88 "done into metre" very literally, with notes about the Hebrew, show neither trend. God's anger and the Exodus receive emphasis, yet not more than blindness, the cult of the Temple in Jerusalem, and a mixture of other themes.

27. The sonnets of 1640-50 are often political, though they were not made public in print. In one, written "when the siege was intended to the city" by the King's army, Milton bids the royalist officer who knocks at his house to spare it, as Alexander the Great spared the house of Pindar (Hughes 140). It is a witty appeal, relying on Greek allusions with no Israelite parallel whatever. Two more sonnets attack critics who break the "known rules of ancient liberty" (143). In these, the poet claims to have made the mistake of "casting pearls before swine"--a gospel, not a Hebraic, allusion. In the mightiest of these sonnets he assails the Presbyterians, as coercers of conscience:

New *Presbyter* is old *priest* writ large. (145)

The etymological wit depends, again, on a knowledge of Greek, not on Biblical allusion. On the way to this climax, Milton wishes that Parliament will curb the Presbyterians by "clipping their Phylacteries." Phylacteries, the little boxes holding quotations from the Torah worn on the forehead by pious Jews, provide an Old Testament reference, but not a favourable, normative one. Phylacteries, grown ostentatiously large, are denounced by Jesus as pharisaical. Milton's allusion is, after all, from a New Testament standpoint.

28. Most of these sonnets uphold liberty of worship for all as the prime aim of state policy. Gospel freedoms outweigh Hebrew fixities and forms. Milton had been badly hurt by the attacks on his divorce tracts, and by the Presbyterians' willingness to force consciences when they took power from the Anglican bishops. Does he merely not use the Israelite image, or does he actively forego it? Some absences are certainly due to occasion: one would not expect a triumphal Israelite image to be used in the ode, Rouse being either neutral or on the King's side. Other absences, however, do seem noteworthy, particularly in those psalms and sonnets addressing public topics. A pattern begins to emerge.

### **Milton's Poems of the 1650s**

29. A similar pattern emerges from the poems of the 1650s, with one great exception. The psalm versions of 1653 are as mixed, as before, in subject (in fact, they also focus on metrical experiment). The sonnets are addresses to Parliamentary leaders--Fairfax, Cromwell, Vane. All three praise the addressees, then urge them to stay vigilantly on course. The "course" in question is to preserve the cause of religion, meaning liberty of worship. The major image in each case is classical or New Testament, if not both. Israel is nowhere to be seen.
30. Israel's absence is, in fact, striking. If there is any one of these sonnets to public figures on public topics which might adduce the imagery of Israel and Moses on Exodus, it would be the sonnet to Cromwell himself (1652). Such imagery, however, is not found there. The imagery is Roman, Italian, contemporary, New Testament--in short, almost anything but Hebraic. If Milton's priority is to prevent a new Establishment of paid clergy, he could well have asked whether the spiritual leaders of Israel in Exodus served for cash. Instead, he addresses Cromwell in secular or gospel terms.
31. The volta reads:

Help us to save free Conscience from the paw  
Of hireling wolves whose Gospel is their maw. (160-61)

The gospel imagery is the same as in *Lycidas*, fifteen years earlier. But instead of the wolves being the Catholics, now they are the "hirelings," those Independent clergy who asked Parliament to set up a state-salaried, state-controlled ministry. Milton's image equates this with coercion, greed, and an end to toleration. He did not want a state church, nor conformity to a national religion. In other words, he was not just critical of that particular group (the Independents, now following the bishops and the Presbyterians in seeking to run a national church with gain to themselves). It was becoming hard for Milton to see how freedom of conscience could combine with any state religion. He was finding it equally hard to see any role for the cult of ancient Israel in his imagery.

32. One great exception to this reliance on New Testament liberty, above an idealized Old Testament unity, is Sonnet 18, "On the Late Massacre of the Piemontese." Compared with the earlier sonnets of advice to leaders, this is more heated and less reasoned, with a prophetic tone. The Catholic Duke of Savoy had brutally repressed the religious worship of the Waldensians, a sect of proto-Protestants in the Alps. His soldiers had thrown non-combatants, including mothers with babies, over the cliffs. The atrocity was unusually hideous and Milton was the one who put Cromwell's protests to Savoy and other European powers into Latin. Details of these despatches vivify the sonnet.

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd Saints, whose bones  
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold,  
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old  
When all our Fathers worship't stocks and stones . . . (167)

In this case, the stronger feelings raise many Biblical images. They come from both Testaments, especially prophetic books or passages--Jeremiah, Daniel, Revelation, and Luke. But they come also from a gospel parable, and Tertullian (not to mention Greek myth, Virgil, and Petrarch). The array and force of convergent testimony are dazzling. [15] The sonnet abounds in voices of Israel grieving and denouncing. The implication is that the atrocities described are unholy:

God must avenge them. This, at last, is the Hebraic vehemence we have been awaiting.

33. Nevertheless, the ending invites a closer look. What is a "Babylonian" woe? And how are the Waldensian survivors to "fly" it?
34. "Babylonian" explodes at the end like a cluster-bomb. It means "Roman," since the Papacy is blamed and the Roman church was often identified with the wicked Babylon of both Testaments. But it also means the Babylon of the Exile, beside whose rivers Israel lay down and wept (Psalm 137.1). Maybe the encouragement of that allusion expands into an apocalyptic, Fifth-Monarchy hope for the Last Days. If so, it is one of Milton's very few millennial moments.
35. The choice of the verb "fly" is odd. A much more pugnacious choice could have been made, such as "end," "quench," or such. The Waldensians could "fly" the woe only by leaving their vulnerable homes, and going into exile. The poem is sometimes criticised for being impractical, but Milton envisages voluntary exile, for truth and liberty's sake. It is exactly what the family of his close friend, Charles Diodati, had done in leaving Lucca. It is also what pilgrims had been doing all century, to Holland, Germany, Massachusetts, and Bermuda.
36. Milton had kept the image of "coming out of" Babylon for this great occasion. (We need not object that Babylon and Egypt are not identical: metaphorically they are.) If the image is great, however, it is also disinterested. There is no suggestion in the poem that England is the promised land. Quite the reverse is true and the other sonnets show why. Milton's foreign office employment allowed him a renewed awareness of how the rest of Protestant Europe was faring. His prose studies of Dutch practices, and Arminianism elsewhere are a critique of his own country. [\[16\]](#)

### Milton's Prose of 1649-1660

37. Much of this prose was in Latin, addressed to Europe. It was hard enough to defend regicide before this audience, and out of the question to argue that the English were the chosen people. Milton concentrates on logic and law, with Biblical exegesis supporting him. Where he does wax fervid, as in the 1658 revised ending to his countrymen, he emulates Cicero (*Pater Patriae*). In the main, he keeps the rhetoric satirical.
38. In *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), Milton argues that kings must uphold laws and obey them, too. There is a contract between governor and governed which, if broken by either side, incurs legal punishment. His terms are those of social contract, not sacred Covenant.
39. In 1651, Milton was commissioned by Parliament to write their answer to an alarmingly successful piece of royalist propaganda, the *Eikon Basilike*--the "Icon of the [dead] King." That "icon" purported to be the weeping of Charles I over his erring people, full of sorrowing forgiveness--like Jeremiah or Christ weeping over Jerusalem. It is arranged in layers, with sections of self-justification, followed by a Biblical pastiche of lamentation. Although it was a very one-sided sentimental work, people read it, loved it, and wept over it. Milton's method of reply was demolition, as his title *Eikonoklastes* shows ("Icon-Smasher"). He drove wedges between the biblical sanctities and the actual king. In short, he did not propose a rival Biblical parallel, but stuck to logic or else to his own side's version of the facts, with Charles as a "man of blood," and a quite disastrously bad ruler, as many of Charles's own side agreed. It seems Milton had recognised that the image of England as Israel was a two-edged weapon: Israel had a long tradition of kings, despite the Bible's own preference for "Judges" and prophets. [\[17\]](#)
40. Milton's position was different, though, at the end of the 1650s, during the crisis following the death of Cromwell in 1658. Milton, despite being blind, ill and in retirement, produced four prose works in one year. Two advocated a gospel policy against a prelatical one, on liturgy and on tithing. The fourth insisted on a basis of civil government grounded in law and reason, with no Biblical grounding at all. The third is much the most stirring, however, and it does use the Bible, including the "only parallel." Milton was either addressing different readerships, or trying any means to stave off the Restoration of monarchy.
41. His *Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* has a tone of prophetic warning. The prophecy comes from throughout the Pentateuch, the gospels, Jeremiah, and climactically focusses on Exodus. Milton reproves the warring sects for building "no goodly tower of a commonwealth, to overshadow kings, but a tower of Babel." [\[18\]](#) (He contrasts the United Provinces, who have built more from less.) He says England is regressing to kingship despite Jesus' rebuke of certain disciples for wanting to "lord it over others, as the Gentiles do." This is a particularly dexterous hit, making the godly sectarians ungodly. Going back to the history of Israel, he compares the English to those who so resented the crimes of the sons of Eli the prophet that they wanted kings to rule instead of prophets, as if two bad apples proved all apples bad. He aptly mentions Aesop's fable of King Log and King Stork, as well, but the principal aim is to confute Protestant extremists with the Bible itself.
42. Jeremiah is cited denouncing King Coniah: "O earth, earth, earth . . ." The allusion is truncated, and cryptic to us, but Milton may have thought that a single word to the wise would suffice, or broke off in a spirit of "absit omen." Jeremiah's full speech is filled with premonitions of exile and reprisal: "I will give thee into the hand of them that seek thy life [saith the Lord] . . . And I will cast thee out . . . into another country . . . and there ye shall die. O earth, earth, earth, hear the Lord." Milton is warning the regicides and sectarians of what will follow on the King's return: particularly exile. [\[19\]](#)
43. Last, and most vehemently, Milton denounces those who for monetary reasons, like the murmurers of the Exodus, want to "return back to Egypt." [\[20\]](#) Let all sensible men, "though they seem now choosing a captain back for Egypt, . . .

bethink themselves a little, and consider whether they are rushing." To want to go "back to Egypt"--to prefer slavery--is the ultimate shame for the people of Exodus.

44. Milton waited until late in the 1650s debate about polity before entering into it. In particular, he waited before trumpeting the Exodus analogue, but then he used the trumpet to blow a fine impassioned blast of rebuke, a *fortissimo appassionato*.
45. The army intervened yet again, called elections, and the new MPs invited the King back. Milton went into hiding for a time. He was silent on political topics for more than a decade.

### Conclusions for 1642-1660

46. From the above narrative I draw a number of inferences. They are presented as if looking back from 1660, moving from more to less recent. Then I look forward again to the sequel in Milton's life, and so, finally, to a more theoretical rationale of absence.
  1. The Exodus parallel worked strongly for Milton in a crisis. In 1659 he could expect his fellow religionists to loathe a return to an "Egypt" of monarchy, bishops, and tithing. Its rhetoric was negative or deterrent, to shame them. As they had no agreed Moses, however, nor Aaron nor Joshua, no Law and no Ark, the parallel conveyed no information or guidance, only a vague revulsion.
  2. Old Testament parallels had given trouble, since the King's side could use them, too, and with great effect. As with the first item, the parallel works most naturally when voicing the hopes of underdogs.[\[21\]](#) It preserves morale. Seeing that even Moses faced opposition and backsliding, however, and that England after Cromwell had no Moses, morale alone proved insufficient.
  3. Protestantism was international, and Milton knew this well. To limit the new Israel to England was impossible to the sincere tolerationist. Commercial wars against the Protestant Dutch had probably helped to dampen the enthusiasm of the open-minded.
  4. The full form of the analogy, England as Israel, appears more clearly in his early prose than in his verse of any period. It returns, as a rebuke, in his late prose. Prose genres may be simpler than verse ones and are certainly more unidirectional and advocative. Moreover, this would also help explain why many prose works omit the parallel as inappropriate to the particular topic, audience or occasion. The fact that *Eikonoklastes* does not answer in kind the parallelism of Charles with Jeremiah or Jesus tacitly concedes that the imagery is ambivalent, or suits the downtrodden better than the victorious. In any case, I have found no simple correspondence between medium or genre and the presence or absence of the Exodus image.
  5. In poems, Milton employs New Testament imagery more than Old. Even pagan or vernacular images outweigh those of ancient Israel. This is especially evident in the sonnet to Cromwell.
  6. Advocating liberty of worship predisposes the poet against the Israelite analogy, which in practice if not in principle also resisted universalization.[\[22\]](#) "Curse ye Meroz" became a favorite text with preachers to Parliament and its armies,[\[23\]](#) with the implication that those who do not advocate such liberty are accursed themselves. Saul ceased to be Samuel's choice because he was not thorough enough in exterminating a defeated people.[\[24\]](#)
  7. Milton's political hopes of the early 1640s were rebuked in 1644 with the rancorous reception, attended by personal attacks, to his tracts on divorce. Similarly, when Presbyterianism sought religious uniformity and conformity, Milton realised that liberty of worship was likelier under a separation of church from state. Such separation was too moderate a doctrine to affirm the only parallel.

Further reasons come to mind for the absence of the Exodus image.

8. Milton's historical studies, especially in the later 1640s when writing the *History of Britain*, confirmed this scepticism.[\[25\]](#) Something always went wrong, whether you looked at the history of Britain or England or Greece or Rome. Liberty was what mattered, and sins of self-interest always betrayed it.
9. In fact, the Old Testament told the same tale. Those among whom the image of a chosen people was strongest strayed the most often. Old Testament historiography makes its theme-song or chorus the "turning aside" of Israel and its leadership, its "walking to right or left" of the straight path, the way of the Lord. The "only parallel" may be encouraging for morale and rhetoric, but not for practical politics.
10. Did Milton come near to using this image so often, yet fully develop it only twice, because he found it a constrictive cliché? If so, where he does use the cliché it measures the young man's hope in 1642, and in 1659 the older man's desperation.

### Beyond 1660

47. This summarizes the period of my survey, 1642-1660, but the remaining fourteen years of Milton's life saw his greatest writing. What do the three major poems have to say or imply about England as Israel?
48. It has become usual to read the prophetic books of *Paradise Lost* as an oblique comment on the failures of England's Protestants to achieve true Reformation, and to read Samson's indictments of betrayal by the leaders of his tribe and nation as another.[\[26\]](#) Certainly the emotions correspond, but why should we relate only these emotions of Samson with Milton's life circumstances? What about Samson's blindness, his wife, his hair-length, or his father's views on marriage-choices? To privilege the political part of a whole seems to me a narrowing to our own preoccupations. As for

the prophetic books, we also narrow their scope to apply them to Restoration England; the whole purpose of Milton's change of theme, from the projected epic of Arthur or its Saxon successors to "Adam Unparadiz'd," is to universalise the theme. The parallel of Israel to England would restrict it.

49. Knowing that this argument will not convince readers who perceive that the prophecies of misery can be applied to Milton's own post-Restoration situation, I will elaborate. In 1667, Milton wanted readers. He got them. He got more in 1669 by adding explanations of his action and his medium. In 1674, converting ten books into twelve, he made his poem more Virgilian and epic. This direction of attention makes it less, not more, likely that he wanted his prophecies read as a cryptogram for his own situation.[\[27\]](#)
50. *Paradise Regained* ought to have precluded such psychobiographical discussion. The Messiah rejects the temptation of world power or liberating Israel from Rome (III.150-202). Milton appears to have chosen his topic to express the fact that temperance is personal integrity, and that this matters more than political activism. One need not argue that this poem is political and quietist in order to refute those who read the other two great poems as political and nostalgic for failed revolution. Rather, we should credit Milton with keeping his mind firmly on the moral and spiritual principles of *each* poem. All interiorize hope.

### Theorizing an Absence

51. "Absence" resists definition. The mere fact that it gets a name does not mean the name denotes anything (as "dog" or "tenure" do). It is more sensitive to context than most abstract nouns are, since it makes us ask what it is the absence of, and what the presence of that which is absent, would mean. It does not work in simple binary fashion, since an absence may be partial or intermittent. Absence may mean that something is self-evident or unthinkable, unknown or disregarded or ignored. Context is vital to defining an absence.
52. The definition of "absence" is more than mere logic-chopping. An absence of the image of England as Israel could mean Milton was simply not patriotic, being either hostile or indifferent to that sort of feeling. He was patriotic, however, expressing the feeling with other images. We seek, then, to explain the paradox, or puzzle, that a potentially strong, in fact absolute, image of national glory did not take hold of this poet even though he was eloquently patriotic, abandoning hope of European fame through Latin in order "to be an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things among mine own citizens throughout this island in the mother dialect."[\[28\]](#)
53. This failure to deploy an image, this inaction, has something inherently problematic about it. If an inaction is outward and public, we can find both public and personal reasons for non-occurrence. How a conspiracy or assassination attempt never succeeded can be explained by security measures. Something which has not awoken a gifted imagination, or has not continued to engage it, is more difficult to perceive, let alone explain. Nonetheless, the intermittent is easier to probe than the wholly absent. Outward circumstances, known views and hopes, changing of genres along with altering occasions and audiences, all encourage speculation.
54. My question, why Milton makes no more use of the "only parallel," reveals very clearly certain things about Milton's intellectual, spiritual and practical life during the long mid-century crisis of rule:
1. I have been charting Milton's loss of political innocence. He adopted logic, not prophetic passion to combat the royal propaganda. Concurrently, Milton became more pluralist, *choosing* his mode of vision for each task, each political and polemical speech-act. Above all, he was driven by the wish to heed Greek and Roman principles and exemplars, as much as Old Testament ones. The sonnets in particular manifest this preference.
  2. We have been witnessing the unfolding of a principle of separating church from state. The principle is seen not in public advocacy alone but in the poet's own sphere, his choices of topic, stance and imagery to express them. Here I might compare Milton with Cromwell. Cromwell's actions look erratic until one sees that he sought amongst many political forms for a way to uphold liberty of worship. A consistent principle stands behind his inconsistent actions. Milton's use of the only parallel, like his use of classical imagery, varies with his occasions and genre, but he does not swerve from belief in freedom of worship ("so that the hewn and scattered virgin Truth may be slowly re-membered by her sad friends").
  3. Milton favours what Isaiah Berlin calls "negative" liberty, the absence of external constraints, for the sake of Berlin's "positive" liberty, which consists in spiritual fulfillment or self-realization. Not only the events of the Interregnum but also his humanism and his historiography showed him that "positive" liberty, though attractive as a spiritual freedom, is narrow and coercive when vested in any small group of believers, and destroys both liberties for those who do not agree with the believers. Despite optimistic moments in his own epoch, he soon realised[\[29\]](#) that the day when all people, and all nations, share the same spirituality was a long, long way off.
  4. He drew the corollary, that freedom mattered last as well as first. While many radicals advocate freedom only till they themselves win power, Milton advocated it whether in opposition or in power or in the internal "exile" of his last years. He was a more consistent, altruistic thinker than is often acknowledged.

### Notes

1. I am grateful for advice with the paper from Colin Davis, Neil Keeble, John Morrill, Janel Mueller, and David Reid.
2. "London, Printed for Richard Moone . . . 1653." By page 23 the parallel is being used to justify Cromwell

- ("Moses") making all major decisions, including the control of elections.
3. *The True Levellers Standard* (1649).
  4. *The Law of Freedom in a Platform, or True magistracy Restored* (1652).
  5. Exodus 2.14.
  6. Looking ahead to the Succession Crisis of 1681 and to Dryden's satire *Absalom and Achitophel*, we see how the imagery of parallelism continued, as did the power-struggle. Dryden won the fight to possess the parallel between Israel's King David and Charles II.
  7. *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell* (l.6).
  8. L. 390.
  9. Ll. 110-58 with Margoliouth's note; also line 293.
  10. This contestation of Biblical allusion is discussed by Mary Ann Radzinowicz.
  11. It has a basis in the early biographies, nevertheless. "Milton" and "Cromwell" were the names of two Englishmen known to foreigners visiting London in the 1650s ("the only inducement of several foreigners that came over into England, was chiefly to see O. Protector, and Mr J. Milton," says John Aubrey [Hughes 1023]). Hughes' edition is used for the text of Milton wherever possible.
  12. *Epistulae Familiares VI*, in *Milton's Private Correspondence and Academic Exercises* (10).
  13. *Elegia Quarta*, 113-122 (see Hughes' ed., 29). This work was first published in 1627.
  14. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (1.706-07).
  15. Hughes (168).
  16. I discuss this sonnet more fully in "Milton's Sonnet 18 and Psalm 137" (91).
  17. Samuel regretted being told by the Lord to anoint Saul king (1 Samuel 8). A similar antipathy to kingship and pining for the days of ad hoc "judges" (*shophetim*) recurs in the books of Kings. Kings are second best.
  18. Hughes (884).
  19. Hughes (808). The reprisals were thorough. One of the regicides fled to Massachusetts, and even there he lived the rest of his life in a cave in the country some ten or more years.
  20. Hughes (898-99). The allusion is to Exodus 16.2-3: "And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger." See also Numbers 11.5.
  21. The motif recurs in freedom songs, such as "Go down, Moses."
  22. A principle is not held to be a moral principle unless it can be held and acted upon by all without carnage or self-contradiction. We all find unjust the acts that hurt us, but doubly so if those who inflict them could claim immunity from the same pain in the same situation. "Do as you would be done by."
  23. Judges 5.23. This was a favourite text with the preachers urging Parliament or its armies to be more "thorough" with defeated opponents. The text was used by Clarendon to exemplify the utter inhumanity of some of the godly.
  24. 1 Samuel 15.
  25. The dating of the Digression on the Long Parliament has been disputed, but for my argument the date could have been any time: Milton's disenchantment with England's Parliament was continuous.
  26. *Paradise Lost* XI-XII, especially XII. 485-552; and *Samson Agonistes* 240-76. The first passage covers all the years after Christ's Ascension, while the second stays close to Judges 15.
  27. This paragraph uses material from my essay "*Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books, or Ten?*"
  28. *The Reason of Church Government*, printed 1642 (Hughes 668).
  29. See Fixler (10): "The need to reaffirm the only possible course towards which Christian faith ought to be directed appeared the more urgent to Milton to the extent that he had once looked for the heavens to open. His apocalypticism was the condition out of which grew his preoccupation with the grand themes of his later poems, the justification of the ways of God to Man."

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Responses to this piece intended for the Readers' Forum may be sent to the editor at [emls@arts.ubc.ca](mailto:emls@arts.ubc.ca).



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“England as Israel in Milton's Writings,” *Early Modern Literary Studies: A Journal of Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 2(2): 54 paragraphs, 1996 Google Scholar. Halkett, John. *Milton and the Idea of Matrimony*. Israel and England Paralleled. London, 1648 Google Scholar. Knoppers, Laura. Milton's attitude towards the readmission of the Jews has long been an object of puzzlement. He was close with people in the Samuel Hartlib circle who expressed tolerant attitudes towards the Jews and were interested in their readmission, believing the conversion of the Jews would be part of the millennial reign of Christ on Earth. Milton's friend, Moses Wall, was the translator of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel's *The Hope of Israel* (1650), which prepared the way for Menasseh's petition to Cromwell and his Council in 1655. For a time in the 1640s and 1650s, Christian millenarian A site dedicated to John Milton, arguably the best 17th Century English author. *Critical Essays and Journal Articles*. Doerksen *The Prophet Disarmed: Milton and the Quakers* - Steven Marx *England as Israel in Milton's Writings* - John K. Hale *Ham's Vicious Race: Slavery and John Milton* - Steven Jablonski "To stand upright will ask thee skill": *The Pinnacle and the Paradigm* - Carol Barton *Milton and the Sexy Seals* - John K. Hale *Skepticism and Poetry in Milton's Infernal Conclave* - Henry Weinfield.

By surveying Milton's use and non-use of certain biblical images, this essay records his loss of political innocence, and also something of his pluralism. In doing so, it shows in action his view of the relation between church and state. It charts his implied view of Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty – negative and positive, the absence of external constraints as opposed to spiritual fulfilment or self-realization – to conclude that Milton favours the first for the sake of the second. He drew the corollary, that freedom mattered last as well as first. He was, in short, a more consistent Milton seems to have had a happy childhood. He spoke of his mother's "esteem, and the alms she bestowed." Of his father, Milton said that he "destined me from a child to the pursuits of Literature, . . . and had me daily instructed in the grammar school, and by other masters at home." Civil war was simmering in England; in addition, Milton learned that his old friend Charles Diodati had died. Late in 1638, Milton returned to London, where in 1639, he settled down as a schoolmaster for his nephews and other children from aristocratic families. Writing Career and Marriage. At this time, Milton began writing prose pamphlets on current church controversies. The political climate was charged as Charles I invaded Scotland, and the Long Parliament was convened.