

Paradise Lost Book 1

Book 1 Summary

The narrator invokes the Heavenly Muse to assist him in telling the story of the fall of man. The story is meant to explain God's will to men. Satan was cast out of Heaven for stirring up rebel angels to make war on God. Having lost the war, he was hurled down from Heaven and imprisoned. The prison was, Hell, a place of fire that gave no light, and the farthest place from Heaven. Satan's second in command, Beelzebub, languished by his side in a sea of fire. After nine days passed, Satan broke the silence and spoke to him.

Satan reminds Beelzebub of how they were once the brightest angels in Heaven, and now they are equal in misery. Although God has defeated them, Satan says that he will not repent or change, because he was able to threaten God's might. Satan has not lost hope of revenge and still refuses to bow to God. He thinks that they may successfully use guile, rather than outright war, against Heaven.

Beelzebub replies that he too regrets having lost the war with Heaven and being imprisoned in torment. Although he is suffering, his vigor and spirit have returned. He wonders why God has fated this to be. He suggests that either the Almighty wishes them to have the strength to endure more suffering, or perhaps wants them to serve Him again in war. For now, however, their strength is useless.

Satan assures Beelzebub that, although they are weak and miserable, they can still thwart God by doing evil. Whatever God may plan for them, they will see to it that nothing but evil comes from it. Seeing that God has drawn off his angels, Satan suggests that they head for the shore. Either hope or despair will drive them in their purpose.

Having been left by Heaven to his own evil designs, Satan raises his monstrous form from the lake of fire and flies to the shore. Beelzebub follows him. Now on land, the pair glory in their accomplishment, having escaped by their own force rather than with God's help.

Satan compares Heaven and Hell, but decides that he will rule in Hell, saying "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n." In Hell, he and Beelzebub will be free to do as they wish. Satan considers their friends who are still trapped in the lake of fire, and considers that they might free them to share in Hell or perhaps to make war on God, once again. Beelzebub answers that they will surely gain courage to escape their bonds, when they hear their master again.

Satan, with his shield and spear, goes to the bank and calls to his legions. The fallen angels lay lost and defeated, like floating corpses. Satan calls to them to awaken and rise, saying that if they continue to lay there, Heaven will press its advantage and tread them down further.

The fallen angels spring up in an innumerable multitude, in obedience to Satan's orders. These devils array themselves into companies, and are known by many names. The chief demons are named, including Moloch, Chemos, Baalim, Ashtaroth, Astoreth, Thammuz, Dagon, Osiris, Isis, Orus and Belial. All of these were worshipped as gods and goddesses in different lands. Satan's word give them courage and hope.

Azazel claims the right to carry Satan's standard. Ten thousand banners, along with numberless spears are raised. They advance as a phalanx, assembling before Satan and waiting for his commands. Satan is touched by remorse that his followers, now damned for his sake, remain faithful. Three times he tries to speak, but is stopped by his tears.

Satan reminds his followers of the conflict with Heaven, but suggests that rather than going to war, they may use guile against the Almighty. Force is not the best way to overcome a foe. It was prophesied in Heaven that God would create a world which would be populated with people who would have equal favor with the angels. Satan suggests that this should be their first interest. Satan decides that they must take counsel and declare war, either openly or covertly.

Led by Mammon, the fallen angels build Pandemonium on top of a hill. Trumpets announce a counsel, and the spirits swarm about the halls. Satan goes into a conclave with his highest Sephamin and Cherubim lords. The summons is read, and they begin their discussions.

Book 1 Analysis

Milton describes Paradise Lost, as the story of the fall of man. However, it is also the story of the fall of Satan. Satan is the first character introduced by Milton, and the most carefully developed. His story fleshes out the thematic elements of the story, sometimes both as a parallel example and a contrasting example. However, Satan is not a heroic figure, but an antihero whose charm is based on deception.

The story begins in Hell, where Satan is suffering in a burning lake, having been cast from Heaven. Although defeated, Satan is fueled by defiance and hope, which give him the strength to escape from the burning lake, in order to build a new kingdom in Hell for himself. This hope comes from pride, an important thematic element throughout the book. Satan believes himself to have challenged God, and therefore still imagines himself equal with the Almighty and capable of taking revenge on Creation.

Book 1 includes the first reference to the theme of freedom and free will. Satan claims that he prefers to rule in Hell, where he will be "free." The promise of freedom and desire for freedom are the lures that Satan has used to gain his followers. In fact, Satan, himself, is not free at all, but is confined to Hell. His followers are also not free, because Satan tells Beelzebub that he intends to be their ruler.