

Jesus and Rama: Interpretations of the Incarnation

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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Examination Date: March 27th 2007

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Introduction

The Bigger Picture

*Humble is my lot and my ambition high; but I am confident of one thing,
that the good will be gratified to hear my verse, though evil men will laugh.*

-Tulasiadasa

Humankind has always been trying to understand the mystery of God. Many of our most passionate dialogues and arguments have been about our own conceptions of this divine figure. Despite generations' worth of technological advances, we still cannot fully reason out the ways of the divine. We do not, however, give up. We continue to debate and try to understand. Today we see that studies in the field of comparative religion are extensive. Many have spent a good deal of time discussing the differences between their gods, their traditions, and their people.

Despite attempts to find some common ground between religions, however, there is still a great disconnect. This may be because many of the discussions between various religions look for points of contact on a more theological plane. Current scholarship on the relationship specifically between Christianity and Hinduism lacks the relevance to make either religion open up to conversation with the other. There needs to be a shift in the conversation to the narrative level. This provides more points of contact between these two religions than the theological plane. To bring these two faiths together, there must be a connection so great that it transcends religious dogma and instead shows a commonality at a basic human level. So we look

to the narrative; we look at stories from each religion. If the followers of each religion can find common ground in who they are and how they view the world, then a connection will be made. A conversation will begin. Hopefully, understanding will follow.

So what is this common thread that will pull Christianity and Hinduism together? The narratives of the incarnation, a god that comes to earth, physically taking on humanity. In Hinduism, this figure is also called an avatar, or “earthly vehicle” for a god. In Christianity, this incarnation refers to the Word made flesh. These god-men are the focus of my study. More specifically, it is how human kind views that incarnation. In both Christianity and Hinduism, the incarnation plays an important role in their understanding of the divine. How do believers in these traditions represent the mystery of the god-man through their stories? Is the Christian incarnation equal to a Hindu avatar? but that the followers of these incarnations understand them similarly.

Current studies on the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity are too broad. If scholars mention the incarnation, they shortly thereafter dismiss it, moving on to other seemingly more important connections. In *More Things in Heaven and Earth*, A. van den Beukel acknowledges that humanity can best understand the divine through earthly things, but does not mention the incarnation, instead choosing to focus on how physics helps us understand god. John S. Dunne at least acknowledges the incarnation in *The Way of All the Earth*, but only in a greater mission of finding a sense of completion for man. Both are too broad. Second, if studies on comparative

religion mention the incarnation, Hinduism and Christianity are only two of many religions discussed. Dunne writes,

Each of the incarnations which we have considered so far seems analogous to God's right hand, the one which holds all truth. The Bodhisattva is one whose essence is enlightenment; the Avatar, when he reveals himself as Krishna did to Arjuna, is a revelation of all things gathered into one; and the Logos, doing humanly what God is doing, is a revelation of God to men (94).

Although Dunne discusses similarities among the incarnations in Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian traditions, he loses the Hindu and Christian incarnations within the greater purpose of his book.

Karen Armstrong comes closer to my question when she writes in *A History of God*, that "It seems that the idea of God is remarkably close to ideas in religions that developed quite independently. Whatever conclusions we reach about the reality of God, the history of this idea must tell us something important about the human mind and the nature of our aspiration" (Armstrong, xxii). She acknowledges that there seems to be something remarkably similar about humankind's conception of the divine. Armstrong, however, spends the rest of her book looking at connections between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and their conception of "One God." So the texts that mention the incarnation do not exclusively discuss Hinduism and Christianity.

There is another problem that these comparative religion texts have. Dunne demonstrates this third problem above, citing Krishna when he mentions the

Hinduism incarnation. Most scholarship on the Hinduism incarnation references Krishna because the first mention of the word “avatar” is in the *Bhagavad-Gita* in reference to Krishna. Krishna is the default Hinduism incarnation.

In *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Raimundo Panikkar admits that “Hinduism has no unifying symbol such as Christianity has” (38). Panikkar admits, however, that Rama would be the most likely choice if Hinduism sought a comparable figure to Jesus Christ. “Within one single Hindu tradition the name of Rama would probably be my choice. Rama in fact is totally human and totally divine, Rama is material and spiritual, temporal and eternal” (Panikkar 38). Panikkar dismisses him, however, because he is not completely recognized by everyone in Hinduism. While this decision makes sense within the goals of his book, I believe he was on the right track in signaling out Rama as the best figure for comparison to Jesus. Most scholars tend to downplay Rama’s importance in the conversation on incarnations. In Geoffrey Parrinder’s book, *Avatar and Incarnation*, he grants Rama only a small chapter in a larger list of avatars in Hinduism. This means that Rama is given ten pages in a book over 250 pages long. Rama, however, is the figure that should receive the most attention in studies between Christianity and Hinduism. Rama, an incarnation of the Supreme God Vishnu, provides the most interesting parallels with Jesus.

Rama and Jesus are similar on many fronts. Both god-men are born on this earth. They both go on journeys to discover who they are. They work towards realizing their divinity despite limitations placed on them because of their humanity.

Both figures go into a kind of exile. Rama is banished to Dandaka forest for fourteen years while Jesus spends forty days in the desert. While banished, Rama fights the evil demon Ravana and conquers him through his wisdom. Jesus also battles an evil figure, Satan, at the end of his time in the desert and conquers him through his knowledge of scripture. Throughout these journeys, there is a good deal of testimony about the incarnations' divinity. Also, both figures experience trials that test their ability to see the truth at hand. Ravana and Satan greatly employ the use of deception in order to trick the incarnations. In the end, the evil figures are unsuccessful. Jesus and Rama emerge from their exile triumphantly. Rama returns to sit on his throne as the king of Ayodhya. Jesus comes from the desert and immediately begins his ministry. These are just a few of the many commonalities between Jesus and Rama. The question then, is how to best discover those parallels. This study proposes to look at stories written about these incarnations. What elements are included about the life they lived? Looking at the many versions of *The Ramayana* and various gospels in existence, one has to ask why are there so many different interpretations on the incarnation. More specifically, what do these stories tell us about how believers in these traditions view the incarnation?

The best place to start is the holy text of each religion. These interpretations are widely accepted, heavily read and discussed. They are the stories any other stories on the incarnation are based off of. But to look solely at the holy scripture would betray the question at hand. If we want to know how more of human kind views the incarnation, we must also look at a lay perspective. This more secular interpretation

of the incarnation tells us, better than the holy text, how particular believers understand the incarnation. Both views are crucial to the study however, for the secular interpretation is best understood as a kind of retelling of the original holy text. What things are different and more importantly, why is there a need to retell it? How does that retelling further humanity's understanding of the incarnation?

I chose four books to address these questions. There is the rather obvious problem, however, of needing texts written in English. Therefore, any kind of holy scripture chosen still betrays a kind of translation or retelling of its own because it is not in the original language in which it was written. For the purpose of this study, however, I will treat the English translations as if they are the holy scripture. The scripture on Jesus and Rama has been translated numerous times from the original Greek and Sanskrit. So for the most part, I also did not acknowledge the different translations. After the texts were chosen, I referred to them alone.

Rama's story is told succinctly in *The Ramayana*, literally "Rama's way." For Rama, then, I chose Tulsidasa's translation of the story. He titles it *Shri Ramacharita-mansa*, or *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama*. This version actually has three different translations side by side. For my intents and purposes, this widely accepted interpretation of Rama's life will serve as the first holy text. The secular text is based not specifically on Tulsidasa's version of the story, but on Kamban's version. Kamban, much more so than Tulsidasa, is known for emphasizing the human qualities of Rama. He readily depicts his humanity. R. K. Narayan's *Ramayana* picks up on this humanity. His version can certainly be seen as a retelling because Narayan

subtitles his story, *A Shortened Modern Prose Version*. It is shorter, done in prose, and is self-proclaimed as neither “a translation nor a scholarly study” (Narayan, xiii). Instead, because Narayan has spent so much time studying Kamban’s version of *The Ramayana*, he refers to his work as “a resultant literary product out of the impact of Kamban on my mind as a writer” (Narayan, xii). This shows that he is struggling with a way to interpret the figure of Rama. This is not to say he found fault in Kamban’s version, but that he still felt the need to respond to it. This pairing of Tulsidasa and Narayan forms the discussion of Chapter One. I hope to show that, though Narayan struggles with how Rama is depicted, whether as a god or a man, Narayan ultimately emerges with an understanding that Rama must undergo a journey of self-realization before he can realize his full divinity in the midst of his humanity.

Next, the focus shifts to Jesus. The holy scripture here must be found in the Bible and specifically in the gospels of the New Testament. Again, because I could not read the original text of the Bible, I chose The New International Version (NIV) as the translation of scripture.¹ The next question was which gospel to study. Though at times I will pull details from all four gospels, the main book in question will be the Gospel of John. His interpretation is seen as radically different than the first three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. To begin with, John writes in a completely different style than the synoptic gospels. He was purposefully writing to a

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wider audience. In doing this, he emphasizes Jesus as a spiritual being rather than describing events of Jesus' life (for these events are already listed in the first three gospels). Because of this, he does not follow a specific timeline or follow the order of events as they are laid out in the synoptic gospels. He even changes the number of events, completely leaving out scenes found in other gospels. John actually omits the entire desert scene found in the all three synoptic gospels.

This omission plays against the secular text, John Milton's *Paradise Regained*, for it is set almost entirely in the desert. This could certainly be seen as a retelling of scripture not only because Milton creates details not found in any gospel but also because Milton chooses to write exclusively on a scene that John omits. Scholars studying Milton and *Paradise Regained* are puzzled as to why Milton wrote about this particular episode. They question what Milton might have based his four book work on, or put differently, if Milton was responding to some particular text.² This study, then, answers that question in a different light. Milton was not responding to the Georgic, to the books of Job in the Old Testament or even Luke in the New Testament. Instead, he was reinterpreting the Gospel of John. Ira Clark writes about this possibility in "*Paradise Regained* and the Gospel according to John." Clark includes a great number of references about the similarities between *Paradise Regained* and the gospel of John, asserting that "Milton proceeds to choose more than half his texts on Christ's mode of existence from John" (Clark 2). The two texts have

² A few scholars suggest that Milton's "brief epic" is based on the Book of Job (see Louis Martz. "Paradise Regained: The Meditative Combat." *ELH*. Sep. 1960. 223-247.); the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (see Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle. "Home to Mother: Regaining Milton's Paradise." *Modern Philology*. May 2000. 499-527.); or even Vergil's *Georgics* (see Anthony Low. "Milton, Paradise Regained, and Georgic." *PMLA*. Mar. 1983, 152-169.)

similar themes, content, and representations of Jesus' character. It seems, then, that Milton was telling a story that perhaps he felt was wrongly omitted from the otherwise complete gospel. He is retelling it, in a way, to understand better Jesus' life story. Clark also discusses this idea. "To say that Milton supplemented the Bible by recounting in a different context an event already told in Scripture is not to say that he was presumptuous or sacrilegious, nor is it to claim that he considered the Bible insufficient for salvation [...]; it is almost as if he were supplying a manuscript loss" (5-6). Evidently there are great similarities between Milton's view of the incarnation and the gospel writers, even if the desert scene is the focus of one and completely left out of another.

This wrestling with the mystery of Jesus and his thoughts as he wanders the desert shows Milton writing an interpretation of the incarnation. The juxtaposition of Milton with the gospel writer forms the second chapter.³ It will show that Jesus undergoes a journey of self self-discovery. Through testimony and trial, Jesus comes to an understanding of his purpose, fully realizing his divinity in the midst of his humanity.

Finally, Chapter Three brings the views represented in the secular texts together. How similar are Jesus and Rama as seen in *The Ramayana* and *Paradise Regained*? Do these two (or at times, four) interpretations of the incarnation represent similar understandings of the incarnation? Although these similarities may appear to

³ Much study has been done recently on the *real* writer of the gospel. The question at hand is if John really wrote the text now represented in the Bible under his name. Whoever he may turn out to be, however, I am calling him "John" or simply, "the gospel writer." It does not matter so much the name of the person who wrote the gospel as the text of the gospel itself.

be merely a laundry list of details that do not bring about any kind of understanding between religions, I hope to show that it is not necessarily about the list of details that makes the incarnations appear to be similar. Instead, it is important to show that as humans, our conceptions of the incarnation are the same. Of course there are details that do not connect, but at the core of the understanding, Christians and Hindus are more alike in their narratives of incarnation than they perhaps realize.

Before we look at these figures, as represented by Tulsidasa, Narayan, the gospel writer, and John Milton, a few things must be said about this study in general. First of all, whole books have and can be written about Jesus, the Gospel of John, *Paradise Regained*, Rama, *The Ramayana*, and *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama*. The goal was to write about all these things, but in a relatively short and very specific manner. How does humanity understand the divine incarnation? It is this question that drives the study. Because so much more can be said with respect to either incarnation or any author or text, there are obviously things left unsaid. The task is not to say it all, but shed more light on a subject that I feel has been, for the most part, ignored. We must try to approach any conversation between religions without our biases.⁴ Though no one can completely take away the things one has learned in his or her life, each can strive to communicate on a more human level. We can communicate through the narrative; we can find common ground through our incarnations.

Raimundo Panikkar writes,

⁴ Though I must admit that I come with my own biases. I try to remain as objective as possible but fear that at times, my own background has surely slipped through. My understanding of the Indian culture and mind set is from a second or even third person understanding. No amount of lecture or reading of well written books could transplant me to India.

The two sets of doctrines, although they contain certain undeniable resemblances, are far removed from each other, and yet in a certain sense they possess the same *aim* and pursue the same *goal*. Moreover, they start from the same anthropological situation; they consider the same imperfect and vulnerable human being as he strives to reach fullness and perfection (36).

Conversations between Christianity and Hinduism should begin with how they understand their incarnations. It is through the interpretations of Jesus and Rama that we can begin to reach an understanding.

Chapter One

Rama of Ayodhya as Vishnu:***The Ramayana* as told by Tulasidasa and Narayan**

The Ramayana, or Rama's story, is truly a story of man's journey of self-realization. In the Hindu tradition, every man walks a journey for himself, though it may be through many, many lifetimes, to recognize his own divine nature. *The Ramayana* is a great model of this journey because Rama is a man, but also a god with great purpose in store for him. He must destroy the evil of this world, specifically a character named Ravana who is most responsible for the destruction on earth. Though Rama is actually the god Vishnu he can do as a man what Vishnu cannot as a god. Specifically, he can destroy Ravana because Ravana has immunity from the gods.

Though Rama's mortality is often mentioned as a kind of limit to his godly being, it is also more generally mentioned in reference to how cleverly the disguise of his human form works in fooling Ravana. Ravana is often seen mocking Rama for being a mere mortal. It is, however, precisely god contained in human form that triumphs over Ravana. At the end of the story, Brahma, the Creator god of Hinduism, tells Rama, "Please remember that this is your real identity and let not the fear and doubts that assail an ordinary mortal ever move you. You are beyond everything; and we are blessed indeed to be in your presence" (Narayan 164). Rama is not an ordinary mortal because he is actually a god. So at the beginning of life's journey, we begin

fully unaware of our own individual divinity. But like Rama, we grow and learn and realize that divinity embedded within our humanity.

To take a closer look at this journey of self-realization we must look to the texts that tell the story of incarnation. Though most comparative religion studies focus on the avatar of Krishna and his story found in the Bhagavad-Gita, mine will focus on what is perhaps the lesser of the religious incarnations: Rama. There was a wide selection of interpretations on his life story. This study, however, focuses on two. It uses Narayan's version of *The Ramayana* and certain details from *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama*. One will be juxtaposed against the other in an effort to show that *The Ramayana* is not only Rama's life story, but also a story of self-realization that can stand as a model for many Hindus. Specifically because Rama's journey is so crucial to one's understanding of him, it is best to move through the story chronologically, pulling out the most important events. Each of these events in Rama's life move him towards self-awareness, towards realizing he is the god, Vishnu. It is Narayan's representation of Rama's self-realization that is tracked throughout the story.

The Ramayana is a story so popular that it would be difficult to find a person of the Hindu faith that does not know at least some aspect of it. Because I was at first very unfamiliar with the story and the majority of my readers are also unaware, I will present a shortened summary of the story before delving into the specific episodes that show Rama's divinity so well. Keep in mind that I am only presenting a very basic and skeletal version of *The Ramayana*. Every time the story is told, however,

the narrator will add details and embellishments to make the story more realistic and current for the audience. The main theme, however, stays the same. Rama is a hero who rescues the world from the evil of the demon Ravana.

At the start of the story, all the gods gather in an attempt to find a way to eliminate the evil demon, Ravana. This demon has immunity from the gods and they can therefore do nothing to stop his wrath. Vishnu volunteers to go down to earth in the form of a human since Ravana has never asked for protection from a human. He is born as a son of Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya, who had no heirs to his kingdom and was wishing for a son. Rama is one of four boys born to three mothers at the same time. Rama's brothers are also avatars, not of gods, but of things that Vishnu uses, or is identified with, as a god. Vishnu holds a conch and a wheel and rests on the coils of a serpent. His brothers then are Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Sathrugna. All four boys are well respected but everyone esteems Rama. A sage comes to take Rama away and train him. On their travels, they come across Sita. Rama and Sita fall in love from the first moment they meet and there is a grand wedding.

After returning, King Dasaratha decides it is time to step down and crown one of his sons (all three found wives at roughly the same time as Rama in the same village where Sita was from). Rama is the likely choice and preparations are made for his coronation. Queen Kaikeyi, however, is pressured into calling in a favor of the king. Her son, Bharatha, must be crowned and Rama must be banished to the woods for fourteen years. After much debate between the king and queen, Rama humbly takes it upon himself to leave and defer the throne to his brother. Though the entire

nation would like to follow in loyalty, Rama only allows Lakshmana and Sita to follow him to his ascetic life in the wilderness. After some time has passed, the evil Ravana learns of Sita's beauty through his own sister who had set her eyes upon Rama but failed to gain his affections. Ravana then cleverly kidnaps Sita and takes her back to his palace. Rama and Lakshmana must set out on an adventure to find her and destroy Ravana. With the help of a monkey clan, and namely Hanuman, they find Ravana and a great battle ensues. Rama indeed destroys Ravana. Then he returns to Ayodhya and is proclaimed king during a magnificent festival. There is no talk of his death for the tale ends with his coronation.

For the purposes of this paper, I had to choose two texts from the many *Ramayanas* that exist in English. The story was first set down by Valmiki, who actually places himself in the narrative as a contemporary of Rama. After him, thousands of versions of the story arose with varying "lost segments" of the story, embellishments, but of course, losses in some of the original detail. The language barrier also creates difficulties. Valmiki's original is composed in Sanskrit. Most English versions today are not translations from Valmiki's Sanskrit version, but translations of someone else's translation of the Sanskrit. For my sacred text, then, I decided upon Tulsidasa's *Ramacharitamansa* or *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama*. The second text is by R. K. Narayan, simply titled *The Ramayana*. Narayan's text is a condensed prose version of the Tamil version of the story by Kamban, a popular translator of Valmiki's original text. Because it is shortened, it is the more interpretive text of the two, and therefore the secular version of the story.

It is important, also, to discuss why Narayan wrote the way he did. Why did he choose to represent the story of Rama in a “shortened prose version” in English instead of a full-length epic tale in a foreign language? The episodes that Narayan chooses are central to understanding Rama’s journey of self-realization. He did not seek to translate his own version or tell the story in a new radical way as some modern authors have done.⁵ Narayan proclaims his version as neither “a translation nor a scholarly study, but may be called a resultant literary product out of the impact of Kamban on my mind as a writer” (Narayan, xiii). He wants to stay true to the story, true to the person of Rama.

Indeed, Narayan often refers to “the poet” acting in his narrative. In doing so, he is referring to Kamban and how Kamban tells his story. It can be surmised that Narayan makes his epic as a kind of retelling of Kamban’s version and because of this summarizes portions of the text. In doing so, Narayan limits the amount of detail necessary to tell the story. Only the most important details and the most influential parts of the narrative remain. By looking at Narayan and which portions of the text he has kept in full from Kamban’s version, we see which parts of *The Ramayana* are most significant in Narayan’s view. To know what he left out, however, it is necessary to look at the more in-depth text and notice when Narayan references Kamban, Valmiki or simply, “the poet.” All would show what Narayan has omitted from this condensed version. For an example, *The Holy Lake* spends over eighty

⁵ William Buck’s *Ramayana* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1976) or Aubrey Menen’s *Mischievous Retelling of the Hindu Classic* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York: 1954) are just two examples of the many versions in existence today. Many of these versions are not accepted by those inside the Hindu faith as true or accurate depictions of Rama.

stanzas on Rama's birth narrative while Narayan sums it up in just under eight paragraphs. One could ask why Narayan shortens it down and places less importance on it. Perhaps Narayan chose to focus more on the events of the incarnation's life instead of his birth.

For another example, Narayan merely refers to what Kamban wrote. Narayan writes in the Prologue, "The poet then describes the countryside with its gardens and groves" (Narayan, 3). Another, somewhat comical reference to "the poet" occurs in the midst of the wedding chapter. "The sun set beyond the sea, so says the poet – and when a poet mentions a sea, we have to accept it. No harm in letting a poet describe his vision, no need to question his geography" (Narayan, 25). Narayan even mentions Valmiki once at the beginning of "Two Promises Revived." He says, "The original poet Valmiki mentions that Dasaratha was sixty thousand years old!" (Narayan, 35). These interjections are obviously not part of the core of the story, but embellishments that Narayan seems to dismiss. They further indicate that Narayan is retelling not just a generic version of the story, but specifically Kamban's version of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Narayan is not however, merely transcribing from Tamil. He is condensing it. The main episodes that Narayan includes, then, are central to understanding Rama's journey of self-realization.

Narayan begins his story with the king of Ayodhya wishing for a son to succeed him upon his death. He tells this to Sage Vasishtha, his advisor at court. "At this Vasishtha recollected an incident that he had witnessed through his inner vision. At one time all the gods went in a body to appeal to the Supreme God Vishnu" (4).

After the gods ask for help destroying the evil demon, Ravana, Vishnu replies, “Ravana can be destroyed only by a human being since he never asked for protection from a human being. I shall incarnate as Dasaratha’s son” (5). But Vasishtha does not mention this to the king, instead advising the performance of a *yagna*. After a year long sacrifice, “an immense supernatural being emerged from the sacrificial fire” with instructions to feed the rice he offered to each of Dasaratha’s wives. From here, all Narayan says of Rama’s birth is collective with Rama’s three brothers. “In proper time, Dasaratha’s wives, Kausalya and Kaikeyi, give birth to Rama and Bharatha respectively, and Sumithra gave birth to Lakshmana and Sathrugna” (6). Neither the King nor his wives seem to know that their children are, in actuality, the god Vishnu, his conch, his wheel, and the serpent Adishesha. Only the gods themselves, and those they give inner vision to, seem to be aware of the sons’ divine origin.

So it is here that Rama’s journey of self-realization begins. As the boys grow, the king is still not aware of their divinity. A great sage and former king, Viswamithra, comes to seek Dasaratha’s protection. In Narayan’s version, the sage simply asks for Rama because he needs “none else” (Narayan 9). In *The Holy Lake*, however, it says, “At the sight of Rama the sage was stupefied” (Tulsi 142). Here, then, it is clear the sage had no advance knowledge of Rama aside perhaps from his name as a son of Dasaratha. It seems that only after arriving at Dasaratha’s palace does he see Rama and request him as a protector in addition to his brother, Lakshmana, whom Rama is never without. Viswamithra asks for Rama to be his protector for the *yagna*. Upon seeing the King’s hesitation, his advisor, who is aware

of Rama's divinity, tries to hint at the great things that Rama is to accomplish without fully telling the King the details of Rama's origin. He says, "There must be a divine purpose working through this seer" and encourages the King to allow Rama to follow Viswamithra (Narayan 9).

In both versions of the story, the King speaks to Rama's apparent weakness. Narayan writes, "What can a stripling like Rama do against those terrible forces?" (Narayan 8). Tulsi writes, "My lovely boys, who are yet too young, are no match for the most hideous and cruel demons" (Tulsidasa 143). The King, ignorant of the boys' true identity, is worried (as a normal father would be) for his young sons. After more reluctance to let his sons leave, Viswamithra gives the king a little speech. The sage tells Dasaratha that one cannot always count on loved ones being near us. The King must let go of Rama if he wants Rama to grow. "Every human being, when the time comes, has to depart and seek his fulfillment in his own way" (10). Tulsi, however, skips right over this seemingly important speech. Tulsi only says, "The Vasishtha pleaded much with the king so that his doubts were dispelled" (Tulsi 143). In both versions, of course, the king allows Rama and his brother to go on the journey. It is on this journey that Rama begins to "seek his fulfillment" or start his journey of self-realization. Sage Viswamithra is one of the first, it seems, to show Rama a glimpse of his true identity.

Viswamithra enlisted the boys as protection so that he could perform a *yagna* with some other sages. To protect the *yagna*, Rama must kill a she-monster, Thataka. Rama's humanity seems to get in the way, however, because he hesitates before

killing her for she was once a woman. “Rama hesitated; for all her evil, she was still a woman. How could he kill her?” (13). Viswamithra gives two reasons for Rama to continue. The first he gives is interestingly of the “God Vishnu himself” killing a woman who harbored *asuras*, a kind of demonic classification of creatures that we later learn Ravana is king of. Viswamithra ends his speech telling Rama, “You must rid this world of her. It is your duty” (13). Rama’s duty on earth is indeed to rid the world of evil, specifically Ravana. This is especially seen when Rama actually kills the she-monster, Thataka. This doubly serves as protection for the *yagna* and “also in inaugurating Rama’s life’s mission of destroying evil and demonry in this world” (13). As Viswamithra says, Vishnu has a past of destroying evil, specifically *asuras*. It is fitting, then, that his incarnation in Rama would kill Thataka, an *asura*, and later Ravana, king of the *asuras*.

After Rama kills Thataka the gods gather and rejoice. They tell the sage to essentially take Rama on as an apprentice. Viswamithra, though now a sage, was once a conquering king, fully knowledgeable of weapons and ascetic life. So he makes an excellent mentor for Rama. The gods also tell Viswamithra, “He is a saviour” (13). So though Rama is still mostly ignorant of his divinity, his journey is being laid out before him so he can know his duty and purpose. First in the role of mentor, the sage imparts all “the esoteric techniques of weaponry” to Rama (13). These become very important in Rama’s later battle with Ravana. Elements of the story are essential to Rama later even if he has no use of them now. Readers of the story can take away a lesson. They can perhaps better understand that the gods are providing them with

mentors, projects, weapons, or skills that have no clear meaning now but will be essential at some later point.

Also interesting is that “the presiding deities of various weapons, asthras, appeared before Rama submissively and declared, ‘Now we are yours’ command us night or day” (14). What the text cannot tell us is how literally this is meant. The first option is that Narayan meant it in a metaphorical sense. The submission of the deities to Rama could simply mean that Rama has fully conquered the weapons the sage taught him. We must remember, however, that deities often come to earth and their journeys are not meant metaphorically but literally. In Hindu culture, it is not at all unheard of for deities to make descents for any number of things. So, if this display is taken literally, that means that a large number of deities appeared before Rama, perhaps bowing in submission, and declared themselves his “night and day.” Yet three lines after this, Rama is still unaware of his identity as Vishnu. “Although Rama was Vishnu, his human incarnation made him unaware of his identity at the moment” (14). This comes just after a huge display of deities expressing their submission to Rama. The episodes show not that Rama is an ignorant person and can’t put two and two together, but that Rama is like any man and takes time to discover his divinity. This can even show, perhaps, how humble a person Rama is. Though he kills a she-monster and masters many weapons, he is just a man. Rama can of course become aware of his purpose before he discovers his divinity. Though the two go hand in hand, a man’s purpose does not require the foreknowledge of a man’s divinity. Viswamithra continues to reveal to Rama his purpose in this life. After Rama goes on

to kill the evil Thataka's sons, he questions what is next. Viswamithra tells him, "You have accomplished much now. There is a great deal ahead of you," hinting at the tasks that Rama would have to fulfill in this incarnation" (Narayan 16).

Viswamithra does not directly tell Rama what is to come or that he is an avatar of a god, but he knows Rama's true identity and is trying to train him toward that end.

Rama begins to see his own divinity after he travels with Viswamithra after he notices a big rock in the ground. "When he brushed past, the dust of his feet fell on it, and transformed it, that very instant, into a beautiful woman. As the woman did obeisance and stood aside respectfully, Viswamithra introduced her to Rama" (20).

Viswamithra tells Rama her story and we learn that this woman, Ahalya, committed a sin and as punishment, the husband cursed her to become "a shapeless piece of granite" (21). Ahalya pleads with him and he relents, "Your redemption will come when the son of Dasaratha, Rama, passes this way at some future date" (22). So here Rama is even seen as a redemptive figure. Indeed, Viswamithra tells Rama, "O great one, you are born to restore righteousness and virtue mankind and eliminate all evil. At our *yagna*, I saw the power of your arms, and now I see the greatness of the touch of your feet" (22). Viswamithra tells Rama he is the great one. So in response, Rama turns to Ahalya and gives her what sounds like a blessing. "May you seek and join your revered husband, and live in his service again. Let not your heart be burdened with what is past and gone" (22). He learns of his divinity and then extends that greatness in the form of forgiveness to Ahalya.

Rama learns still more about himself when he meets Sita. In the Hindu faith, Rama is worshipped singularly, but also through and with his association to his wife, Sita, a Hindu goddess. One is rarely found without the other. Rama is also associated with Vishnu, a Hindu god. Rama is the seventh avatar or a 'descent' of Vishnu. Specifically he is the 7th incarnation of Vishnu. He is, however, one of the most popular avatars despite being the seventh. Also interesting to note is the fact that Rama's wife Sita is also an incarnation of a Hindu goddess. Essentially, Vishnu and Lakshmi are incarnated as Rama and Sita respectively. They stay together throughout *The Ramayana* aside from Sita's abduction, which drives the narrative and spurs Rama on his mission to destroy evil. Rama first meets Sita as he makes a stop on his travels with Viswamithra.

Now Rama observed princess Sita playing with her companions. He stood arrested by her beauty, and she noticed him at the same moment. Their eyes met. They had been together not so long ago in Vaikunta, their original home in heaven, as Vishnu and his spouse Lakshmi, but in their present incarnation, suffering all the limitations of mortals, they looked at each other as strangers (24).

Narayan is telling the reader that Sita is also a reincarnation. Lakshmi and Vishnu became incarnates at the same time and their avatars are Sita and Rama. The human limitation is again seen, this time with reference to memory. Were they aware of their former lives or true identities as gods, they would immediately recognize one another. But because they are now human, they cannot know their true identity. Narayan even

uses the word “suffering,” not to denote pain, but to show that something in the gods’ natures has truly been repressed in this human form. When Rama is later trying to rescue Sita, Narayan acknowledges that Rama is trying to overcome this limitation. “Rama lamented, ‘Oh, human limitation that denies one the far-sight to know where, in which corner of the world or the heavens, that monster is hiding Sita’” (104). Rama, then, is aware that his true nature is being limited or repressed. He cannot yet overcome it, however, because it is this human form that helps him defeat Ravana.

Furthermore, despite the human limitation, gods still find being human beneficial. Even in the wedding chapter, gods descend to earth to join in the fun. “Gods and goddesses watching the happy scenes below assumed human form, mixed with the crowds, and shared their joy” (29). If gods come down for the wedding festivities, it shows they can descend merely for pleasure and fun. They do not have to have some ultimate purpose of destroying evil. This quick descent of the gods compared with Rama’s life long descent shows, however, that there are two kinds of descents. The first is that of Rama. This is an avatar, an incarnation. He is truly human because he is born into this world. Other gods, however, like those in the wedding scene or those that presented their weapons to Rama, merely *assume* human form but are not actually human. They are not incarnated, or born into the world. They use flesh merely to disguise themselves. This is important because Rama does not know at the onset that he is a god. The gods that descended for the festivities knew they were gods and returned to heaven after it was over. Rama’s humanity is pervasive and permanent.

Rama and Sita are incarnations and their true nature is suppressed in the human form. Thus, they cannot really remember one another in this life. They do know each other, however, at some level. After the ceremony, Narayan quotes Kamban directly for the first time. This quotation from Kamban must be crucial to our understanding Rama. ““Those who were together only a little while ago came together again, and there was no need for any elaborate ritual of speech between them,’ says Kamban, describing the couple’s first meeting at the conclusion of the wedding ceremonies” (24). Is this a contradiction? They know each other but they do not. What is interesting here is this pairing of Rama’s divinity and humanity. On a divine level, he and Sita know each other. In the flesh, however, they are strangers, just meeting for the first time. Narayan does not seem troubled about these details, however, so we must conclude that it is perfectly normal. Rama is merely continuing to discover parts of his life as a god. He is realizing his divinity.

Rama, though not fully aware of his true divine nature, performs in a way that suggests he knows that he is part of a greater plan or life mission. After Sita and Rama, along with the whole city of Ayodhya, return home, there is turmoil over Rama’s coronation. Someone influences Kaikeyi, one of Dasaratha’s wives, to call in two favors the king owed her. The first is that Rama be banished to the forest for fourteen years. The second is that her son, Bharatha, be crowned instead of Rama. After much conversation between the King and Queen, Rama discovers his fate. He takes the news, however, with absolute humility. He seems to have an inner calm and attributes the strange turn of events to the plan of the gods. Rama says, “Our father’s

change of mind, or the apparent hardheartedness of Kaikeyi, who has been so loving and kind, or Bharatha's chance of succession... These are really not our own doing, but some higher powers have decreed them. Fate..." (55). Rama's unwavering faith in the actions of higher powers leaves him calm and trusting that things are as they should be. He takes his banishment better than any would-be-king that might be caught in similar circumstances.

Rama is correct in his assumption that these acts were the work of the higher powers, for the chapter closes with the gods looking down on Rama as he enters Dandaka forest to begin his exile. They are aware that Rama does not know his mission yet. They are worried that he might not fulfill the purpose they have set out before him. So Bharatha is resisting the throne, following Rama into the woods, and begging Rama to let him stay in the woods; the gods are obviously concerned. "The gods watched this argument, afraid that if Rama returned to the kingdom, overwhelmed by the needs of the country, the purpose of his incarnation would be defeated" (64). If Rama returns, the mission to destroy Ravana will never be realized. So the gods actually intercede to prevent this. They tell Bharatha to return and rule on Rama's behalf until he can return in fourteen years. Bharatha adheres to their wishes but promises to rule not one day over the fourteen years. Thus Rama's exile to Dandaka forest begins and the gods are satisfied that Rama is still on the right path.

Very shortly after this encounter, however, in "Encounters in Exile," Narayan shows that Rama really does seem to know his purpose in life, even if he is not aware

of his divinity quite yet. After settling near the Godavari River, Rama is enjoying the surroundings. Narayan says that Rama does not, however, forget

his main purpose in settling down in this region—he had come here to encounter and destroy the *asuras*, the fiends who infested this area [...].

Rama's whole purpose of incarnation was ultimately to destroy Ravana, the chief of the *asuras*, abolish fear from the hearts of men and gods, and establish peace, gentleness, and justice in the world (67).

Before this part in the narration no one has told Rama directly, “You must kill Ravana” or anything so direct. Viswamithra has called Rama “great one” and told him he is to do great things in his life, but gave no specifics. Readers must conclude then that Rama has been walking his journey of self-discovery and has learned this about his purpose on earth.

From here, the journey is less defined. Specific events happen but they speak to one main theme or lesson that Rama must learn. This lesson is one of disguises. There can be positive or negative disguises, but in any case, they hide one's truest form. Rama must learn this lesson before he can understand that his own flesh disguises his true divine nature as Vishnu, a supreme God. Disguises are seen frequently throughout the story. We see the more general version of disguise in the incarnations of the main characters. Disguises include Vishnu as Rama; then Rama's conch, wheel, and couch as Bharatha, Lakshmana, and Sathrugna; Vishnu's wife Laksmi as Sita; and Indra as a cat, a rooster, and a sage in the story about the woman who was disguised as a rock. There is also an entire mass of gods forming a class of

monkeys that assist Rama in defeating Ravana, Soorpanaka as a beautiful woman, Mareecha as a deer, and finally Ravana as an old man.

Rama's first lesson in disguises comes from a beautiful woman trying to seduce him. In actuality it is Ravana's sister, Soorpanaka. At first Rama is struck by her beauty, but in the course of their conversation, he sees past her outside appearance into her true self. "Rama understood her purpose. He realized that she had only an appearance of quality, and was really cheap and shameless" (Narayan 68). Rama had to learn that the façade was not an accurate representation of the inside of the character. Narayan describes Soorpanaka in detail.

She might well have been confessing this of herself—her own normal appearance being that of a demon with wild, matted hair, flame-coloured fang-like teeth, enormous stature, and a belly swollen with the meat and blood of animals she had gorged on in her never-ending gluttony. [...] In the course of her wanderings, she saw Rama and fell in love and decided to seduce him by every art in her power. As a first step, through certain incantations, she transformed herself into a comely maiden" (70).

This has to happen a few times, however, before Rama can truly conquer evil. He has to learn how to recognize evil. This is part of his journey of self-realization.

It also follows that if Rama as the hero can see past the disguises, then the villain, Ravana, will be mostly blind to them. This is key, in fact, to Rama's defeat of Ravana. Ravana must believe that Rama is only a man and easily conquered.

Soorpanaka, also, does not realize that Rama is truly a god. She runs to her brother,

Ravana, to tell him how Rama and his brother disrespected her. But Ravana looks down on Rama as a nuisance, not a real threat. He sends his uncle Mareecha to destroy Rama. “A human creature has stationed himself in Dandaka and has dared to challenge our supremacy. [...] Are you suggesting that we should tremble before him? [...] I do not wish to engage myself in a fight with a mere human being” (85). Ravana greatly doubts Rama’s abilities.

Instead of fighting Rama directly, Ravana decides the best way to hurt a mortal man is to take away his companion. So he employs the use of disguise to trick Rama. He enlists Mareecha to pose as a deer and draw Rama out of his hut. Rama is still learning about disguises and goes to fetch the deer for Sita without question. But upon realizing that he has been “duped,” Rama kills the deer. As Mareecha lay dying, he cries out in Rama’s voice, “Oh, Lakshmana! Oh, Sita! help me...” (89). Sita insists after much debate with Lakshmana that Rama needs rescuing. Lakshmana says, “He is the saviour and needs no help from others” but Sita is adamant. As soon as Lakshmana has left Sita is alone, Ravana disguises himself in the form of an old man and woos her into letting him come in. But in addition to not being able to see through disguises, these evil figures are not very good at keeping them either. After talking, Sita says something to upset the old man. “Gradually he was losing his saintly disguise. Noticing the transformation, Sita began to feel puzzled and presently he loomed over her fearsomely in his natural form” (93). This is similar to the episode in which Soorpanaka, as the beautiful woman, yells at Sita to leave her and Rama alone. “In her anger, her real tone and personality came through unconcealed” (70). It

seems that because of their evil nature, Rama and Soorpanaka cannot take on goodly disguises. The evil comes through. Their real nature, the truth, comes forward. There is something about being evil that limits these demons or *asuras* from keeping on a disguise of good. The nature of goodness is that it exposes evil. This is also why Rama can see into the true nature of the *asuras*. Rama is good and evil cannot stay disguised in his eyes.

After Sita has been abducted, Rama and Lakshmana set off to rescue her. On the way, they are met with another disguise, this time concealing a good character. Hanuman approaches the brothers “assuming the shape of a young scholar” (98). Rama tells his brother, “Don’t be misled by his appearance. He looks like a youthful scholar, but he must be possessed of great powers!” (99). After they talk, however, and realize they are on mutually friendly ground, Hanuman explains his disguise. “Hanuman said, ‘I assumed the scholar’s form only for the purpose of coming before you,’ and resumed his real stature and the form of a giant monkey” (99). The monkey clan joins forces with the brothers and they head on toward Ravana.

In this battle, the gods send a chariot to assist Rama. Still cautious, Rama questions if he is being deceived. Hanuman and Lakshmana assure Rama, “We feel no doubt that this chariot is Indra’s; it is not an illusory creation” (153). Later in the battle, Ravana sends a weapon called “Maya” that creates illusions and confuses the enemy. Again, Ravana is trying to disguise his evil. These illusions are not the truth. Rama has been properly trained to trust in his knowledge, so the reader already anticipates a victory. Narayan writes, “With proper incantations and worship,

[Ravana] sent off his weapon and it created an illusion of reviving all the armies and its leaders” (156). So all the fallen soldiers that Rama has killed rise from the battle field and begin coming toward him. “They seemed to fall on Rama with victorious cries. This was very confusing and Rama asked Matali, [...] ‘What is happening now? How are all these coming back? They were dead.’” (156). So then Matali explains that they are illusions and add, “In your original identity you are the creator of illusions in this universe. [...] If you make up your mind, you can dispel [Maya] immediately.” Matali is assuring Rama that this journey he has been on has not been in vain. All Rama must do is realize his true nature. In doing so, Rama will see past the illusions. Rama will see that “Maya” is merely another disguise for Ravana’s evil. “Rama at once invoked a weapon called ‘Gnana’ – which means ‘wisdom’ or ‘perception’” (156). The illusions disappear. Rama has defeated deception with wisdom. His own self-knowledge has led him to see past the disguise. The illusion was not real at all because Rama was able to see past the façade into its true nature.

After this moment in the narrative, Rama returns in great celebration to Ayodhya with Sita now safely by his side. Rama has come full circle. He starts out as a young man knowing only that he is a prince. He journeys with a sage who brings to show him glimpses of his divinity. He destroys demons, marries Sita, encounters Soorpanaka and other disguised figures, and finally confronts Ravana himself. He goes from knowing only his humanity to finally recognizing that he is a god. This is not to say, however, that he has transformed from a man to a god. He is still fully human. Even at his coronation, Narayan confirms this once again.

Rama displayed the tribulations and the limitations of the human frame and it was necessary from time to time to remind him of his divinity. Now Brahma, the Creator, came forward to speak and addressed Rama thus: ‘Of the Trinity, I am the Creator. Shiva is the Destroyer and Vishnu is the Protector. All three of us derive our existence from the Supreme God [...] He is the origin of everything and in him everything is assimilated at the end. That God is yourself, and Sita at your side now is a part of that Divinity. Please remember that this is your real identity and let not the fear and doubts that assail an ordinary mortal ever move you. You are beyond everything; and we are all blessed indeed to be in your presence’ (164).

Rama is indeed a god, but still fully human, forgetting now and then that he is so divine. Rama is, however, aware of his true nature and the true natures of all those around him, whether they be monkeys, *asuras*, or humans. He had to start out fully unaware that he was divine. But after his journey of self-realization, Rama conquers evil. He understands that the human body is merely a disguise that covers the god. Readers of *The Ramayana* can look at this text and come away with some kind of hope. Though they may struggle to understand their mission, things will be revealed. If needed, the gods will intercede and set them back on the correct path. In the end, if they behave as Rama has, they too will understand the god within. They too will conquer evil. For Narayan, Rama is not only a hero, but also a model for how each man should live his life. Rama, after all, is a man; he just also happens to be aware of his divinity. Rama is a god and a man.

Chapter Two

Jesus of Nazareth as Christ, the Messiah:**The Gospel of John and Milton's *Paradise Regained***

Jesus and his earthly family have been the subjects of art for nearly twenty centuries. Paintings about Jesus and his mother, Mary, cover walls in the oldest churches of Europe. In the 21st century, the continuing development of film has brought about movies like *The Gospel of John*, *The Passion of the Christ*, and *The Nativity Story*. Oral or written stories, however, are an art form that stretches from the time of Christ himself to present day. Those alive at the time of Jesus passed down stories about this historical figure and less than a century after Jesus' life, they began to write them down. From then on questions of Jesus' divinity continue to inspire people, specifically writers. They use words as opposed to paintbrushes or pictures in an effort to better understand the unexplainable mystery of god on earth. From the very first rumors of a man from Nazareth who could heal to the most recent big screen depictions of Jesus Christ, people have been captivated by telling his story and trying to solve the riddle of the divine incarnate.

Two men in particular tried to explain this mystery in their writings. Soon after the time of Jesus, the disciple John wrote his personal account of Jesus' lifetime. This is now referred to as simply *The Gospel of John* and will serve as the sacred text of study. Later, in the seventeenth century, John Milton wrote *Paradise Regained*, which will serve as this study's secular text. Narratively, these two stories are very

different. Though they share the same central figure and a few secondary characters, they focus on different events and stress different points about Jesus' life, teaching, and ministry. Milton sets the majority of his story in the wilderness where Satan tempts Jesus. This episode in the wilderness, though biblically based, is entirely absent from The Gospel of John. John also never portrays evil the same way Milton does. Milton personifies evil in the figure of Satan, while John chooses to represent that evil in the form of darkness, which cannot overcome the light, meaning Jesus. The gospel writer first introduces the idea of darkness in opposition to Jesus who is the light. Chapter Three begins to move that darkness to a more internal setting.

“Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” (3:20-21). Here then darkness merely represents the evil in man. Jesus is the opposition to that evil. Jesus is the light and he is goodness and truth. In keeping with the tradition of the Old Testament and *Paradise Lost*, Milton explicitly personifies the character of evil in the figure of Satan. Jesus and Satan are both present in the action of the play. After the narration in the first book, it is their dialogue that accounts for the majority of the text in *Paradise Regained*.

Despite these differences in setting and content, both texts have similar goals in trying to assert Jesus' divinity on earth. Both authors look at Jesus as the Son of God, the Son of Man, and ultimately as the *true image* of God the Father. In other words, they show his divinity, his humanity, and how these two different natures

merge into the figure of Jesus. These stories show how each author ultimately understands the mystery of the incarnation in the figure of Jesus Christ.

The choices for the texts may seem odd given that the gospel does not even mention the temptation scene and the secular text focuses on that very scene. Why not choose a different gospel or another, perhaps more or less contemporary secular text?⁶ Juxtaposing these texts, however, causes issues to arise that answer the question of the study in an interesting way. It must be asked why each author chose to include or exclude certain elements in the life of Jesus. What does this say to their individual understandings of the divine incarnation? Milton makes little to no mention of the passion, the cross, or the resurrection – elements that seem essential to John’s telling of Jesus’ life story. It is obvious that Milton saw something spectacular happening in the desert and desired to expand that conversation. This could even be seen as a kind of addition to the gospel of John; adding on what was left out when John first composed it. Indeed, Milton writes in the opening lines of *Paradise Regained* that this story is one “unrecorded left through many an Age, / Worthy t’have not remained so long unsung” (I:16-17). Milton believes this is a story that needs telling.

⁶ Certainly, the choices for gospels are numerous. The gospels included in the *New Testament*, called the “canonical” gospels, are just a four of many gospels in existence. The gospels that are not part of the *New Testament* are referred to as “non-canonical” or more popularly, the “apocryphal” gospels. There are versions claiming authorship by Philip, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, Peter, Andrew, and even more recently, Judas. There are gospels titled *Gospel of Eve, of Truth, of Perfection, of Twelve*, and even the *Gospel of Four Heavenly Realms*. For this study, however, a gospel was needed that was weighted with recognition as “holy” and “sacred.” Only the four canonical gospels carry this kind of weight and thus were the only ones seriously considered.

Milton also wished to continue thinking about the theme of obedience that was so central to his telling of *Paradise Lost*. He writes about this theme in the opening lines of *Paradise Regained*.

I who erewhile the happy Garden sung,
 By one man's disobedience lost, now sing
 Recover'd Paradise to all mankind,
 By one man's firm obedience fully tri'd
 Through all temptation, and the Tempter foil'd
 In all his wiles, defeated and repuls't,
 And Eden rais'd in the waste Wilderness (I:1-7)

If paradise was lost by one man's *disobedience*, it must be won back by another man's obedience. For Milton, the first real show of obedience for Christ is in the wilderness during his temptation with Satan. This is not to say, however, that Milton did not believe in the importance of the cross or the resurrection and thus chose not to include them. Instead, we might believe that because Jesus was obedient in the desert, he will be obedient in all things, including death upon a cross. Furthermore, Milton and his audience would know the end of the story already. Milton wanted to know, not the *what*, but the *how*.

John's gospel demonstrates a similar mission. He *knows* that Jesus was human because he walked, talked, and ate with him. He wants to show *how* he is also God. According to the opening lines of John's gospel, Jesus is the great "I AM" of the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14) and was God and was with God from the very beginning of

time. John's unique portrayal of this humanity and divinity sets up interestingly with Milton's Jesus who seems less sure of his role in the big picture as he wanders into the wilderness. So though the texts narrate different events, the authors have similar ambitions to show why the Son of *Man* is also the Son of *God*. These two attempts at understanding the incarnate will form the basis of comparison for Jesus Christ, the divine incarnate.

Milton and John first assert Jesus' divinity by using the voices and actions of secondary characters. There are both heavenly and earthly confirmations to show that Jesus is truly the Son of God. These testimonies include John the Baptist and other earthly figures like Andrew, Peter, and even Jesus' mother Mary. They also include divine confirmations from the Father, the Holy Spirit, and even Jesus himself. Right alongside these testimonies the authors present the idea that Jesus is the true image of God. He is not only the true incarnate from God, but is Truth in all he says and does. His truth will overcome the deception and evil of the world. This is seen as a battle between good and evil. For Milton, this battle is fought in the wilderness between Jesus and Satan. For John, it is a battle between light and darkness. For each author, however, they must establish Jesus as divine before they can begin to show the triumph of good over evil. To do this, it is essential to start with testimonies about Jesus.

The first figure in this series of testimonies is John the Baptist. Both works start with him and grant him the first testimony as to Jesus' true divinity. Before John the Baptist is mentioned in the gospel, however, the "true light" must be introduced.

The gospel reads, “In [Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). Then we are introduced to the Baptist.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world (1:6-9).

John the Baptist is purposefully sent in order to testify to the Christ figure that is coming after him.

Indeed, even before Jesus comes to be baptized, John the Baptist is talking about him. John states that some men were sent to ask him who he was. He continues writing, “He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ’” (1:19-20). The men continue to ask who he is. He says he is not Elijah, nor the prophet. After they demand an answer, John the Baptist says “I am the voice of one calling the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’” (1:21-25). They question why he baptizes if he is not Christ, Elijah, nor the prophet. John the Baptist responds that he himself baptizes with only water but “among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie,” who will baptize with the spirit (1:26-27). So John the Baptist is watching for this figure and upon seeing Jesus approaching the next day, shouts, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! [...] I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel” (1:29,

31). So John the Baptist “testifies concerning him” (1:15). He is sent specifically to reveal to Israel the Son of God: Jesus.

John’s gospel is certainly not limited to this sole testimony of Christ. He actually uses the figure of the Baptist to show a second kind of testimony: heavenly testimony. He does not specifically narrate the baptism like the authors of the synoptic gospels, but instead chooses to show how John the Baptist witnesses to it. It seems that the Baptist’s testimony is incomplete until he narrates the events of the actual baptism. In doing so, he testifies to heavenly confirmation. John the Baptist gives

this testimony: ‘I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.” I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God (1:32-34).

The Baptist is very decisive in this testimony. He says, “this is the Son of God” without any flowery or passive language or a hint of doubt. Also important, however, is his account of the baptism itself. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and remains on him. This is significant because John has already been told prior to the event to look for this specific occurrence. There is a kind of triple confirmation happening here. We assume that the figure who sent John is God the Father. Thus God tells John to look for the Holy Spirit upon the Son of God. So God foretells the spirit descending, the spirit descends, and then John talks about it. This testimony is substantial and sets up

Jesus' divinity in a very concrete and real way. There are both heavenly and earthly confirmations to the divinity of the man Jesus of Nazareth.

John continues, however, to write in the gospel about further testimonials. To begin with, he has John the Baptist proclaim in front of two men, "Look, the Lamb of God!" as Jesus passes (1:35-36). The disciples follow Jesus and, at Jesus' invitation, spend the day with him. One of the men, named Andrew, goes directly to his brother, Simon Peter, and says "We have found the Messiah" or as the gospel writer notes, "the Christ" (John 1:37-41). So now we have regular men confirming that Jesus is the Christ. In saying "the Messiah" or "the Christ," they are referring to the Old Testament and its proclamation of the Christ's coming. They are confirming then, that Jesus is the one to fulfill scripture. To strengthen this point, John introduces Nathanael who proclaims to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel" (1:49). This testimony comes in the form of a show of faith to Jesus. They believe in him and will follow him.

Now that John has written about the testimonies of John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit, Andrew, and Nathanael, he has begun to show that Jesus is the Son of God. After this, Jesus must testify about himself. He testifies on his own behalf. He begins by making personal statements about who he is and what his purpose on earth is. These are most commonly referred to as "I AM" statements and are only found in the Gospel of John. In Greek, unlike in English, a verb has different endings that show the subject of the sentence. So typically, "I am" would be written simply, "eimi." In these "I AM" statements, however, Jesus is emphatic, adding the personal pronoun to

emphasize the already constructed “I am” phrase. When Jesus says “ego eimi,” this could be translated “I am and only me” instead of simply “I am.” There is more power behind this phrase than the English translation shows. This is why some translations capitalize both letters in the word “am” for emphasis. This phrase can even be seen in direct relation to Jesus’ divinity. This emphatic “I AM” is similar to the construction used in Exodus 3:14 when God himself speaks: “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.”’” Adel Naggar writes that “when Jesus was using the ‘I AM’ construction he was indicating His divinity, and in John recording His statements he was doing likewise” (“The I AM sayings...”). Jesus is using language to point to himself.

Jesus’ first “I AM” statement is found in chapter 6, verse 35: “I am the bread of life.” He repeats this in verse 48 and restates it in verse 51: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” Here we see a clear picture of Jesus’ conception of himself. He is living bread for the world sent from heaven. It is all the more powerful because it comes directly from Jesus’ mouth after his divine nature has been confirmed by earth bound and heavenly figures. He is now affirming his own God status. His next “I am” statement harkens back to the opening lines of the Gospel of John about the light that shines in the darkness. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). So he reaffirms that he is the light that John was writing about.

The reference to bread and light is also more symbolically charged for Jesus’ audience. Gerald L. Borchert writes in his commentary that chapters 5-11 are

included in the Festival Cycle. This means that people would be celebrating God's faithfulness to them during the exodus. Jesus, in mentioning light and bread, is referring back to Exodus when Moses led God's people out of Egypt. Two specific things happened on this journey. First, God appeared as a pillar of light to guide them. So when Jesus says he is the light, he is referring to a specific kind of light that guides God's people. "[A]s God led his people at night in the wilderness by a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21), so Jesus, who is the 'light of the world,' enables his followers not to walk in darkness (John 8:12)" (Borchert 62).

Second, even the bread Jesus associates himself with is symbolically weighted. Perhaps most easily seen is the allusion to the bread from heaven, manna, which God provided for his people in the wilderness. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day'" (Exodus 16:4). God is providing manna or bread for a day. God is providing Jesus as living bread for life. Readers of the gospel can see Jesus as a physically living representation of that manna. He is bread that gives everlasting life. Jesus says, "Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 6:57-58). So Jesus, in his "I AM" statements, is fully aware of his role in the course of history, in the symbolic content of scripture, and in the future of the world, presumably in reference to the last supper and the

church ritual of repeating that event in communion. He is living bread and true light, God-sent and fully divine.

Jesus has to further prove himself, however. He is talking to the Pharisees that find his “I AM” statements contradictory. How can one man testify about himself, they ask. Jesus answers this question in an unprecedented way.

Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me (8:14-18).

Essentially, Jesus says that the testimony of men does not matter because he and the Father know that he is who he says he is. But if one insists that two men must testify, then Jesus offers himself and his Father, who sent him. He and God will testify that he is the Son of God. He portrays himself and his Father as the ultimate sources of truth. They are the only two worthy to testify about Jesus. They have knowledge of where Jesus has been and where he is going and are thus above the testimony of any man. Jesus goes on to argue with the Pharisees and does indeed throughout the whole gospel but in the end of this episode, John concludes, “Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him” (John 8:30). Jesus’ testimony about himself worked to convince many that he was truly the Son of God. Even after Jesus testifies about himself, there

is the confirmation of many believing because of it. John has worked to confirm yet again Jesus' divinity. A reader of John's gospel could conclude then, that Jesus is who he says he is. The only remaining person for readers to doubt is the author of the story itself. John addresses this problem, as well.

After Jesus has given up his spirit, John writes about the soldiers coming to take down the bodies of Jesus and those crucified with him. John writes that when they came to Jesus, they pierced his side with a spear, "bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (John 19:34). Perhaps because this seems so unlikely that blood and water would flow together from a dead man, John adds, "The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe" (John 19:35). John does not want us to doubt that what he writes is the truth. In that statement, John also begins to talk about this. Near the end of the gospel, John writes more explicitly about his own motives for writing the gospel. "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). John included the most important episodes, the ones that would cause people to believe. John wants to make it clear that his whole purpose is to tell people about Jesus. He wants people to know the truth so they can believe. So he uses testimonies to show how Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and the true Son of God. Like Milton, John wanted to show *how* Jesus was divine. Because the

synoptic gospels already showed a slightly more chronological account of Jesus life, John could simply choose which episodes best showed Jesus' divinity.

Milton also uses testimonies to show that Jesus is divine. Like the gospel writer, he begins with the Baptism. The narration is more blatant, however. Milton writes about the episode directly instead of using John the Baptist to talk about it. In this way, Milton more closely follows the synoptic gospels. Jesus comes to "the great proclaimer," John the Baptist, "as then obscure, / Unmarkt, unknown" (Milton I:18, 24-25). After being baptized, however, "in likeness of a Dove / The Spirit descended, while the Father's voice / From Heav'n pronounced him his beloved Son" (I:30-32). His humanity is blatant and then his divinity is proven. Here again is a kind of triple testimony. There is John watching the Spirit descend and the Father's voice speaking from heaven. Milton says, "the Baptist soon / Descri'd, divinely warn'd, and witness bore / As to his worthier" (I:25-27). John the Baptist came to point to one who would come after him; one who was worthier than himself, just like the gospel says.

Milton only deviates from the biblical version by entering Jesus' thoughts. Within the first book, he portrays Jesus thinking back on the baptism.

I as all others to this Baptism came,
 Which I believ'd was from above; but [the Baptist]
 Straight knew me, and with loudest voice proclaim'd
 Me him (for it was shown him so from Heaven) [...]
 Heaven open'd her eternal doors, from whence
 The Spirit descended on me like a Dove,

And last the sum of all, my Father's voice,
 Audibly heard from Heav'n, pronounc'd me his,
 Me his beloved Son, in whom alone
 He was well pleas'd (Milton I:273-76, 281-86).

A reader can hear the delight in Jesus' voice that he was claimed by not just any Father but *his* Father. Jesus says, "my Father's voice" and "me his beloved son." He takes ownership of the Father just as the Father takes ownership of the Son. Even Jesus' mother, Mary, is proud of this moment. Milton looks in on her thoughts in the beginning of the second book as she ponders the baptism and her son's recent departure into the wilderness. Mary says that Jesus is "now / Full grown to Man, acknowledg'd, as I hear, / By John the Baptist, and in public shown, / Son own'd from Heaven by his Father's voice" (II:82-85). Even Jesus' mother sees the importance of this divine confirmation. So the Baptist is not the only important source of divine confirmation for Milton either. Though the Baptist is first, the Father's voice booms from the heavens. This is a heavenly affirmation of Jesus divinity. Milton's Jesus refers to this as "the sum of all" (I:283). So now there has been earthly and heavenly affirmation of his divinity.

There is another witness here, not present in the gospel account. Milton's Satan even comments on Jesus' divinity, speaking specifically of the baptism he witnessed. When talking of Jesus, Satan says, "And he himself among them was baptiz'd, / Not thence to be more pure, but to receive / The testimony of Heaven, that who he is / Thenceforth the Nations may not doubt" (Milton 345). This is Satan

telling his demonic council that Jesus has received the testimony of heaven. If Jesus' greatest opponent is confirming Jesus' divinity, there can be few greater testimonies concerning his true nature. Satan gains nothing from reporting Jesus' divine confirmation and so one might gather that it must be true. Satan spends a great deal of time discussing Jesus to his demonic council. There is obviously an importance to this incarnation that even Satan cannot overlook.

Milton's Jesus does not speak in "I am" statements like he does in the gospel. Instead he battles with Satan on the idea of truth, specifically the truth about the evil nature of Satan's offers and the good nature of God's plan for Jesus. This idea of Jesus as a truth teller is first seen, however, in the Gospel of John. Jesus is not just the light of the world as John introduces him, but the *true* light that gives light (1:9). Very shortly after John describes Jesus as "full of grace and truth" (1:14). Still again John writes, "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). This heavy emphasis on truth is paired with the strong testimony of John the Baptist. The result of this is that we begin to associate Jesus with truth and being the true Son of God the Father. John the Baptist even later confirms this truth in a different way. John the Baptist is talking to some men about Jesus' growing fame. Again John the Baptist must first assert that he himself is not the Christ before he goes on to talk about the true Christ. He says that those who accept Jesus have "certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God" (3:33-34). Jesus represents the truth of God. In the first chapter, the gospel writer uses the word *exegesato* that is commonly translated "has made him known" (1:18). This full text of the verse is "No one has

ever seen God, but the only begotten son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." This "made him known" in Greek is the same word that scholars draw the word "exegesis" from. So Jesus is literally drawn out from the Father. If God the Father represents the ultimate Truth and the Son comes from the Father, then the Son is truth incarnate.

John then shifts the focus fully to Jesus and his ministry. Once the reader knows that Jesus is the Christ, is from God, and is full of truth, he will believe his teachings.

As soon as Jesus begins his ministry and his gathering of disciples, he employs statements that contain the word "true," specifically saying multiple times, "I tell you the truth" (John 1:51) or in the King James Version of the Bible, "Verily, verily, I say unto you." This phrase has also been updated this way: "Truly, truly, I say to you" as in the English Standard Version. Regardless, he is speaking of truth. He is a proclaimer of the truth that he embodies. He is truth incarnate. Because of this he begins promptly to change the way people look at God. He tells the woman at the well that the time has come "when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (4:23). He is speaking about truth so as to help people to recognize it. He wants people to understand that he speaks the truth about the Father.

Milton also works to bring about this idea of Jesus as a truth teller. Recalling his past, Jesus says, "myself I thought born to that end, born to promote all truth [... and] to subdue and quell o'er all the earth / Brute violence and proud Tyrannic pow'r / Till truth were freed" (I:204-5, 218-220). He sees that his mission is to promote truth.

He sees that to do so, he must stop violence and evil. Jesus sees quickly that Satan will try to represent that truth, but that he is ultimately a deceiver. Jesus tells Satan, “lying is thy sustenance, thy food. / Yet thou pretend’st to truth” (I:429-30). He sees clearly that Satan pretends to tell the truth, but is really the ultimate liar. Jesus goes on to say that all oracles are earthbound and cannot know truth. “God hath now sent his living Oracle / Into the World, to teach his final wall, / And sends his Spirit of Truth henceforth to dwell / In pious Hearts, an inward Oracle / To all truth requisite for men to know” (I:460-464). This living oracle is truth. This truth brings God’s will with it and leaves behind the Holy Spirit, what Jesus above calls the “Spirit of Truth” or “an inward Oracle.” This is very similar to the gospel in how Jesus seeks that all men should know truth. He seeks it so they can see God in that truth.

One of the ways that truth is apparent is in opposition to falsehood. Milton employs this theme of truth versus deception in Book Three during a discussion of glory. Satan argues that he can offer Jesus all manner of glory on earth. Jesus counters, however, that it is not true glory. Jesus does not fall into temptation, for he knows that Satan cannot offer him anything better than his father. He tells Satan, “Shall I seek glory then as vain men seek / Oft not deserv’d? I seek not mine, but his / who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am” (III:105-107). And still later Jesus says, “So much bounty is in God, such grace, / That who advance his glory, not their own, / Them he himself to glory will advance” (III:142-144). Jesus is discussing that God’s glory is the only true glory. “This is true glory and renown, when God / Looking on the Earth, with approbation marks / The just man, and divulges him

through Heaven / To all his Angels, who with true applause / Recount his praises” (III:60-64). The visual is stunning here: God guiding through heaven a just man so he can receive the praises and glory he did not receive on earth. The unjust man, on the other hand, has already had his false glory through a figure like Satan. For an example of this true glory, Jesus mentions Job’s fame in Heaven instead of Earth. “Famous he was in Heaven, on Earth less known; / Where glory is false glory, attributed / To things not glorious, men not worthy of fame” (III:68-70). He also praises Socrates as being next most memorable and “for truth’s sake suffering death unjust” (III:98). True glory is in heaven while false glory is on earth. Jesus is the bearer of the truth to a world full of false glory. He is sent to conquer that falsehood.

This idea of truth in opposition to deception is extensive. Not only do we see it in the debate over glory, but also in the appearances of the figures doing the battling. Before they even speak, however, Satan looks on the baptism and says, “Who this is we must learn, for man he seems / In all his lineaments, though in his face / The glimpses of his Father’s glory shine” (I:91-93). He is confused because he sees a man but knows that there is something else about him. Jesus glows divinity it seems. On the other hand, Satan seems to leak falsehood and deception. We first see this through Jesus as he encounters Satan in the desert. Satan has disguised himself as an older man in rags. Satan is “an aged man in Rural weeds” (I:314). After talking together, however, Jesus pauses mid-sentence to say “For I discern thee other than thou seem’st” (I:348). Indeed Milton even encloses this statement in parentheses to off set it. Jesus finishes his speech saying, “why dost thou then suggest to me distrust,

/ knowing who I am, as I know who thou art?" (I:355-56). Jesus is no fool. He knows that Satan sees his true form just as Jesus himself can see through Satan's disguise.

When Satan returns in the second book, he appears quite different than before. "Suddenly a man before [Jesus] stood, / Not rustic as before, but seemlier clad, / As one in City, or Court, or Palace bred, / And with fair speech" (II:298-301). While there is no mention here of Jesus seeing through the disguise, the conversation that flows between the two makes it clear that there are no pretensions. In the second line of Satan's speech, he addresses Jesus as "the Son of God" (II:303) and several times thereafter. This is not a concession, however. Satan is aware that Jesus is the Son of God and perhaps the one to fulfill God's command at the Garden of Eden: "He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Satan seeks to bring this Son of God to a different kind of understanding of the world. If he can tempt Jesus into taking worldly power and, in a sense, disobey God as Adam and Eve did so easily in the Garden, then Satan wins. He will not be crushed. So although Satan may recognize that Jesus is Son of God, he does not yet feel threatened by him.

During this battle, Satan and Jesus argue not as two regular men picking at each other's weaknesses, but as two extraordinary men with powers beyond the earthly realm. Knowing how Jesus' body is hungry after days without food in the desert, Satan makes food appear in order to tempt Jesus. Jesus refuses and replies, "Shall I receive by gift what of my own, / When and where likes me best, I can command? / I can at will, doubt not, as soon as thou, / Command a Table in this Wilderness" (II:381-384). They have, as it seems, equal power to conjure up any

manner of things. They can see through the disguises and each man firmly represents his side of the argument. Jesus directly addresses Satan. “Get thee behind me; plain thou now appear’st / That Evil one, Satan for ever damn’d” (IV:193-94). Satan, in turn, tells Jesus, “[I] confess have found / Proof against all temptation as a rock / Of Adamant [...] Therefore to know what more thou art than man, / Worth naming Son of God by voice from Heav’n” (IV:532-34, 538-39). They are mutually acknowledging each other’s truest form. Satan is evil incarnate while Jesus is truth incarnate.

In the end, of course, truth wins out. Using a scriptural reference, Jesus simply says to Satan, “Also it is written, ‘Tempt not the Lord thy God’” (IV:560-61). Satan then falls, “smitten with amazement” (IV:562) like he was in *Paradise Lost* with Eve and Adam. After Satan falls and is carried off, Milton presents a chorus of angels and it is these voices that speak next as the final testimony about Jesus. They describe him as the “True Image of the Father [...] enshrin’d / In fleshly Tabernacle, and human form, / Wand’ring the Wilderness” (IV:596, 599-600). This final testimony confirms many of the themes found in the gospel. Indeed, the angel chorus reflects John 1:14 quite closely. The gospel reads: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). A few particular parallels are seen. Milton writes that Jesus is the “True Image of the Father” just as John writes that Jesus is the one “who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Milton discuss Jesus’ divinity clothed in flesh, “enshrin’d / In fleshly Tabernacle,” just as

John writes that the Jesus, also known as “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Finally, both Milton and John mention time spent on earth. Milton mentions “wand’ring the Wilderness” while John mentions Jesus “dwelling among us.” The themes are too similar to ignore.

Milton also tends to follow the example of the gospel by closing with a look not at Jesus’ divine nature, but his more human side. John’s last look at Jesus is the commissioning of his disciples. Milton’s last lines of the also emphasize Jesus’ human nature. After the chorus of angels finish singing, Milton writes, “Thus they the Son of God our Saviour meek / Sung Victor, and from Heavenly Feast refresht / Brought on his way with joy; hee unobserv’d / Home to his Mother’s house private return’d” (Milton 636-639). Many scholars have written about the closing line of *Paradise Regained*, calling it inadequate and a dull conclusion to an uneventful book. Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle says that a “more rare defense of Milton argues that the closure is fitting” (Boyle 500). She seeks a solution to this impractical end by first debunking some of the leading explanations. I agree with Boyle that one of them “lacks coherence” (500). Another dismisses the gospels for their variation or lack of an ending. After these and a few other attempts, Boyle then weakly concludes that this closing line “is neither scriptural nor apocryphal, nor is it really divine. It is literary” (501). She goes on to list reasons why Milton’s closing line mimics something written in *Meditationes vitae Christi*, a medieval text that Boyle says was once attributed to Bonaventure but now understands the author to be John de Caulibus. She seems to understand that Jesus was driven by hunger to request his

mother's cooking. This seems just as weak, however, as the first theories offered because the lines do not more closely parallel Milton's line than any of the canonical gospels. If we look at Milton's closing line with the question of his divinity and humanity in mind, the line appears to fit snugly and close the story perfectly. Milton chooses the words, "unobserv'd" and "private" to describe Jesus' journey homeward. Fittingly, this is precisely how Jesus began the journey. Recall that Milton has Jesus arrive at the baptism, "obscure, / Unmarkt, unknown" (Milton I:24-25). Though John the Baptist, a dove, and a voice from heaven confirm Jesus' divinity and make him known, at the end of the book he has not yet begun his ministry. It is not his time to be shown to his disciples or those to whom he will preach.

Narratively, it also makes sense. Milton had just finished writing how Jesus conquered Satan and how angels came down from heaven and took him to a grassy field and fed him. His divine nature is glaringly obvious. What is not at the moment obvious is that he is still a man. One has to be careful not to say, "just a man" for he is not just a man. He is the incarnation. He is full of divinity and at the same time, humanity. Milton would seek to complete the picture of Jesus' obedience in the desert and his triumph over evil with a view of Jesus, the man. Additionally, Milton would not have simply used a modern day devotional book and pick a scene about Jesus' hunger. He developed the idea of Jesus and his hunger in Book Two. Jesus says, "I feel I hunger, which declares, / Nature hath need of what she asks; yet God / Can satisfy that need some other way" (Milton II:252-54). Though he is subject to hunger, God can satisfy it in an unearthly way. It would seem weak on Jesus' part, then, to

emerge from the desert starving for his mother's cooking after Milton had established that God could provide Jesus with a spiritual answer to his human needs. The angels, then, are an answer to this idea; the request for mother's cooking is not. At the end of the great battle, angels present Jesus with a feast. Then he returns home. This is a beautiful and simple paring of how God responds to Jesus as divine and human. God is satisfying that human need of hunger.

So how do the gospel writer and Milton understand Jesus Christ? Certainly Jesus appears to be a savior in both texts. But in addition, he is a representative of truth. He is truth, he sees truth, and he speaks about truth to others. He is light in the darkness and one to overcome evil. He is greatly versed in scripture and can argue with the Pharisees or Satan himself. Lastly, he is the Son of Man and the Son of God; fully divine and fully human.

Chapter Three

The Hindu and Christian Incarnations in Comparison

Now that the individual conceptions of each incarnation have been set up, it is necessary to look at the incarnations side by side. Are there enough significant similarities here to convince either religion that they have a common interpretation of the divine incarnation? The majority of this discussion will focus on figures of Jesus and Rama, already established in the first two chapters. This will bring in mainly the secular texts and the way Narayan and Milton portray the incarnations. The holy scripture authors, Tulsidasa and John, are also necessary for the discussion and will be used as reference points throughout the discussion. Though the authors portray two different figures in Jesus and Rama, the parallels between the incarnations are still very comparable.

First, the narratives themselves are very similar. From the order of events in the lives of the incarnations, to certain particular episodes like their journeys to the wilderness, *The Ramayana* and the gospel story run similar tracks. Second, the antagonists for both Jesus and Rama are demonic figures of evil that have similar characteristics. Ravana and Satan both doubt the abilities of the incarnations but later use disguise and deception in order to undermine them. They both seek the wisdom of their demonic councils but are defeated by the wisdom and knowledge of the incarnations. Finally, the incarnations themselves share the mission of bringing truth and goodness to the earth. They both face human limitations in these missions, but

persevere because of their duty. Christians and Hindus understand the incarnation, then, in parallel ways. Of course, there are differences, but for the most part, we can set these aside in an effort to best understand the resemblances between Jesus and Rama.

The first places that similarities are found are in the basic story lines of Jesus and Rama's lives. To begin with, there are structural similarities among the four narratives. Both secular texts chose to change the original format of the sacred text to focus on different elements of the story. Milton took less than a chapter of verses from three of four gospels and brought them into a four-book poetic story. Narayan brought the extensive poetic version of Kamban's *Ramayana* into a shorter prose version of the greater story. There is a flux happening here that shows how the second interpreters of the story, Milton and Narayan, worked against the secular texts to, in a way, tell a new variation of the story. Milton pulled a few verses about the temptation and drew out details that were not present in the original. Narayan did not invent details, but still brought them to light where they were once perhaps lost in the 100,000 plus verses of the original.

Both authors were also still working within their traditions. It is accepted that Milton could bring out details in stories that are short. One is merely pulling details from the bible and interpreting them separately with a view towards the whole. Narayan, however, is comfortable with a tradition of retelling the story for the sake of the audience. He notes in his epilogue that a modern storyteller "would not miss any chance for a contemporary reference" (Narayan 170). Authors of *The Ramayana*

thrive in a tradition where retelling is part of the joy of the story. So long as the spirit of Rama is at the core of the story, authors can flex the story so their audiences better understand it and find it more enjoyable. Ultimately each author is working in his own tradition and in dialogue with the original, standard sacred text.

We can also look at the traditional elements of any biography to see how these four authors strayed from it. Generally biographies begin with a small background on the subject's environment before they arrived. This can include a discussion of his or her parents or the physical setting of the story. Next, the biographer gives relevant details from the subject's childhood, moving on to young adult influences shortly thereafter. The most influential episodes of the subject's life are included, up until his or her death. Finally, the biographer might go on to note the lasting influence of the subject or discuss how the environment was changed because of the subject. None of the four stories about the lives of these incarnations follow this standard though each includes different parts of the formula.

In both Tulsidasa's and Narayan's *Ramayana*, they show Rama's birth, his younger years, his manhood, his triumph over the enemy and finally his coronation as King of Ayodhya. Both versions end here. Narayan writes in his epilogue of a sequel that some versions of *The Ramayana* include. But because it is considered to have been written at a later date and because he is following Kamban's version, he writes "Kamban does not take note of this sequel but concludes his tale on the happy note of Rama's return to Ayodhya, followed by a long reign of peace and happiness on this earth. And there I prefer to end my own narration" (Narayan 171). There is the sense

here of “happily ever after” with Narayan. Near the end of the *Holy Lake*, Tulsidasa writes that “the Lord Rama disappeared as lightning disappears among the rain clouds” (Tulsidasa 846). There is no death spoken of here. It is important to note, however, that to talk of death at all in the Hindu faith is thought of negatively as it is the ultimate unclean act. It is no surprise then, that each author leaves Rama alive and well at the end of his telling.

This is actually very similar to the two texts about Jesus, despite the importance of his death, resurrection, and ascension. Though the gospels according to Mark and Luke end with Jesus’ ascension, John chooses to close his gospel with Jesus commissioning his disciple, Peter. Luke writes that Jesus was “carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51) while Mark says he “was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). John, however, concludes at the end of the gospel, “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I supposed that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). Milton’s closing lines also leave readers with the sense that there is more to tell that this author cannot. Milton, similarly leaves it open by closing with the lines: “... hee unobserv’d / Home to his Mother’s house private return’d” (Milton IV:638-9). Jesus’ returning home comes after he leaves the wilderness having defeated Satan. There is no mention of the teachings to come, the death on the cross, the resurrection that would come three days after that, or the ascension. Milton, like the gospel writer, ends the tale with Jesus alive and well, returning home with a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment.

Though the gospel writer and Milton end their stories with a living Jesus, it cannot be forgotten that Jesus did die in the course of his time on earth. In the Gospel of John, Jesus dies and is resurrected to live again (John Chapters 19-21). Milton does not acknowledge this death and resurrection in *Paradise Regained* but does at the very end of *Paradise Lost*. The angel Michael tells Adam, “thy punishment / He shall endure by coming in the Flesh / To a reproachful life and cursed death” and “so he dies, / But soon revives, Death over him no power / Shall long usurp; ere the third dawning light / Return, the Stars of Morn shall see him rise / Out of his grave, fresh as the dawning light” (*Paradise Lost*, XII 404-406, 419-424). For Christians, this resurrection three days after death is a crucial miracle in the “life” of Jesus and cannot easily be overlooked by either author.

Rama lacks this monumental death, though he does, in a sense, still follow the same pattern as Jesus. Pulling back the focus on the two texts, we see a parallel kind of journey for each man, with two events standing out. At some point in their lives, they both go into exile and return in a new way. For Rama, this is exile from Ayodhya, the city where his life began and where his family still resides. Symbolically, his “life” is waiting for him back in Ayodhya. For Jesus, this exile first occurs physically in the desert with Satan. The better parallel, however, is Jesus’ exile from life itself. He dies on a cross and is exiled to death for the three days. He returns, however, to life, just as Rama did. Rama waits fourteen years before returning to Ayodhya where he is immediately crowned king. Jesus waits three days before appearing to his disciples as a living man again. Shortly thereafter, he ascends to

heaven and sits on a throne at the right hand of the father. The journey of these incarnations flows from life, to exile, to life more abundant. In exile, each figure saves mankind. The return is a joyous celebration.

During this exile, the incarnations also defeat evil. Jesus, in the first form of exile, goes into the wilderness to (verbally) fight Satan; Rama goes into Dandaka forest and (physically) fights Ravana.⁷ Both Jesus and Rama go into a desert place, fight, and conquer evil. There is even a parallel journey or “exile” into the self, found in both Jesus and Rama. These internal journeys occur at the same time as the physical journeys into the wilderness. Recall that as soon as Rama arrived in Dandaka forest, he remembered his life’s mission. Jesus certainly looks inwardly as he wanders the desert, recalling the confirmation of his father’s voice and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. Whichever level these desert exoduses are taken, they are parallel in both figures.

It is important to Christians that Jesus not only came to reside among us but that he also died and rose again. Seen through this filter, the obvious lack of a miraculous death and resurrection for Rama seems to diminish his importance. But within the Hindu tradition, there is no problem. Rama was obedient to his father and conquered Ravana for the safety and salvation of his people. No amount of dying and returning could add to his glory in their eyes, thus a death is not necessary and does not diminish his greatness as it would Jesus.

⁷ An argument could be made for Jesus’ second kind of exile as well. Jesus, in the exile of death, is conquering sin. This is another form of evil, another enemy Jesus’ conquers.

These stories also contain archetypal patterns and characters in their overarching structure. To begin with, both incarnations are initiated in the beginning of the story. Christ is baptized by John the Baptist and Rama takes a journey with Viswamithra. Then we see the archetypal journey as well. The hero goes on a journey away from home to conquer evil and saves a maiden in the midst of it all. In Rama's case, we see him starting in Ayodhya but leaving with Viswamithra to protect the *yagna*. Then he meets and marries Sita and they leave for Dandaka forest. Here Rama battles the villain, Ravana, and rescues Sita from his evil clutches.

A parallel could be made with Jesus as well. Though he has no earthly wife in the same way that Rama married Sita, Christ is symbolically linked in the new testament with the church as his bride. The book of Ephesians explicitly links Jesus and the church in terms like that of a husband and wife. Though these words are meant for a married couple, the analogies between the bride and the church and Jesus and the husband are clear.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his

wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25-32).

Here we see that Jesus “gave himself up” for the church, “cleansing her” through the word and loving her as he loved himself. Certainly a case can be made for Jesus being married to the church. Jesus, then, parallels Rama on the archetypal journey. Just as Rama left home and rescued Sita, so to does Jesus leave his home in heaven to come down to earth and rescue his bride from the clutches of sin.

We also see both heroes fight evil. Jesus debates verbally with Satan while Rama physically battles Ravana. Each hero, in his own way, conquers the villain. They both, however, overcome the villain. Despite the villain’s attempts to deceive the hero, the villain always fails. The hero outsmarts his enemy and conquers him. Rama counter’s Ravana’s weapon of illusion and confusion with wisdom. He is using intelligence to outwit his enemy. Jesus does the same, quoting scripture to Satan until he falls. Finally, after the great battle, each hero experiences a celebratory homecoming. Rama returns to Ayodhya to be crowned King and Jesus returns to heaven to sit at the right hand of the father. The cycle is complete. These hero warriors have gone on their journey to rescue a lady in distress from great evil. These archetypal journeys are not the only narrative similarities, however.

Aside from the structure of the stories, the actual characters themselves are similar. We do not begin with the incarnations, however, but with their opposition, their antagonists. These are represented by the characters of Satan in *Paradise Regained* and Ravana in *The Ramayana*. This evil is the reason the gods came down

to earth and the reason the stories were written. It seems to flow that if the divine can be manifested in men, so can evil. The mission of the incarnations is to conquer that evil. God the Father speaks about Jesus in Milton's first book: "I send him forth / To conquer Sin and Death the two grand foes, / By Humiliation and strong Sufferance; / His weakness shall o'ercome Satanic strength" (Milton I:158-161). God continues that Jesus is "To earn salvation for the Sons of men" (I:166). Rama on the same hand is sent to destroy evil. "Rama's whole purpose of incarnation was ultimately to destroy Ravana, [...] abolish fear from the hearts of men and gods, and establish peace, gentleness, and justice in the world" (Narayan 67). Jesus and Rama must overcome evil to establish good. Satan and Ravana are evil incarnate set up to battle against divine incarnate, Jesus and Rama. Without these figures of evil, it seems, there would no purpose in the divine rescuing humanity from it, and thus no purpose for incarnation. Therefore, Satan and Ravana have a huge role to play in the story.

Satan and Ravana use similar techniques as they try to bring down Jesus and Rama. To begin with, they cannot stand on their own. Each figure has a council of demons standing behind him, in some cases even tempting the incarnation on their own. Milton has already established the great council of demons in Books One and Two of *Paradise Lost*. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan consults with them before he tempts Eve and then Adam. This council of demons assists Satan by encouraging him and at times providing him with ideas. They also simply act as a kind of soundboard for Satan's own thoughts. This last function is how Milton employs them in *Paradise Regained*. After witnessing the baptism, Satan summons his council and describes the

scene and the character of Jesus to them. He backtracks first and mentions the curse God put on him that the seed of Eve would come and crush his head. Then Satan continues speaking to his council,

Ill news I bring, the Woman's seed
 Destin'd to this, is late of woman born,
 His birth to our just fear gave no small cause,
 But his growth now to youth's full flow'r, displaying
 All virtue, grace and wisdom to achieve
 Things highest, greatest, multiplies my fear (Milton I:64-69).

He obviously knows that Jesus could be the one to crush him for he says that “we / Must bide the stroke of that long-threat'n'd wound” (I:58-59). But he tells his council that they must find out who he is. “Who this is we must learn, for man he seems / In all his lineaments, though in his face / The glimpses of his Father's glory shine” (I:91-93). He knows that this Jesus is the man that is *supposed* to crush him, but he plans to overthrow God again by defeating Jesus. His pride goes foolishly before him, however. He remembers how he sought out and ruined Adam and seeks “a calmer voyage now” because “the way found prosperous once / Induces best to hope of life success” (I:103-104). He fought once and won and sees this second venture as a sure repeat performance of triumph on his part. Readers would know, however, that Satan already failed in this attempt and that though he may have bruised Jesus' heel, he was indeed crushed by it at the same time.

Ravana, like Satan, also doubts the incarnations' power and ability. Again, this is accompanied by extreme pride, clearly seen in Ravana's dialogue in *The Ramayana*. Ravana is infuriated with Rama for treating Soorpanaka the way he did. Ravana says, "a human creature has stationed himself in Dandaka and has dared to challenge our supremacy" (Narayan 85). But Ravana does not even deem him a worthy opponent at this time. He steps back saying, "I do not wish to engage myself in a fight with a mere human being" (85) and later continues "Do you want me to employ an army to tackle that mortal? I can put an end to his nuisance once for all, but I do not wish to take that step" (87). He strongly doubts that Rama is a worthy foe. Chapter Nine, titled "Ravana in Council," is a continuation of this dialogue. Ravana's brother tells him in this chapter, "now you are thinking of your prestige, reputation, status, fame, might and eminence" (Narayan 137). Another brother reminds him that he has "never asked for protection from human beings [...] The gods have assumed that form, only because you have had immunity from the gods conferred on you" (138). Ravana does not listen to this wise and accurate advice. Instead he shouts back, "You think that he is likely to be an incarnation of Vishnu. What if he is? I am not afraid of Vishnu or anybody. Particularly Vishnu, who has been the most defeated god, having never won a single battle" (139). Ravana swells with pride as he doubts the strength and true nature of Rama. This pride in Ravana and Satan, however, get them into a good deal of trouble later.

Satan and Ravana, still believing they are greater than the incarnations, seek to destroy them. Their first method of attack is through the temptations of worldly

possessions. In *Paradise Regained*, Satan deliberately prepares arguments that will tempt Jesus to fall. First Satan tempts Jesus with food. “Our Saviors lifting up his eyes beheld / In ample space under the broadest shade / A Table richly spread, in regal mode, / With dishes pil’d” (Milton II:338-341). Jesus does not fall, however, so Satan moves on to riches. “Money brings Honour, Friends, Conquest, and Realms” (II:422). After Jesus refuses this as well, Satan tries to tempt him with worldly power. “Great Julius, whom now all the world admires / The more he grew in years, the more inflam’d / With glory, wept that he had liv’d so long / Inglorious; but thou art not too late” (II:39-42). This temptation fails as well. Satan fails to tempt Jesus with worldly power on all fronts but temptation has little effect on the incarnation.

Unlike Satan, Ravana is not trying to convert Rama to his side. Because of this, Ravana does not try to offer Rama anything. For this, then, it is best to look at his evil sister, Soorpanaka, as she tries to win Rama’s affections. She tempts Rama with her physical beauty. Rama, of course, refuses her sexual advances. After Rama resists her, she is angered and tries to attack. Lakshmana then cuts off her nose, ears, and breasts. Like Satan, however, Soorpanaka does not give up after this first temptation. Narayan writes, “Soorpanaka made one last attempt to gain Rama’s love. She said, ‘Even now it’s not too late. My brother Ravana will pardon you for what you have done if he knows we are married; he will also make you the overlord of several worlds, placed above all the gods. It’s not too late [...] I can interceded on your behalf’” (Narayan 73-74). Again, however, Rama refuses her. Like Jesus, he is not tempted with worldly offers. They both, perhaps, realize that anything that Satan

or Soorpanaka offer, however unmasked, has the limitation that they are offering it. Any power that an evil demonic figure could grant is a good deal less than any power the divine incarnations have on their own or with the assistance of the gods in heaven. Jesus and Rama realize that there are better offers elsewhere for them. They would essentially be accepting an offer that was less than they are worth. This is precisely Satan's plan, however. He wants Jesus to believe that what he offers is in fact greater than what God has promised Jesus. Jesus and Rama are no fools, however, and see through these temptations.

The most prevalent use of deception is in the physical form of disguises. As we saw in chapter two, Satan appears to Jesus twice in a disguise. The first time he is in rags as an old man. The second time he appears, he is elegant city clothing. "Suddenly a man before [Jesus] stood, / Not rustic as before, but seemlier clad, / As one in City, or Court, or Palace bred, / And with fair speech" (Milton II:298-301). Each time, however, Jesus sees through the disguise. He says to Satan, "I discern thee other than thou seem'st" (I:348). Jesus sees Satan for what he really is. Because Jesus is such a figure of truth, Satan cannot succeed in fooling Jesus through disguise.

Ravana, however, does gain some initial ground by using disguise to his advantage. Although Ravana is not directly responsible for Soorpanaka's disguise, we can assume that he has helped her at least some point in the past to master disguises. In *The Ramayana*, she appears as a beautiful woman but is in truth something ugly and monstrous. Rama sees through this disguise to her true self. After she begins talking, Narayan writes, "Rama understood her purpose. He realized that she had only

an appearance of quality, and was really cheap and shameless” (68). She failed at trying to conceal her true form from Rama. He cannot be deceived. Ravana’s next use of disguise is in his abduction of Sita. To do this, he tells Mareecha to “assume the form of golden deer, and draw her out” (87). So Mareecha “assumed the form of a golden deer and strutted before Rama’s cottage” (87). Rama does indeed come out of the cottage in order to get the deer for Sita. After a lengthy chase, however, Rama does finally see through the disguise and understands what has happened. “Suddenly it dawned on him that he was being duped” (89). Ravana’s plan was working perfectly. Ravana could then approach Sita alone in her hut in his disguise as a hermit, just as Satan first appeared in rags to Jesus. “Ravana, who had been watching, emerged from his hiding place. [...] He was in the garb of a hermit, lean, scraggy, and carrying a staff and a wooden begging bowl in his hands. His voice shook as if with old age, his legs trembled” (91). He manages this disguise just long enough to abduct Sita from her hut. He is successful here in his use of disguises. Ultimately, however, Ravana is defeated. Recall that in the final battle scene, Ravana uses “Maya,” or confusion and illusion on Rama. After Rama realizes what is happening, however, he counters with “Gnana,” or wisdom. The illusions disappear; through wisdom Rama has defeated Ravana.

Rama and Jesus do defeat the characters of Ravana and Satan, but there is question if they are fighting the characters or merely the evil within themselves. An interesting event occurs at the close of each battle scene. Upon their defeat, the evil figures actually seem to lose their evil nature, revealing a layer underneath that is

essentially pure and good. It seems that the evil they embodied was actually just a cover over their true good nature. In *The Ramayana*, Narayan concludes the battle scene this way:

Rama watched [Ravana] fall headlong from his chariot face down onto the earth, and that was the end of the great campaign. Now one noticed Ravana's face aglow with a new quality. Rama's arrows had burnt off the layers of dross, the anger, conceit, cruelty, lust, and egotism which had encrusted his real self, and now his personality came through in its pristine form—of one who was devout and capable of tremendous attainments. His constant meditation on Rama, although as an adversary, now seemed to bear fruit, as his face shone with serenity and peace (Narayan 159).

Never before this has Ravana been associated with words like “pristine,” “devout,” “serenity and peace.” He is changed. His evil had merely been covering his “real self.” Rama notices the change and says, “Honour him and cherish his memory so that his spirit may go to heaven, where he has his place” (160). Even the most evil character in the book has a place in heaven. With the disguise of evil gone, he is a good person. This lesson can again speak to readers. Even the most evil people in the world today have the ability to shine with peace after that evil is taken away.

Milton has somewhat similar dealings with Satan at the end of *Paradise Regained* and even during *Paradise Lost*. After a particularly rough rebuke from Jesus, Milton writes, “Satan had not to answer, but stood struck / With guilt of his own sin, for he himself / Insatiable of glory had lost all” (*Paradise Regained* III:146-

148). If only for a moment, Satan sees his own true nature. He recognizes his own sin, or evil. Unfortunately, Satan moves on swiftly to the next argument until Jesus' final blow. Then he is "struck with dread and anguish" and sent back down to hell to his demonic council (IV:576). In *Paradise Lost*, Satan recalls his once glorious nature in heaven before his fall. Satan says, "O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams / That bring to my remembrance from what state / I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere; / Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down" (*Paradise Lost* IV:37-40). Satan's fall is not so glorious as Ravana's, but that was not Jesus' purpose in defeating Satan. Jesus was not sent to destroy evil, but to destroy Satan.

Despite Satan and Ravana's use of disguise for evil intentions, the most obvious use of disguise in the stories is not actually used in a negative sense. The heroes, the incarnations, are involved in this disguise too. This word seems to denote some sort of negative meaning, however. Basically, however, they are gods taking on the disguise of human flesh.⁸ The biggest difference for the disguise of an incarnation versus the previous disguises, however, is that they are full transformations. In other words, they are not removable at will. While both men discover that their true nature is of gods, they remain human. They do not peel back the flesh suit and jump out in their full god-filled glory. There is a sense, however, that this divinity shines through. Jesus and Rama seem to glow god-ness. Just as Satan and Ravana were seen beneath their disguises, so to are Jesus and Rama.

⁸ The idea that the human body was merely a kind of suit for an otherwise fully divine figure (docetism) is a much larger topic than this paper can take on. I mention this facet of the incarnation only to point out that flesh can be seen as another form of disguise. This paper is trying to show that Jesus and Rama are fully divine and fully human.

When Satan first sees Jesus, he says to his council, “Who this is we must learn, for man he seems / In all his lineaments, though in his face / The glimpses of his Father’s glory shine” (Milton I:91-93). Milton uses the word shine, but he is still talking about this kind of glowing quality. Narayan uses very similar language to describe Rama. When Hanuman first sees Rama, he recognizes that divinity. He reflects on the sight of Rama and Lakshmana, “So noble-looking! Who are they? [...] Ascetics armed like warriors or warriors clothed in ascetics’ robes? But they still look like—like whom? [...] Are they gods?—but they look so human” (98). Hanuman is easily confused by their forms. They are avatars so they are actually gods. The confusion, however, is that they look so much like men. Later Hanuman tells his brother, “Though he has not revealed his true self yet, I sense his identity. He could be none other than Vishnu himself” (102). Ravana seems to be the only one to really doubt that Rama is more than mortal.

Above and beyond conquering evil, these gods have another important similarity. There runs a theme of steadfast obedience in each of these incarnations that each opposing religion should find respectful. Both Jesus and Rama were obedient in their individual exiles, whether it be to the desert as an ascetic for fourteen years or to death on a cross. They also go through these exiles gracefully. Rama obeys his father’s command without hesitation. Rama does not leave for the wilderness in a storm, whining or complaining about the situation being unfair. Rama tells his mother, “I will carry out [my father’s] wishes without question” (Narayan 48). He calmly leaves for Dandaka forest, assuring his family and his throngs of

followers that he will return when the time has come. He calmly accepts his fate and lives his fourteen years peaceably.

Similarly, Jesus wanders into the wilderness trusting that God has a purpose. Jesus says, “And now by some strong motion I am led / Into this Wilderness, to what intent / I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know; / For what concerns my knowledge God reveals” (Milton I:290-293). He does not know why the Spirit is leading him into the desert. This is no cause, however, for stubborn will or disobedience. He calmly enters the desert despite the cautious natures of his disciples and his mother. Jesus accepts that whatever is meant to happen, will happen in God’s time. He trusts like Rama trusts. They obey willingly, trusting that god or the gods will take care of them.

Setting these two incarnations next to each other brings to light a good deal of similarities that are difficult to ignore. For one, the narratives themselves are built like each other. They both have archetypal patterns and characters of the hero, his bride, his journey, and his defeat of the ultimate villain. Second, the characters of Ravana and Satan are similar in their relationships with the incarnation, their councils, and even their ultimate demise. Finally, Jesus and Rama both play the hero, the obedient child, the bearer of truth, the destroyer of evil, and ultimately the saviour. These incarnations are fully human yet fully divine. It seems that the interpretations of Jesus and Rama are similar in construction, content, and theme. Though these elements may seem by themselves to carry no weight, the sheer number of comparable ideas presented together suggests that a conversation can easily begin by asking how humankind interprets the incarnation.

Conclusion

Returning to the Conversation

This study began with the question, how does humankind view the mystery of the divine incarnation? To address this, we consulted four texts that tell the story of the incarnation composed by four different authors. Chapter One focused on the two texts that represented Hinduism, while Chapter Two focused on another two texts that represented Christianity. One from each tradition was a holy text while the other was more secular or worldly, offering a wider perspective for study. The third chapter combined the views from Chapters One and Two to further consider the question of how we understand the incarnation. Through these four texts, we see Rama and Jesus portrayed as fully divine and fully human. Each author represents their incarnation as full of grace and forgiveness, compassionate, obedient, intelligent, and at the same time, ultimately divine. They represent their incarnations as truth and goodness conquering deception and evil in the world.

What these texts alone cannot tell us, however, is how others perceive their interpretations of the incarnation. We do not get to hear what other religions say in response to these texts or the views contained therein. While there is no current scholarship about a Christian perspective discussing *The Ramayana* or a Hindu perspective discussing the Gospel of John or Milton's *Paradise Regained*, there have been a few studies comparing the Hindu avatar with the Christian incarnation. The

avatar mentioned is usually Krishna, however. If there is mention of Rama, it is brief and generally in a list of the other popular avatars of the religion.

While the similarities are extensive between Milton's text and Narayan's text, the two religions themselves have some incongruencies that are unavoidable. The differences in the figures of Jesus and Rama alone are not easy to ignore in any conversation. Raimundo Panikkar is an important thinker in this conversation. He writes about one of the first big problems between these two religions. "To be sure, each tradition, seeing itself from within, considers that it is capable of giving a full answer to the religious urge of its members and, seeing other traditions from outside, tends to judge them as partial" (34). The problem of course is one in claiming to have the one right answer. Each religion would like to say that they have the full and complete answer to the mystery of God. This creates obvious problems. If both claim to be right, it cannot be good for them to try to coexist on a naïve complacent level. It is also not advantageous to try to debunk either theory by asserting rightness or wrongness in either tradition.

Panikkar suggests that there must be a common meeting place in each tradition's current understanding. He suggests Christ. He claims that this must be the unifying symbol in common understanding because Hinduism has no unifying figure. So although Christians in their separate denominations differ on views of the Trinity, the church body, the sacraments and other details, they can agree without hesitation that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is why they are called *Christians*. Hinduism, on the other hand, according to Panikkar, "can hardly be called a religion. It is rather a

bundle of religious traditions. [...] Hinduism has no unifying symbol such as Christianity has” (38). Panikkar, unlike most involved in the conversation of Hinduism and Christianity, admits that Rama would be the most likely choice if Hinduism sought a comparable figure. “Within one single Hindu tradition the name of Rama would probably be my choice. Rama in fact is totally human and totally divine, Rama is material and spiritual, temporal and eternal” (Panikkar 38). Panikkar dismisses him, however, because he is not recognized by all those in Hinduism. While I can understand this decision within the goals of his book, I believe he was on the right track in choosing Rama as a kind of rallying figure. Instead of trying to make Hindus see Christ, or Christians see Rama, it seems best to show how each figure, within each religion’s already firmly established set of beliefs, can illuminate the parallels between the religions. It can provide for them common ground without stepping over whatever imaginary line separates the two religions.

This simple comparison and contrast still presents large problems, however. To begin with, scholarship on the religions is quick to note the fact that Christians recognize Jesus as the sole incarnation while Hinduism recognizes many avatars. E. G. Parrinder writes in his essay, “Incarnation and the love of God,” “Of course there is a notable difference between the traditional Christian conception of one Incarnation, ‘once for all’, and the characteristic Hindu belief in multiple Avatars” (153). Many scholars are not so quick however, to find reasons why this might still be overcome. The traditional method is first to discredit Christianity. They want to

say that Christianity does seem to have multiple visits from the divine, like Hinduism. In a certain way, this can be seen as beneficial.

If the point of comparative religion has noble ambitions to bring two religions onto common ground, this cannot be accepted. First of all, any Christians reading the commentary will immediately stop if someone begins to suggest that they have multiple gods, or at least multiple incarnations. Parrinder writes that “the Bible puts the Christ in a succession of divinely sent envoys [... and secondly,] he will come again and perhaps he will be as difficult to recognize then as he was the last time” (153). Parrinder is referencing two things from the Bible. The first is that Old Testament scripture tells of visits from God the Father to his people on multiple occasions. Each time this argument is mentioned, different examples are given. Examples include God walking in the Garden of Eden in Genesis with Adam and Eve, God presenting himself as a pillar of fire to guide the Israelites, God coming in the form of a burning bush or a storm cloud, and several occasions when God’s voice boomed from heaven.

Secondly, New Testament scripture discusses the second coming of Christ. For many outside the Christian tradition, this is seen as just another avatar or incarnation. What must be said, however, is that we are still dealing with one god. When Jesus comes again, this will not be a new birth all over again. He will not be incarnated a second time. With reference to the Old Testament examples, however numerous, we must keep in mind that they are still not incarnations. Jesus is the only figure to be sent from heaven, born in the flesh, and eventually die completely. When

he was resurrected, this was not a second body. Also in the second coming of Christ, he will not have a new body even if he will be unrecognizable. Noel Sheth in his essay, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison," also seeks to correct Parrinder's two assumptions. He writes that "it is not a new incarnation but the same identical Christ returning in glory, at the end of the world" (106). Sheth believes that Jesus' human nature is never relinquished but later glorified in the second coming. Parrinder's assertions about Christianity, then, are dismissed. The problem of the conversation, however, stills stands.

Just as some comment on the monotheism of Christianity, so others comment on the polytheism of Hinduism. We see the Christian perspective looking down on the multiple avatars and gods of the Hindu tradition. One could easily ask why Hinduism needs so many avatars? Noel Sheth explains this hard question in a unique and remarkably simple way.

There are many and repeated avataras, while Christ comes only once. This is in keeping with the respective cyclic and linear worldviews of the two traditions. [...] In Hinduism there are cycles of evolution and dissolution, and so in this worldview it makes sense that avataras come again and again in different ages (yugas). In Christianity, however, the world is created only once, and it moves in a linear fashion toward a final goal, and so it makes sense that the incarnation takes place once and for all (Sheth 106).

Simply, Christ has one incarnation for its one lifetime while Hinduism has many incarnations for its many lifetimes. This so easily strikes down an argument that has

troubled monotheists about polytheists or polytheists about monotheists. It seems less troubling to understand the worldview of another religion than it is to understand the religion itself. One could easily understand that some timelines are straight and some are circular. Each circle and the line contain an incarnation. For Christians, this is Jesus; for Hindus, Rama.

Essentially, the similarities are impossible to ignore even in the midst of the differences. It seems that some of the larger differences can be overcome by understanding the cultures the views come from. Arguments could be made at length about the remaining differences between Jesus and Rama, but I believe I have satisfied the most troubling of the arguments, however. What comes after is conversation and healthy debate between scholars, between average human beings, and hopefully among believers of Christ and Rama. We seek common ground and we find it successfully in the incarnation.

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