

THE WAR IN HEAVEN

Book VI is the book in which classical and Judeo-Christian elements are most perfectly fused: most classical epics include extensive and detailed accounts of wars, and the combatants in Milton's war are of course angels whose battleground is more a set of theological ideas than disputed territory, property, or national identity. As is so often the case, however, Milton amplifies to the cosmic level classical accounts of war, and proves well-versed in contemporary military strategy and technology. Moreover, Milton draws on the belief, prevalent throughout the Christian era, that wars on earth are preceded and indeed foreshadowed by battles in heaven. Note that the war is recounted by Raphael rather than by "Milton"--by a voice within the epic rather than by the controlling epic voice. You might stop to think about why Milton stages the war this way. Note too that the story of the war really begins in Book V and thus spans two books.

Questions to Keep in Mind

1. Why does Milton introduce the story of the War in Heaven midway through Paradise Lost, even though in chronological time it is an extremely early event? (Hint: look at lines 892-912.)
2. Does the story of the war become less gripping once you realize that angels are indestructible and thus that no lives are at stake? God is always in control and the outcome of the war--Satan's ignominious defeat--is never in question. Can Christ's triumph over the rebel angels even be regarded as a triumph if it is assured from the beginning? Does the fact that the angels assume armor and employ conventional weapons seem paradoxical and even absurd? Finally, why does God delay the conclusion of the battle? Two possible answers: [1] He intends to deceive Satan about his omnipotence; [2] He means to distinguish the power of the angels from that of Christ, i.e., while an interangelic battle would rage infinitely without resolution, once Christ enters the fray, he proves significantly more powerful than the angels and thus can terminate an otherwise interminable war.
3. What are some of the crucial differences between Satan's forces and those of God? Focus on differences of motive, mindset and strategy, beginning with the simplest distinctions (offense vs. defense; rebellion vs. reaction), working up to more complex philosophical differences (pretenses to self-creation vs. obedience). Finally, contrast satanic methods of imitation and invention (both key terms and devices in this book) with the methods God's legions employ.