ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST’S NATIVITY

BY

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Milton’s *Ode On The Morning Of Christ’s Nativity* celebrates a unique event in the history of mankind i.e. birth of Christ on the morning of 25th December nearly 1975 years ago.

‘Nativity’ means ‘birth’ and the ‘nativity’ of Christ is celebrated as the greatest festival in the Christian calendar.
• Milton places himself in the story of the Nativity, but he does so obliquely, so as not to draw attention to himself.

• Personal pronouns are entirely missing from the preface—instead of being self-referential, Milton gives all the credit for the poem to the Holy Spirit, his “Muse”, who filled and inspired him as he wrote.
• So although it is implied that the poem is a gift that Milton offers to baby Jesus, just as the Wise Men offered their gifts, the giver is named as the Holy Spirit.

• Milton is but the vehicle of his gift.
• The last line of the preface is a reference to Isaiah 6:5-7, where an angel purifies the prophet’s lips with a hot coal taken from God’s altar.

• Milton’s implicit prayer is that God would purify his pen, as he did Isaiah’s lips.
So that the gospel presentation in this poem would be clear, articulate, free of error, and compelling-its truth and relevance felt.
• To Milton the first Christmas was not just a cuddly new baby and angels singing and presents the calm winds and soft snows, but mayhem, wailing, destruction, and mad flight, as the pagan gods were driven out from their seats.
• Milton considered the gods of other religions to be demons – fallen angels with power to perform miracles and embody different forms to attract worship toward themselves and away from the one true god.
One theme running throughout the poem is the emptiness of pagan worship.

The people engage in elaborate rituals to honor their local deities or to petition them to act on their behalf, but their gods are not even their any more.
The “gods” are in reality nothing but resentful beings who have been cast out of heaven by God and are now bent upon taking down as many people with them as they can.
• In Blake’s illustrations the gods are shown fleeing their images and shrines in terror of their enemy, Christ, who has just stepped onto the battlefield.

• The battle is swift - the light of Christ pushes the gods back to the darkness from whence they came. Its hasty retreat, directly into the prison that will become their grave.
• The poem is about the destruction of one kingdom and the inauguration of another.
• The authoritarian rule of Satan and his demon viceroy is over.
• Christ’s birth severely limits their power, as he displaces them from their throne.
• That is not to say, though, that Satan no longer exercises influence in this world.
• He may be bound, God’s prisoner-of-war, but there are still many who pay him loyalty.

• His final defeat is still pending.
• “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” is an ode—a praise song.

• It’s an ode to the birth of Christ and by extension, his victory over all other gods, particularly those of Canaan, Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and Rome.
• How unusual for the genre: our martial hero is an infant! God’s first battle as Christ-on-Earth is fought from a manager-crib.
• After this military interlude, the image of the bright and peaceful stable scene runs full circle.

• In Blake’s first painting, Peace descends, and in the last , Peace is here to stay.
• The blessed Virgin Mary laid her baby to sleep.

• The poem ends with the baby Christ sleeping quietly watched by the latest born star of heaven and the bright angels sitting in, “order set iceable”.

• But let’s not forget that behind the scenes of this icon of Christmas, the cosmic forces of good and evil are confronting each other in a big way.