

Thou Read'st Black Where I Read White

Christ the Poet, Blake the Prophet, and Reading Between the Lines of Creation

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On October 23, 1804, the painter, engraver, poet, and prophet William Blake wrote frantically to his friend William Hayley from a cottage in Felpham, England:

Suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures, I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and by window-shutters. (...) Dear Sir, excuse my enthusiasm or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand (...). In a short time I will make my assertion good that I am become suddenly as I was at first (...).¹

The years that followed saw the writing and publication of Blake's two magnum opus epic poems which pioneered and surpassed the burgeoning Romantic movement: *Milton* and the one-hundred plate behemoth *Jerusalem*. They were the capstones of a long series of his 'prophetic' works, parallel to and inspired by subjects ranging from Genesis, to the discoveries of Isaac Newton, to the French Revolution, all contained within a larger narrative cycle of Blake's own creation. In this literary universe was distilled nearly every facet of Blake's life experience and beliefs, although purified and mystified into a realm of pure ecstatic vision, a realm in which the distinction between imagination and reality collapsed. Blake spent his entire life traversing this boundary. From the age of five, he had talked to the prophet Ezekiel, seen a flurry of angels fly from a tree, and witnessed God pop his head through a window.² For Blake, the act of capturing these moments through art, of self-sublimating into the divine, was

¹William Blake and Frederick Tatham, *The Letters of William Blake, together with His Life*, ed. Archibald G.B. Russell, (Methuen & Co., 1906), 171.

²G.E. Bentley Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (Yale University Press, 2001), 19.

absolutely fundamental – it was the very essence of his religion, as much as he despised the word. His God, as he said as many times and in as many ways as he could think up over the course of a long and dynamic career, was Art; his worship, to create it. Yet he was a Christian. He revered Christ. Not the virgin-born, right hand of God, the meek shall inherit the Earth, soft lamb for the slaughter Christ – though his favorite epithet for Jesus was ‘Lamb of God’ – no, Blake worshiped the intentionally esoteric, the hanging-around-prostitutes, the Sabbath-breaking, the chronically indecisive yet passionately rebellious Christ, whose death comprised no pointless stageplay of sin and salvation but a full-fledged assassination by the demiurgic enforcers of Moral Virtue to punish Christ for his true revelation of universal love, universal forgiveness. Blake’s Christ is fierce, impulsive, mystical, and all-loving: a liberator of the eternal artistic creation.

Blake’s very earliest statement of his long-held ideas of God, the 1788 pamphlets *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*, walk in lockstep with the aesthetic and philosophical tenets of Romanticism – particularly in the unique relationship he develops between the potency of the absolute (or, the Universal) and its self-expression in human subjectivities³ – but they also move beyond them, hinting at Blake’s more mystical, prophetic tendencies. The former work affirms the Universal, what he calls the Poetic Genius, and the presence of the divine in every person, and the latter denounces Newtonian materialism.⁴ The combination they create can be approximately called a gnosticism of imagination. “The forms

³Louis Dupre, “The Quest of the Absolute: What Was and What Is Romanticism?” *Church Life Journal*, September 23, 2022, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-quest-of-the-absolute-what-was-and-what-is-romanticism>.

⁴William Blake, edited by W.H. Stevenson, *Blake: The Complete Poems*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2014), 55.

of all things can be derived from their Genius,” Blake writes, placing (not unlike Plato) the world of forms and ideas above the material. He emphasizes the ability of all human beings to uniquely receive this divinity, adding: “all forms of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius adapted to the weaknesses of every individual,” and, “the Religions of all Nations are (...) reception of the Poetic Genius which is everywhere called the Spirit of Prophecy,” from which “the Jewish and Christian Testaments are an original derivation.”⁵ This is what Blake means in styling himself a prophet, his poetic works prophetic. He believes prophecy is an exercise of visionary ability, one not entirely unique to Biblical revelation. But it is his relationship with prophecy, his relationship with God, which returns him to the idea, however radically expressed, that one’s relationship with the divine can only be understood through a fundamental mystery: the personhood of Christ. “He who sees the infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only. Therefore God becomes as we are,” — that’s Jesus! — “that we may be as he is.”⁶

What truly separated Blake’s early Christianity from others of his day was not his mystical, humanitarian, or even revolutionary sentiments — they are all trademarks of Romanticism — but his categorical rejection of what he saw as imposed law. To Blake, the Ten Commandments and universal gravitation were tyrannies of equal weight and equal detriment to the human soul, to the human capacity to imagine. It is in this spirit that Blake wrote his 1790 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a pseudo-satiric work meant to both define and obfuscate the nature of reality, the nature of Christ, and the nature of Blake’s own opinions. The work derides Emanuel Swedenborg,

⁵Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 56.

⁶Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 57.

a humanist latter-day prophet, yet draws significantly from his theology.⁷ It rebukes the style of Blake's great predecessor, John Milton, yet subjects him to highest praise and closest imitation: "He was a true poet," – that's everything to Blake – "and of the Devil's party without knowing it."⁸ It is in that same Devil's mouth where Blake puts his earliest and most radical critiques of Christianity, and in so doing redefines the nature of Christ. Imitating Christ's proverbial style, the Devil transforms deadly sin into highest virtue:

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.

The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.

The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.

The nakedness of woman is the work of God.⁹

A contradiction is established in nature itself: how can nature be God's creation, and natural evil a defiance of him? And furthermore, why should the most natural state of humanity, nakedness, be evil? Satan continues:

Now hear how he [Christ] has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the Sabbath, and so mock the Sabbath's God? Murder those who were murdered because of him? Turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? Steal the labour of others to support him? Bear false witness (...)? Covet when he prayed (...)? I tell you no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments.¹⁰

So what is Christ, if he both submits to God's law and denies it? What is Christianity, if even Christ contradicts himself? "Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not

⁷Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 107.

⁸Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 113.

⁹Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 114.

¹⁰Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 126.

from rules,"¹¹ Satan (and Blake) answer. Blake's rejection of imposed law extends, in Christ, to the very requirement of self-consistency, self-assuredness, and self-knowledge in the attainment of true virtue. The mystery of Christ's existence as both God and man becomes universal; that paradoxical intersection becomes the very meaning of a new, different virtue. Christ's perfection is his imperfection to all Moral Law. As if he weren't already to nearly every Christian church a blasphemer, Blake, surely (like his Christ) a man of 'impulse, not rules,' piles on one final insult. But it is also a warning, and a premonition of the work that would absorb the rest of his life, the work of becoming a prophet for all mankind, of recording the fall of creative harmony, the enslavement of the human mind by Law and Religion, and the very narrow path out, the path of redemption. He declares: "This angel [Lucifer], who is now become a devil, is my particular friend. We often read the Bible together in its infernal or diabolical sense, which the world shall have if they behave well" – or, if they continue in slavish meekness to doctrine. "I also have the Bible of Hell – which the world shall have whether they will or no."¹²

Four years later, Blake published his Bible of Hell.¹³ *The Book of Urizen* is (though not the first) the cornerstone of his prophetic works, an alter-Pentateuch in which Yahweh, or Urizen, is an "unknown, unprolific, self-closed, all-repelling (...) abominable void," a "soul-shuddering vacuum,"¹⁴ who purely by mentally categorizing, dividing, and meting out the very substance of Eternity creates an infernal world apart from Nature, with "Laws" – a dirty word – "of peace, of love, of

¹¹Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 126.

¹²Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 127.

¹³Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 253.

¹⁴Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 255.

unity, / Of pity, compassion, forgiveness," under "One command, one joy, one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure, / One King, one God, one Law."¹⁵ This foul world is our own; its law, the mind's self-imposed chains. 'Urizen' is Your Reason. Here the driving paradigm of Blake's prophetic works is perhaps most clear: that what Blake is saying about the human mind is both textual and metatextual. The driving struggle of narrative progression is always mental, always a quest to resolve a divided or repressed personhood; but the form of that narrative itself, the world it inhabits, is also a reflection of that mental journey. As Urizen's despotic world of law literally tears itself from the realm of the Eternals, the prophetic blacksmith Los, an emissary of the Eternals, is ripped from his female aspect (called an Emanation) who forms Enitharmon, or Pity. The product of Los's nonconsensual union with Enitharmon is Orc, the tragic personified Love. This drama – the tragedy of a fallen world tearing pity from free thought, and the two birthing the great savior, passion – plays out (as Blake emphasizes) both literally and in the minds of the characters, simultaneously emphasizing and obscuring the effect of what Blake is saying about the mind's relationship to reality.¹⁶ The prophetic works, as a whole, are full of multi-layered, vastly descriptive, heavily symbolic yet starkly literal images like this, contributing to their (especially later) great conceptual difficulty. But their effect is potent.

Blake's two prophetic epics, *Milton* and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, written after a series of visions at that cottage in Felpham, again place Christ and the story of Christ front and center, reconciling more conventional Christian ideas of God and Satan with his long-held aesthetic

¹⁵Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 258.

¹⁶Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 265-267.

views. They are the New Testament to *The Book of Urizen's* Old, depicting the arduous road to salvation. Here, Milton is his Christ; Albion, his man. "I will go down to self-annihilation & eternal death," Milton cries, beginning the epic, "Lest the Last Judgement come & find me unannihilate, and I be seized & given into the hands of my own Selfhood [...]. I in my Selfhood am that Satan; I am that Evil One, He is my Spectre!"¹⁷ The destruction of Satan's physical form is revealed to have only dispersed his spirit, creating the dark counterpart to one's Emanation, what Blake calls his Spectre, or Shadow. This malicious, broiling product of one's own self-repression has sent Albion into an eternal sleep, and now Milton into pangs of suffering and self-doubt. This is the prototypical inner conflict of Blake's later works: the hero finds himself both hollowed by self-separation and tormented by repressed desire. They are the two fundamental effects of the imposition of Moral Law, negations of the Christlike virtues, chief of which is total self-expression. *Milton* and *Jerusalem* each concern the resolution of these ills, but stretches them, as with *Urizen*, across the sum of human creative thought.

Milton climaxes and is framed within two visions of Blake's, one of Milton reuniting with his Emanation, the other of a lightning bolt striking his shoe, through which the spirit of Los, the eternal prophet, suddenly possesses him. The passage that follows is a stunning moment of visionary harmony, in which the newly-renewed prophetic elements of Los and Milton unite in Blake to establish a true universality – the plane across which Blake can now mold, form, and obscure the bounds of truth and imagination, here and there, past and future, druidism and Christianity, man and divine:

¹⁷Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 538.

Los had entered into my soul; his terrors now possessed me whole. I arose in fury & strength. 'I am that shadowy Prophet (...) both Time & Space obey my will. I in six thousand years walk up and down: for not one moment Of Time is lost, nor one event of Space unpermanent, but all remain; (...) though on the earth, where Satan Fell and was cut off, all things vanish & are seen no more, they vanish not from me & mine; we guard them first & last. The generations of men run on in the tide of Time, but leave their destined lineaments [distinctive marks] permanent, for ever & ever.'¹⁸

This is Blake's Christ. Jesus is the path through which Blake reconciles his dual tendencies towards both specificity and obfuscation, his obsessions with the Universal, the unified truth of reality, and with the Particular, the individual ideas and objects with which man interfaces with the Universal. The Poetic Genius isn't just an idea, it's a sinew drawing together the Divine Man, his ideas, and his history. It's an intention underlying all things that exist. Christ is its central prophet because Christ is the first to articulate what can't be articulated: that uncovering truth is an act of artistry, of decoding mirages of mirages, and that feeling spontaneously and without restriction is the very substance of prophecy; rules and laws, its deathly poison. Blake is a prophet because he feels.

In the years before his death, as Blake ascended further into the prophetic literary universe he had spent a lifetime developing, he became more interested in seeing Christ in his own terms, as a man who was born, lived, and died. In this period, he drafted, but never published, a newer, more grounded understanding of Christ, one based heavily in gospel but also recognizable as the synthesis of the belligerent

¹⁸Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 548-549.

religious ideas of his youth and the complex philosophical sensibilities of his later life. Here, Blake is attempting to stretch the concrete facts of Christ's life across the abstract, universal impact of his ideas. Blake's 1818 *Everlasting Gospel*, an unfinished study of Jesus in the vocabulary of Blake's personal philosophy, may very well be called the 'Interrogation of Christ,' or of the reader's preconceived notions of Christ. The poem is structured around a series of questions: "What can this Gospel of Jesus be? What life and immortality?"¹⁹ it asks. "Was Jesus born of virgin pure? (...) Was Jesus chaste? (...) Was Jesus gentle? (...) Was Jesus humble?"²⁰ *No, and no, and no, and no* again, it asserts.

Blake begins his argument by reframing popular conceptions of sin, redemption, and punishment, as the ultimate evils of repression, simultaneously reintroducing his old foes, Moral Virtue and its foul brother Holiness. "What is the accusation of sin but moral virtues' deadly gin [trap]?"²¹ "For what is Antichrist but those who against sinners Heaven close with iron bars in virtuous state?"²² Christ's enemy, here, is explicitly the demiurgic 'Christian' God – not unlike his Urizen. First, "He [Christ] laid his hand on Moses' law; the ancient heavens in silent awe – writ with curses from pole to pole all away began to roll."²³ Christ's uproarious affronts to conventional virtue only balloon, his destruction of rules compounding: "Publicans and harlots he selected for his company, and from the adulteress turned away God's righteous Law, that lost its prey."²⁴ Virtue is completely turned

¹⁹Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 896.

²⁰Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 896-906.

²¹Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 896.

²²Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 897.

²³Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 900-901.

²⁴Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 899.

on its head — Christ doesn't just redeem prostitutes in spite of their moral stain, but because of it. For Blake, to oppress the prostitute in the name of supposed moral superiority is an even greater ill than to be one, an even greater affront to Christ's status as a teacher of universal love. "If he [Christ] intended to take on sin," Blake remarks, "his mother should an harlot been."²⁵ A brothel is Christ's domain; the human body, the canvas of the Divine Humanity: "They may call a shame and sin Love's temple that God dwelleth in, and hide in secret hidden shrine the naked human form divine, and render that a lawless thing, on which the soul expands its wing."²⁶

Horried at this inversion, "the Moral Virtues in great fear formed the cross and nails and spear."²⁷ And so disturbed by Christ's openness toward expressions of outward sexuality, his Spectre — the inner product of his repressed desire, a Satanic figure — slinks away to plot his murder. "When Jesus was crucified then was perfected his [Satan's] glittering pride — in three nights he devoured his prey, and still he devours the body of clay [Adam]."²⁸

So Christ loses? Though Blake's narrative of the life of Christ ends with his violent murder, relegated to the same humiliating position as Adam, Christ's spiritual journey takes on a far more meaningful, far more impactful role. He has redefined the meaning of virtue, turning it on its head. He has redefined what it means to sin, and what it means to forgive. He has set out a new vision of what it means to be humble, a powerful meekness — "this is the race that Jesus ran: humble to God, haughty to man."²⁹ Christ "acts with honest triumphant

²⁵Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 898.

²⁶Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 903.

²⁷Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 897.

²⁸Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 903-904.

²⁹Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 908.

pride; and this is the cause that Jesus died.”³⁰ He has redefined true morality as something that has no place for any particular method of self-repression, whether sexual, intellectual, or artistic – what is done truly and honestly, is done well. Even Christ falters in fear – “I will never pray for the world: once I did so when I prayed in the garden; I wished to take with me a bodily pardon” – but he always emerges triumphant.³¹ In Christ, Blake discovers (or, inserts) the unifying aspect of his many disparate ways of expression – whether through the young, precociously prophetic hope of *All Religions are One*, the infernal, anti-religious cynicism of *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *The Book of Urizen*, the mystical, psychological discourses of *Milton*, or the philosophical, utopian project of *Jerusalem* – that Christ’s liberation of the Divine Humanity exists latent within every person. When Blake uses the epithet ‘Lamb of God,’ it is as Christ’s battle scar of a fight he lost in life, but wins in death, in the hearts and minds of humanity, a fight between the God of Love for whom Christ died, and the God of Law who killed him. Blake’s life’s work is a similar fight – like all conflicts in Blake, both internal and external – to untangle from Creation the free and divine Art, unfettered by doubt, repression, oppression, the restrictions of gender or class, or rigid empirical materialism, the shackle of imagination. And Christ – for all Blake’s ire for mainstream Christianity, for all the mountains of esotericism he constructs in its place – is his final answer.

The vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my vision’s greatest enemy:
Thine has a great hook nose like thine,
Mine has a snub nose like to mine;
Thine is ‘the Friend of All Mankind’,

³⁰Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 907.

³¹Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 908–09.

Mine speaks in parables to the blind;
Thine loves the same world that mine hates,
Thy Heaven-doors are my Hell-gates.
Socrates taught what Melitus
Loathed as a nation's bitterest curse,
And Cai'phas was, in his own mind,
A benefactor to mankind.
Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white.³²

³²Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 899-900.

APPENDIX

The image on the first page is Plate 76 of *Jerusalem*. Sourced from The William Blake Archive, copy E.

Fig. 1 (right): *The Ancient of Days*, 1794, from *Europa: A Prophecy*, sourced from The William Blake Archive, copy K.
Fig. 2 (below): *Newton*, from *The Large Color Printed Drawings*, 1795, also from the Archive.

Notice how both Urizen/Yahweh (first image) and Newton (second) measure out creation with the same tool – a golden compass. An equivalence is being made between what they do.

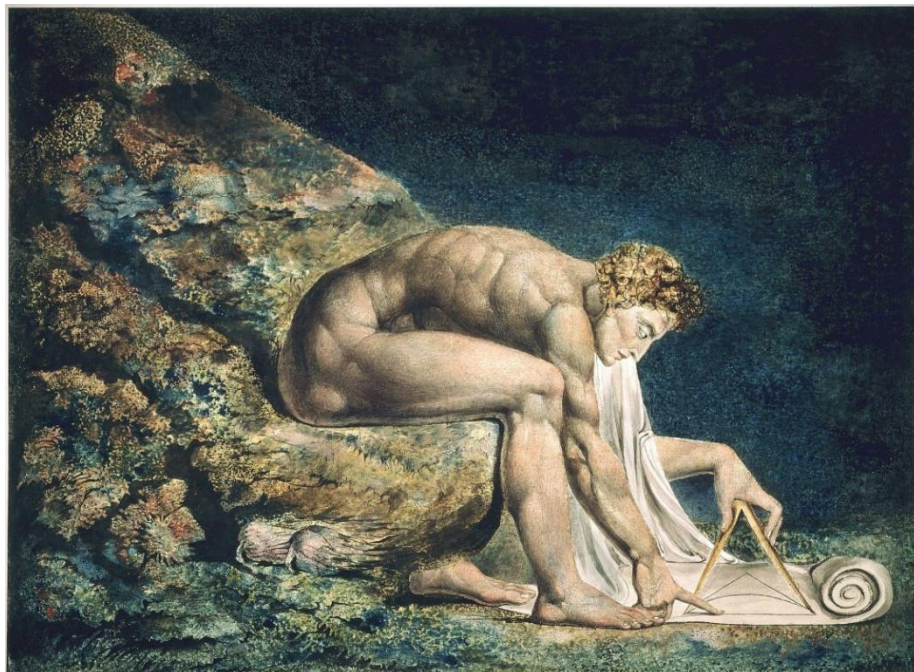


Fig. 3: *Adam Naming the Beasts*, 1810, from the Archive. The portrait resembles a young Blake. Perhaps he saw Adam's lot as his own.

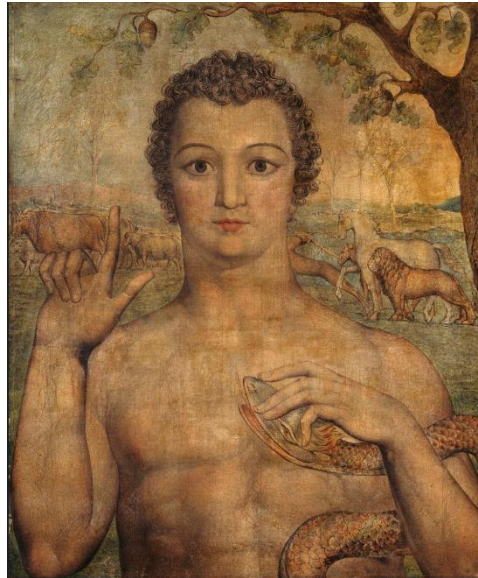


Fig. 4: *The Good and the Evil Angels*, from *The Large Color Printed Drawings*, 1795, from the Archive. The 'evil' angel is chained and weeping. Is he so evil – or just a tragic figure, trapped by shackles of his own creation?



Fig. 5: The title page to *Jerusalem*, copy E, 1821, from the Archive. Blake's angels taking on extraordinarily fantastical, natural, moth-like, leaf-like forms. They seem straight from his boyhood visions — clearly they held significant weight in his artistic life.



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