

Blake's Songs, Their Introductions and the Bible

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Abstract

Although William Blake was highly eclectic and drawing from multifarious sources, religious system, philosophical thoughts and traditions, the Bible was Blake's most predominant concern. Throughout his life of meticulous and tedious composite art Blake aimed at decoding the Bible as the Great Code of Art for helping people to be imaginative and visionary like Jesus Christ. Both in his complex and sophisticated prophetic works, meant for the illuminated people, and in his deceptively simple lyrics of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, meant for the rank and file of society, Blake did keep this up. The present study is an attempt to focus on this element, by delving deep into the texts and designs of the Introductions of *Songs of Innocence* as well as of *Songs of Experience*, inevitably considering the totality of Blake's works and in the special context of their marked allegiance or affinity to the themes and symbols from the Bible. Blake visualized a blend of lamblike meekness and mildness with the ferocity of tigers of wrath for having the human form divine perfect.

Keywords: innocence, experience, guileless, guilty, fallen, unfallen, naive, sophisticated, transparent, hidden, or veiled, human soul, human person

1. Introduction

Blake was highly eclectic and readily drawing from such varied sources as Orphic and Pythagorean traditions, Neoplatonism, Hermetic, Kabbalistic, Gnostic and Alchemical Writings, writings of Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg, and over and above all the Biblical traditions. It seems that in order to create his own system Blake was depending on a consistent body of tradition, extending over nearly 2500 years as proven by Raine (1968) in her two big volumes. Raine has presented a very detailed account of Blake's relationship to these traditions, although she did not sufficiently highlight Blake's indebtedness to the Biblical traditions. Of late in the beginning of the 21st century came out an excellent study highlighting the close affinity of William Blake's mythical (and often mystical) prophecies with the mythologies of the Hindu Pantheon, where the author Weir (2003) commented: "In a sense, where his contemporaries decoded mythology as theology, Blake encoded his system with myth" (p. 90). Quoting from Damrosch Jr (1980, p. 70) Weir continued: while others "were demythologizing Christianity, Blake sought to remythologize it" (Ibid). Yet, noticing the conspicuously thoroughgoing and life-long devotion and dedication of William Blake to the Bible, both in his poems and paintings, one is prompted to doubt whether it is "remythologizing" or "decoding" the Bible as the Great Code of Art that Blake was mostly concerned with.

In his Laökoon plate containing his circular poetry, Blake had inscribed (Note 1): "A Poet, A Painter, A Musician, an Architect: the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian; and "Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists" and "Christianity is Art" (K 776-77; see also Figure 1), and filled the surrounding area of the whole picture with plenty of inscriptions from the Bible to establish his view points as an Artist and creative painter and poet committed to the Bible (See Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/41447259045107006/>

2. Review of Literature

From the time of Swinburne there have been scattered references to Blake's use of the Bible and biblical commentaries. A fuller discussion of Blake's use of the biblical tradition, however, gained momentum only with Frye's *Fearful Symmetry* in 1947. Since then there have been a handful of books treating the same aspect, with various accents. Equally significant was Davies's (1948) discussion of Blake's Theology. Bringing out Blake's relationship to Swedenborg and the Bible he focused on the points at which Blake is not in conflict with orthodox traditions (passim). In fact, Davies actually tried to put Blake in the mainstream of Christian Orthodoxy, much against the trend set by Yeats, Ellis and M.O. Percival and later by Kathleen Raine and others pressing for an interpretation of Blake that depends more on the esoteric traditions, particularly Neoplatonism and Hermeticism. Gleckner (1960) has brought out the indebtedness of *The Book of Thel* to the *Book of Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*. Then, following Davies (1948), Roston (1965) also tried to put Blake within the context of the growing interest in biblical poetics in the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. The same has been done by Morris (1972) in his *The Religious Sublime*. Fisch's (1964) study can be considered as complementing the above two works, giving an excellent analysis of the impact of the Old Testament upon the Seventeenth Century literature and briefly drawing attention to the continuation of this influence in Blake's poetry. Blake's *Tiriël* has been identified with at least two trilogies: Whereas Frye (1947) placed it with *Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Erdman (1970) considered it together with *An Island in the Moon* and *The Book of Urizen*. Halloran (1971) has observed that *Tiriël* is a prophecy, the chief source of which is *Genesis*. He sees *Tiriël* as a Christ/Adam figure whose prophetic powers have fallen into the fierce but highly limited cursing powers of the tyrant (p. 164). Taking advantage of the helpful context offered by this argument, Ostrom (1983) interprets the Heva-Tiriël encounter thus: "Heva who unwittingly alludes to the iconography of temptation, plays parodic Eve to Tiriël's parodic Adam. As with the Heva-Tiriël encounter, [6:1-49] a symbolic act of incest is hinted at in this rich passage, while the contrast to the central Christian episode of temptation further suggests the complete degeneracy of Har, Heva and Tiriël" (p. 175). Gillham (1973) had pointed out that among other minor influences, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* echoes the *Song of*

Solomon. As for our understanding the poem, Gillham asks us to see the connexion of this book with the *Song of Solomon*.

In the most systematic exposition to date, of Blake's relation to the Biblical traditions, Tannenbaum (1982) elaborately discusses the biblical context of each of Blake's Lambeth Books. *America: A Prophecy* is shown to be greatly indebted to the books of *Daniel*, *Revelation* and *Song of Songs*. According to Tannenbaum, in *Europe: A Prophecy*, deeply drawing the contexts established by the *Books of Nahum* and *Proverbs*, Blake recapitulates the history of Europe as a consolidation of errors, which is represented in the Bible by the harlot and harlot's house (*Nahum*, 3:4 ff). *The Song of Los (Africa & Asia)* is best discussed in the background of *Galatians*, *Job*, *Ezekiel* and *Revelation*. The two contrary movements in Africa and Asia "reflect a vision that is both dialectic and progressive, suggesting the movement of biblical history from enslavement in Africa to liberation in Asia, from the founding of abstract philosophy and law [Mosaic Law] to the victory of prophecy over that law on Patmos [John's Revelation or Apocalypse]. While that victory is not complete, the reader is at least left with a picture of Los performing the same historical function as John of Patmos, keeping the divine vision in time of trouble" (p. 200).

Korshin (1982) has given an excellent analysis of *Jerusalem* as Blake, "the St. John of Lambeth," prophesying a "heraldic annundge that he had endeavoured to emulate the grandeciation to God's chosen people informing them to fulfil historical destiny. Both the prophesied Jesus and the risen Christ appear throughout *Jerusalem* from the epigraph on the first page (*John* 8:9) to the Christ-Jehovah figure in the final plate" (pp. 348-355). Nathan (1975) has emphasised the sum total of Blake's *Jerusalem* as unconditional and categorical forgiveness of sins (pp. 124-135). Miner (1969) renders an exhaustive study of Blake's indebtedness to the Bible, giving innumerable parallels between Bible passages corresponding to the lines of Blake from all the works of this Bard (pp. 256-292). Concentrating on *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem* Miner concludes that "*Jerusalem* must serve as Blake's final textual philosophy and it is a hosanna of affirmation" (p. 290). Witke (1970) remarked: "The entire structural pattern of *Jerusalem*, in fact, is modelled upon the interpretation of the Four Gospels as it was handed down through tradition from the early Christian Fathers (pp. 266-267). Gallagher (1977) has attempted a satirical comparison of "A Poison Tree" with the *Genesis*. When all is said about Blake's poetry, one is forced to affirm with Miner (1969) that Biblical Imagery became almost a sine qua non through which Blake's poetry structured itself, a medium through which his poetry functioned (p. 291).

However much Blake might have tried to satirize the Biblical passages, especially in the composite illuminated works of 1790s, when it comes to the question of illustrating The Book, Blunt (1959) pointed out that Blake "generally keeps close to the Biblical narrative... but in one or two cases something very personal appears" (p. 66). According to Blunt, *The Agony in the Garden* is one of the most original of Blake's paintings because here "the angel, instead of offering the cup is shown plunging down to support the fainting figure of Christ" (p. 67). Equally original in execution is the *Nativity* where Child Jesus radiating light leaps toward to Elizabeth: "There seems to be no model for this impressive manner of emphasizing the miraculous character of the birth of Christ" (Ibid).

Considering *Illustrations of the Book of Job* acknowledged by Blake scholars and critics alike as the masterpiece of Blake, Wicksteed's work (1910) has been a pioneering full length study of it. For any serious study of Blake's Job plates, the wonderful facsimile edition produced by Lawrance Binyon and Geoffrey Keynes in six fascicles must be depended on. Lindberg (1973) chose the 22 copper plate engravings for discussion because only they have the "pictorial by-plot of the margins" (p. 55), but which are, far from being by-plots, meant by Blake to have a direct bearing on the scene illustrated. Lindberg has also argued that plates 11 and 16 are not directly drawn from the Bible, because "there is no reference in the *Book of Job* to a dream of Satan masquerading as God, or to any vision of the Last Judgment" (p. 57). True there is no direct reference in the *Book of Job* to these scenes, but these scenes are implicit in *Job* and are explicated in other parts of the Bible. Moreover, Blake, especially towards the end, had learnt to see the Bible in its totality, not as individual Books, which is manifested by his quotations in the margins ranging from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. Wright (1972) has indirectly suggested that all of them are drawn directly from the Bible, with slight alterations by Blake to make his *Job* contemporaneous, as evident from the appendix to this book, "The Biblical Texts and Blake's Alterations" (pp. 53-64). Remarkably Blake draws the Job story not merely out of the *Job* narrative of the Bible. Blake does a lot of editing and collation with texts of the whole Bible from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, to execute his masterpiece work of "art", of life.

According to Bindman (1982), Blake's *The Last Judgment*, and *Jerusalem* are synoptic works drawing together all the states of humanity. The persons—Moses and Abraham—are not meant here, but the states signified by those names. The individuals are just representatives or visions of those states as they are revealed to mortal man

in the series of divine revelations recorded in the Bible. Bindman goes to *the* extent of asserting that *The Last Judgment* is also “A History of Art & Science” which are finally purified like the Fallen World, so that the wicked will no longer hold dominion over the mind of man (p. 156). Justifying this culmination of Blake’s artistic work, Bindman had observed in the Introduction of his book:

If the Old and New Testament contain “All that Exists,” then the Artist must aspire to bring all the Spiritual States of man together in one mighty work. Blake’s greatest single painting... would have been the tempera of the Last Judgment. ...He worked on it for the last twenty years of his life. ...Although seemingly Conventional in structure and recognizable in terms of traditional iconography, as an attempt to encompass the history of the human spirit from Fall to Redemption it is an equivalent in pictorial terms of *Jerusalem*, which itself was the culmination of Blake’s efforts, beginning with the Prophecies of the 1790s, to create a Bible of his own (pp. 20-21).

That Blake did not stop with the satirization of Bible is also clear from one of Blake’s last works, “The Illustrated Manuscript of Genesis” (dated differently on two title pages as 1821 and 1826). It is important to note that Blake almost literally follows the King James Version with only minor alterations of punctuation and word order and two slightly more significant expansions, which are brought to notice by Butlin (1981a): first, after the word “ground” (*Genesis* II: 7,9,19; III: 19,23,; IV: 10,11,12) Blake adds “adamah,” but usually in brackets; and second, *Genesis* IV:15, “And the Lord put a mark on Cain,” is amplified to “And the Lord set a mark upon Cain’s forehead”(pp. 596-97). These plates have been reproduced by Butlin (1981b) together with almost all the plates of Blake’s paintings and etchings. Butlin (1981a) also observed that in spite of a different and earlier watermark on the first leaf, the manuscript was presumably worked on mainly in 1826-7, being left unfinished at Blake’s death (p. 597). Considering this work alone it looks certain that although Blake had, for some time intended to produce an inverted Bible in his early Prophecies, towards the last years Blake was ready to accept the Bible as it is, without venturing to make a total reformulation of the *Genesis* to suit his purpose. One should not forget that Blake is only adding titles to each chapter. Blake could finish only upto *Genesis* 4:14 of this laborious task leaving 4:15 unfinished. Had Blake begun the work much earlier, it would definitely have been the best illustrated Bible, by a man who understood the Core of the Bible and at the same time was capable of translating the spirit of the Bible with illuminated designs. Concerning the unstinted energy that Blake spent for this work, his biographer Gilchrist (1942) testifies:

He thought nothing of entering on such a task as writing out, with ornamental letters, a manuscript Bible as a basis for illustration; and actually commenced one, the last year of his life, for Mr. Linnell, getting as far as chap. iv, verse 14. He cared not for recreation. Writing and design were his recreation from the task-work of engraving (p. 259).

Why should have Blake so painstakingly undertaken in his last days to illustrate the *Genesis* exactly verbatim from the conventionally accepted King James Version? -this question has been the inspiring motivation for the present study. Evidently, Blake wanted towards the end, to throw to winds all suspicions about him, showing his undaunted faith in the Bible in spite of passing through troubled times, by undertaking to literally decode the visions of *Genesis* in pictorial terms, as his life’s work. Frye’s (1970) remark that “Blake’s prophecies are intensely allusive, though nine-tenths of allusions are to the Bible” (p. 170) becomes particularly valid regarding Blake’s later prophecies.

To conclude this review of literature, a word about Blake’s insistence on following inspiration both in poetry and in painting, must be mentioned. O’Neil (1970) quotes the following entry from the diary of Henry Crabb Robinson to assert this:

February 18th 1826: Called on Blake... He warmly declared that all he knew was in the Bible. But he understands Bible in the Spiritual Sense... “I write,” he says, “when commanded by the spirits and the moment I have written I see the word fly about the room in all directions. It is then published and the spirits can read. My Ms. is of no further use. I have been tempted to burn my Mss., but my wife won’t let me.” “She is right,” said I (p. 16).

As James (1984) asserted, Blake did believe what he had written in the annotations to Watson: “The Bible tells me that the plan of Providence was subverted at the Fall of Adam & that was not restored till Christ” (Note 2). We have reviewed only a handful of critical studies which approach Blake’s works in the background of the Books of the Bible and are not having an exhaustive study, which is not in the purview of this study.

3. Scope of the Study

Right from the beginning of Blake's career as a poet, his verse had an affinity to the Bible. Hartman (1970) pointed out that even in *Poetical Sketches* (1769-1778), Blake tried to restore the vigour of the classical style "by bringing it closer to the poetical parts of the Bible." In his remarkably poetical-prose passage on Samson in the *Poetical Sketches* Blake depicts the Hebraic hero, the potential deliverer of God's people as a "type of Christ". Tannenbaum (1973) argued that Blake achieved this "through the representation of Dalila, who sells her lord for gold as a type of Judas, through the emphasis upon being a Nazirite, and through the re-wording of the angel's annunciation of Samson's birth in *Judges* 13:5 to make it echo the Annunciation of *Luke* 1:28: 'Hail, bear a son'. Here Blake is employing a conventional interpretation of the Samson story whereby the Old Testament character is seen as a foreshadowing or promise of Christ." While agreeing with this second observation, one is not inclined to agree with Tannenbaum's explanations of Blake's manoeuvring Samson as a type of Christ, because Samson actually was one among the many Old Testament types of Christ. Considering the arguments set forth by Tannenbaum, the annunciation to Manoah's wife (Samson's mother) is already present in *Judges* 13:3: "And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son'" (Note 3). After some instruction in the next verse, comes the verse 5: "for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth, It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines." Thus Samson's being a Nazirite and deliverer of God's people is already emphasised in the Old Testament itself. Similarly in the Bible version too each of the lords of the Philistines offered Dalila eleven hundred pieces of silver for enticing Samson to reveal the secret of his might. This shows that Blake's attempts decoding the Bible are often misunderstood even by the critics.

Another example of misreading Blake's thought is worthy of consideration here. Even though the redeeming presence of Jesus is admitted by all, there are scholars as pointed out by Nurmi (1975), trying to deny the idea of virgin birth of Jesus Christ as "being not only unessential to the divinity of Jesus but as expressing a false doctrine" (p. 160). Their arguments may seem tenable especially when considered in the light of Blake's fragments *The Everlasting Gospel* of which the true sequence is not yet traced. However, a closer look shows that Blake never intended such an understanding about Virginity. In the reverse of pages 80-81 of his *Notebook* Blake had written about the tempera "A Vision of the Last Judgment":

Around Noah & beneath him are various figures Risen into the Air among these are Three Females, those who are not of the dead but of those found alive at the Last Judgment; they appear to be innocently gay thoughtless, not being among the condemn'd because ignorant of crime in the midst of a corrupted Age; the Virgin Mary was of this Class.

In affirming that Virgin Mary was among the "ignorant-of-crime" type, Blake seems to doubly stress Mary's virginity. This is confirmed in many of Blake's verses such as "Christ took on Sin in the Virgin's Womb & put it off on the cross" (*Milton*, I, 5:3; K 484).

Thus a close reading of Blake's works gives ample chance of highlighting Blake's predilection for the Bible. Most of Blake's prophetic works and most of his *Songs* have obviously allusive and thematic relationships with the Holy Scripture. In an unpublished article sent to me in July 1985, Gallagher has commented on this subject:

"...not all the songs are informed with biblical motifs; but the sacred text frequently illuminates—or is itself illuminated by a Blake poem, and in the juxtapositioning of the two, even the simplest lyrics sometimes acquire a complexity not seldom denied them by student readers and professional critics alike".

Interpretations of Biblical allusions and explications of individual songs have been attempted. However, it appears that often some of the critics are unnecessarily complicating Blake's reading and launching on far-fetched interpretations. The present study purports to evaluate the *Songs* and their relationship to the Bible in general and to shed special light on the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and "Introduction" and "Earth's Answer" in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* with a view to depicting their marked dependence upon the Bible.

4. Method of the Study

Both the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* were reproduced by illuminated printing. To have a fuller understanding of the lyrics we must consider the verses and designs side by side. It is, however, extremely difficult to focus our attention simultaneously to the verses as well as the paintings. Especially in the later Prophecies sometimes reading the text becomes almost impossible on account of its complex designs. Therefore, in spite of his argument that Blake's illuminated books must be read as unified formal entities, Mitchell (1978) himself tends to divide his study into sections which deal primarily with text or design respectively, "because

talking about complex poems and pictures at the same time is like trying to carry on two conversations at once”(p. xvii). Mitchell admits that it will have to wait someone more ambidextrous than himself. It should also be remembered as Kennedy (1970) notes, that at least a few of the “illustrations were made five or six years after the corresponding poems were written, so that the pictures do not always accurately represent the time of composition”(p. 144). But Blake was probably visualizing and clarifying the thought contents of these poems by furnishing them with illustrations later. On any score it is evident that Blake’s text and design should be treated and analysed together as a composite unit of the sister arts. To this inherent difficulty of handling Blake’s text and design together is added the inevitable focussing upon the Biblical background. Thus for a correct understanding of Blake’s illuminated poems one should treat them in a Trinitarian or triadic approach devolving on the text, the design and the Bible. The present study purviews such an attempt.

5. Discussion: The Songs, Their Introductions and the Bible

Gallagher (1985, pp. 1-2) pointed out that the very title of the book, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is parasitic upon and critical of *Genesis* ii:25-iii:24 and *Romans* v:12-21. In the *Genesis* passage the innocent naked ashamedness of Adam and Eve which they never felt, is transformed into conscious self-awareness and humiliation. In *Romans* v:12-21 the hereditary curses of *Genesis* become explicitly moralized in the doctrine later called “Original Sin”. After eating from the tree of knowledge the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened and they became conscious that they were naked. *Genesis* 3:7 reads:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Or again,

And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, “See the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken (*Genesis* 3:21-24).

In the *Letter to the Romans* St. Paul clearly establishes that sin and death came to this world by Adam’s transgression and the pristine guiltlessness can be brought back only through participation in Christ’s grace:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law... For just as by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (*Romans* 5:12-21).

Blake took the Pauline dichotomies, guiltlessness and sin which have eschatological and legalistic rather than psychological implications, and transformed them into the largely perceptual categories “childlike naïveté” and “adult sophistication” which he calls “Innocence” and “Experience” respectively, showing the two contrary states of the human soul. Blake’s lyrics are primarily dramatic vehicles of individual consciousness and social criticism, not merely Pauline instruments of exegetical casuistry. In composing the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake is definitely influenced by the Bible; and often he is interpreting and transvaluating themes from the Bible in these lyrics and designs.

The fallen world is the world of the *Songs of Experience* and the unfallen world, that of the *Songs of Innocence*. Those who live most spontaneously and easily in the pre-lapsarian world of innocence are apt to be somewhat naive and childlike, from the point of view of those in the post-lapsarian world of experience. Most of them are in fact children who live in a sort of protected world which has something of the intelligibility of the state of innocence. Moreover, they have an imaginative recklessness deriving from that state. As Frye (1947) observes: “The child who cries to have the moon as a play thing, who slaps a table for hurting him where he lumps his head, who can transform the most unpromising toy into a congenial companion, has something which the adult can never wholly abandon without collapsing into mediocrity” (42-43).

In *The Notebook of William Blake* the motto to the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is given:

The Good are attracted by Men’s perceptions, And think not for themselves; Till Experience teaches them to catch And to cage the Fairies and Elves And then the knave begins to snarl And the Hypocrite to howl; And all his good Friends shew their private ends, And the Eagle is known from the Owl (p. 34).

This little poem tells us how the *Songs* are related to some of the most persistent elements in Blake's thought. For him the primary thing and the only thing that is important is the active life of the creative imagination. So he has nothing but contempt for empiricist philosophers who build their systems on sense perceptions instead of on visions. Blake's belief that the naturally good are deceived by such theories and so corrupted by them to the extent of ceasing to think for themselves and restricting those creative forces which he called "fairies and elves", is expressed through the above poem. When such a thing—the restriction of imaginative forces—happens, knavery, hypocrisy, and self-seeking enter into the soul and the state of innocence is lost. At the same time, for those who have eyes to see, and exercise that faculty, the free, soaring spirit of the eagle is visible in all its difference from the sleepy, night-ridden owl. If the motto is anything, this is the central theme of the *Songs*, in the first part Blake showing what innocence is and in the second how it is corrupted and destroyed in experience.

5.1 Title Page of *Songs of Innocence*

Even though Blake had a separate title page for his *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 (See Figure 2), in 1794 he etched and coloured a new general title page. Comparing the title page of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* to an earlier children's book, in order to reveal Blake's progressive views on the importance and power of childhood, Philips (n. d.) in his web article "The title page of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789)", describes this picture:

It depicts two children standing at the knee of their nurse or mother reading from a book, out of doors, in a garden or the countryside. Symbolically, a young vine entwines itself for support around the trunk of a tree that in turn provides shade. Birds rise up through the lettering of the title, a piper in a broad-brimmed hat leans back against the capital letter *I* of *Innocence*, while higher up children can be seen at play in the capital letters *O* and *G* of *SONGS*, and an angel leans back against the letter *N* engaged in writing in a book. What imagery could be more appropriate, indeed innocent, to head such a collection?



Figure 2.

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

Contrasting this with the frontispiece of John Newberry's *A Little Pocket Book* (1744), Philips observes further: "In contrast with the Newberry frontispiece, where the nurse or mother is holding the book from which she is reading and instructing the children, in Blake's title page it is the children who hold the book; it is they who are reading to the adult (Ibid).

Contrasting Blake's setting the scene out of doors, showing the relaxed and informal dress of both the woman and the two children, together with the children at play amongst the letters of the title in the company of a piper and an angel, with "the formality and comparative claustrophobia of the Newberry frontispiece" Philips highlights Blake's implicit juxtaposition within the pastoral tradition expressed by the contrast between city and country. But much more than this juxtaposition between material circumstances, Philips observed: "In contrast with the Newberry frontispiece, where the nurse or mother is holding the book from which she is reading and instructing the children, in Blake's title page it is the children who hold the book; it is they who are reading to the adult" (Ibid). He goes on to assert:

As the poems of *Songs of Innocence* are read and unfold, we discover that it is we who can learn from the children. It is from their point of view, dramatically expressed in poem after poem, that we begin to question and gain insight. The shift in point of view from adult to child is fundamental and revolutionary. As readers, in particular as *experienced* readers, it becomes a matter of acknowledging the child's way of seeing and responding to the world—in the most profound sense, by taking it upon ourselves, by it *becoming* a part of ourselves. Responding to the *Songs of Innocence* in this way is to realise the promise made to our first parents by the Archangel Michael at the close of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the promise of a "paradise within", that is latent in each of us and to be regained. It is the evocation and promise of all pastoral.

All of this elucidates Blake's visionary perspective about the state of innocence as the prelapsarian and pristine guilelessness enjoyed by the first human beings in the Garden of Eden. The Lamb, the piper piping, singing and then writing a song for the child and the angel coming in the Introduction (I) are all foreshadowed in this picture of the title page. A detailed picture of the piper and the child is given in the Frontispiece of *Songs of Innocence*, which will be discussed together with the song "Introduction" (I) soon (See Figure 5).

5.2 General Title Page of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794)

In the general title page of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in the lower part is pictured the post-lapsarian Adam hiding his face from Eve, though bending over her (See Figure 3). Erdman (1975) observes, "the position of his arms suggest potential menace. Eve is shown bowing to the ground but looking back at him. In different copies she is either looking back at Adam or holding her eyes shut, or looking up and out, mouth agape, at some terror offstage, but sometimes hiding her face towards the earth" (p. 42).



Figure 3

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

One cannot miss the connection of this picture to *Genesis* 3:12,13 where both Adam and Eve are trying to shake off the responsibility of the fall, Adam accusing Eve and Eve in turn accusing the serpent. Adam and Eve are painted among bright flames, and flames in Blake often symbolize the world of Experience. Above the word

“Innocence” a large bird flies up and leftward, in the same direction as that of the flames, a direction which marks the return from flames to the paradise. It is to be remembered that Blake believed that there will be a definite restoration to the former pre-lapsarian golden age. These contrary states of human soul are not going to be perennial. As shown and argued by William Blake in his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 3 (See Figure 4), there should be a reconciliation between good and evil or between heaven and hell. As we read in the facsimile reprint edited by Geoffrey Keynes (1975) and as can be seen in the Plate 3 given here as Figure 4:

...Now is the dominion of Edom and return of Adam into Paradise (See *Isaiah*, chapters XXXIV and XXXV). Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell (Plate 3).



Figure 4.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Marriage_of_Heaven_and_Hell_-_Plate_3#/media/File:Blake_The_Marriage_of_Heaven_and_Hell,_copy_G_object_3.jpg)

The_Marriage_of_Heaven_and_Hell_-_Plate_3#/media/File:Blake_The_Marriage_of_Heaven_and_Hell,_copy_G_object_3.jpg on 4

The lines from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* may sound a little outrageous at the hearing. One should not forget here that prophetic book mainly consists of the wrathful words of Rintrah (Elijah, the angry prophet) and Blake the Visionary Prophet's words cannot be very pleasant to hear.

In Blake's system each of these states has its role. The central situation of the Innocence is that of a child or a young animal delighting in life. Of course, fear may not be necessarily absent. But whenever the child is threatened with a danger, a parent figure, father, mother, God or Angel is close at hand to provide reassuring love and care. The child here is not bothered about the complexities of life. On the other hand in Experience the situation is very different. The dangers are infinitely greater. Fear has infected all creation and the hope of comforting love is remote or practically absent. Even the ration of love offered by the elders takes destructive form because in themselves the elders are extremely corrupt. Any sexual expression of love, which is associated with the “delight” and “joy” of Innocence, meets with particularly bitter oppression from the elders. Many of the

experience poems are rooted in the symbols of conflict in Heaven, the fall of the rebel angels, the Garden of Eden, and man's fall from grace. As Kennedy (1970) observes: "A Golden Age in the past is regarded wistfully, and a possible return of bliss, either in another future Golden Age on earth or in Heaven, is occasionally implied as the only hope of human happiness" (p. 145).

In fact Blake's whole system of creative output strove after the restoration of the original Golden Era. As we read in William Blake's *Jerusalem* (1975) Albion, the primordial man who fell, is liberated and is standing "before Jesus in the clouds of Heaven, fourfold among the visions of God in Eternity" (plate 96:43). Although Blake's *Songs* are to be considered in their totality, only the Introductions to both *Innocence* and *Experience* and "Earth's Answer" are selected in the purview of this study, as they too have marked indebtedness to the Bible.

5.3 Introduction: *Songs of Innocence*

It is most appropriate to start with the "Introduction". In fact "Introduction" can be considered as the best commentary on *Songs of Innocence*. When we analyse the poem "Introduction" it is unavoidable that we focus our attention on the frontispiece to *Songs of Innocence* (See Figure 5). The frontispiece depicts a shepherd holding a long pipe and looking up to a cherub in a cloud above his head. As Mellor (1974) observes, the piper as the acknowledged author of these songs, should be identified with Blake himself, especially since he is given Blake's profile and broad forehead in the frontispiece (p. 12). The shepherd's pipe is not a simple shepherd's pipe, but resembles an oboe, as Erdman (1975) observed (p. 43).



Figure 5.

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

In the background sheep are seen grazing. The child is divine, celestial, a human form of the bird of innocence (Idem). The realm opened is that of imagination. Blake is using the child as a symbol of imagination. The innocence of children has inspired him to write. His other symbol of innocence, the lamb, is also introduced here. Both these symbols recur throughout the *Songs*. The child/cherub may be either (1) the Christ-child—he speaks from Heaven (on a cloud) and asks for a song about a lamb; (2) a cherub as a representative of innocence (...); (3) an allegorical "Spirit of the Pastoral Poetry", as Kennedy (1970) pointed out (pp. 145-146). Commenting on the child-piper relationship Kennedy observes:

The fact that the poem deals with divine inspiration in such simple and natural terms (bringing divinity effortlessly down to earth) makes it a highly appropriate introduction to the series. The poet is setting out happily to record the joys of secure childhood (p. 146).



Figure 6.

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

Both the frontispiece and the illuminated text of “Introduction” (See Figure 6) are bordered by entwined trees resembling the Tree of Jesse, from where salvation was believed to come forth. According to the words of Prophet Isaiah “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (*Isaiah* 11:1). In the “Introduction” the tree of Jesse produces eight panels by curving and intertwining, four each on either side of the text and human figures are clearly visible in all these eight panels. It is not easy to make out who these figures are. Erdman (1975), of course speculates on this point in his quoted work (p. 45). What is important from our point of view is that the Tree of Jesse as a symbol of God and his mercy makes a suitable emblem for innocence.

In the text of “Introduction” we cannot find any direct allusion to the Bible. In line 5 the child asks the piper to “Pipe a song about a Lamb!” Note the capital used for Lamb. Although Blake was not very strict in the use of capitals, in the quoted line the capital seems to be used deliberately (However, Blake uses small l for lamb in the poem “The Shepherd”). For Blake, Lamb was not only a symbol of innocence, but also of Christ Himself. Lamb of God is the epithet applied by John the Baptist to Jesus (*John*, 1:36). In *Revelation*, the Lamb on the Mount Zion is the symbol of Christ (*Revelation*, 14). As Damon (1973) observes, “The Central idea of persecuted innocence, vicarious suffering, and deliverance as in the Paschal Lamb of the Passover, had been common in the Old Testament” (p. 232). Blake knowing all this, probably might have had Christ in his mind when he used capital L for Lamb in line 5. The Piper was piping joyful songs and the child interferes and asks precisely to pipe a song about a Lamb. In line 7 the child asks him to pipe that song again. The child is overjoyed at the song and wept with joy and asked the piper to drop the pipe and to sing the happy songs. But the piper sings the same song again:

“Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;

“Sing thy songs of happy cheer;”

So I sang the same song again

While he wept with joy to hear (K 111).

The piper who invariably followed the child’s peremptory injunctions, is now violating it. And the child is not unhappy about it. On the contrary he is overjoyed and deeply moved that he asked the piper to write down that song. The lines “Piper sit thou down and write / In a book that all may read” (L1.13-14) cannot be fully comprehended unless in the background of “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches” (*Revelation* 1:11) where the “seven” in Biblical symbolism stands for totality including all, or “Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter” (*Revelation* 1:19). Accordingly, the Piper, “wrote my happy

songs / Every child may joy to hear” (Lines. 19-20). Blake makes it evident that he knew that “whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it, for to such belong the Kingdom of God” (*Mark* 10:14-15).

In the ensuing *Songs of Innocence* this recurring return to the theme of Lamb of God is even more conspicuous. Both the child and the piper are happy about it. In the “Introduction” the child is requesting the piper to sing not only about innocence, but more implicitly to sing about Innocence Incarnate, i.e., Christ Himself. It should be noted that Blake might have got the piper figure from the Gospel of Matthew: “We piped to you, and you did not dance” (*Matthew* 11:17). Knowing that the Lord of Heaven and Earth has hidden “these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (*Matthew* 11:25), Blake starts his prophetic mission with these songs of innocence, so that every child may joy to hear, accepting the admonition of the Christ-child figure to be the same as the one received by St. John at Patmos (*Revelation* 1:11 & 19).

5.4 Note on Songs of Experience

Songs of Innocence was immediately followed by *The Book of Thel* in the same year (1789). *The French Revolution* came out in 1791. In between 1790 and 1793 *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was etched. At about the same time Blake was working on *Songs of Experience*. Many of these Songs were included in *The Note book of William Blake* before the year 1793. Stevenson (1971) observes that “of the poems which make up *Experience* only the “Introduction”, “Ah, Sunflower”, “A Little Girl Lost” and “To Tirzah” (a very much later poem) are not found in the Note Book” (p. 209). Gillham (1966) in a detailed analysis about the date of composition of the *Songs*, concludes that the manuscript poems of Experience might have been written before 1793 (p. 252).

As we step into the realm of the *Songs of Experience*, we can realize at once a strikingly different note from that of the *Songs of Innocence*. Feelings of resentment, bitterness, anguish, energy, and sublimity are distinctly echoed in these poems. It may seem to suggest that innocence isn’t, after all, the most complete state of man. Man is often baffled at the recognition of the realities of this life. The Songs dealing with Experience arise from a desire to set the adult experience of real life against the spontaneous and innocent presuppositions of children who have not had the experience of it, and also against the less innocent, sophisticated indoctrination they receive from their parents. As Ostriker (1965) observed: “No satire seems implicit in the *Songs of Innocence* until its publication along with *Songs of Experience* makes clear that “the two contrary states of the human soul” are parodies of each other whoever wished to babble over the natural sweetness and happiness of childhood would be reminded by *Songs of Experience* that childhood was by no means sweet and that happiness was against Nature” (p. 47). Blake had of course produced a separate title page for *Experience* (See Figure 7).



Figure 7.

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience#>

But once the *Songs of Experience* were ready, Blake published them together ever after. The combined volume first appeared in 1794 as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience showing the Two contrary states of the Human Soul*.

The themes of Experience reflect those of the period in which Blake wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *America: A Prophecy*. The themes are: tyranny by brutality or deceit, the lack of freedom and openness in love, and enslavement especially of children. Often in these poems Blake lashed staunch criticism against the institutionalism of the political and religious leaders, in poems like “Holy Thursday”, “The Chimney Sweeper”, “The Little Vagabond,” “A Little Boy Lost,” and “London”, all of which may be best understood in the background of the prophetic curses on the corrupt religious leaders of Israel, especially by the prophet Amos, in the Bible.

5.5 Introduction & Earth's Answer

Most of Blake scholars today agree that “Introduction” and “Earth’s Answer” must be considered together, even though Blake had placed the latter after the poem “Infant Sorrow.” Stevenson (1971) in his edition places, “Earth’s Answer” in its inevitable place following the “Introduction” to which it is a sequel” (p. 209).

In “Introduction” the bard is the counterpart of the piper who introduced Innocence. There seems to be little to distinguish them because the piper clearly exhibits imaginative vision and the bard “Present, Past and Future sees” (line 2). However, as Gleckner (1966) remarks:

For each, the past, present and future are different: for the piper the past can only be the primal unity, for the present is innocence and the immediate future is experience; for the bard the past is innocence, the present experience, the future higher experience. It is natural, then, that the piper’s point of view is prevailingly happy; he is conscious of the child’s essential divinity and assured of his present protection. But into that joyous context the elements of experience constantly insinuate themselves so that the note of sorrow is never completely absent from the piper’s pipe. In experience, on the other hand, the Bard’s voice is solemn and more deeply resonant, for the high-pitched joy of innocence is now only a memory. Within this gloom though lies the ember which can leap into flame at any moment to light the way to the higher innocence (pp. 10-11).

Both these singers are imaginative, poetic and prophetic. The one singer uses mild and gentle poems and the other more terrible ones. But Blake invites us to rouse up our imagination and consider both these aspects together.

To understand the poem “Introduction” of *Experience* we have to examine the “frontispiece” plate which pictures the bard, in comparison with the “frontispiece” to *Innocence* (See Figure 8). The bard has caught the winged child and set him firmly on his head, holding the child’s arms. This may be either to support as it sits, or to hold it firm that it may not fly away. As Gillham (1966) observed, unlike the piper and the child in *Innocence*, in the *Experience*, the bard and the child “are placed in closer and more lasting relationship but have lost contact with each other” (p. 150). Neither can see each other (See Figure 8).



Figure 8.

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

The child is probably a burden on the piper. The piper cannot even use his arms. Similarly the piper is a hindrance to the freedom of the child because it cannot use its wings. In the *Note Book*, Blake wrote a poem which expresses this idea:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise (K 179).

Any attempt to snatch at what may be got or to give the joy a lasting form perverts the experience. This idea is made clear in "My Pretty Rose Tree" and other poems. The innocent piper can allow others their own freedom and life. While appreciating the child he shows no desire to seize it.

In the "Introduction" to the *Innocence* there is a dialogue between the piper and the child. But in the "Introduction" to *Experience*, a conversation is started, but the Earth does not understand and no communication takes place (See Figure 9). Thus the introductory poem of *Innocence* is here replaced by two related monologues, "Introduction" and "Earth's Answer." Before going to the text of the poem a few lines about the design of "Introduction" are inevitable. Scholars like Keynes, Grant, and Wilkinson incline to think that the figure in the lower part of the cloud (See Figure 8) is Earth, turning her back to the Bard and to the Holy Word i.e. God. But Erdman (1975) argued that this figure is either the Bard or the Holy Word with a halo in some copies reclining on a prophetic scroll from where he is calling the Earth in her fallen state.



Figure 9.

Source: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>

Erdman (1975) observed:

Earth in these scenes lie very much on the earth or on the grass, with some sort of a vegetable pillow. This cloud-borne "lounging divan" seems quite out of character, whereas it is very much like scroll desk and divan in *Night Thoughts* (Plate, 73) on which a reclining poet faces us so that we can see the pen in his hand. According to the text of this poem Earth is neither arisen from her den, though it be but grass, nor ready for a halo (pp. 72-73).

This view was earlier suggested by Erdman himself in his joint work with Moore, in their edition, *The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile*, published in 1973. But Jean H. Hagstrum had challenged this view in the review of the book. Hagstrum (1974) in her review, subscribing to the view point of

G. Keynes and J.E. Grant, categorically argued that the figure resting on a cloud in a star-studded sky used by Blake in his strategic "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience* "must surely be identified not as the future Bard, but as the future Earth. ...Her position resembles that of a clear but unmistakable Blakean icon . . . the position of Earth, of the Clod of Clay or Nature in *Thel*, of the sleeping girl in *America*, and of "Vala" in *The Four Zoas*" (pp. 643-645). In the revised edition of the *Note Book* by Erdman & Moore, Erdman finally concedes to this view point (p. iii). The whole text of the poem is included in a multiple cloud in a starry indigo sky, as pointed out by Erdman (1975), the number of stars differing in each copies (p. 72).

There are actually two voices in the poem: the voice of the Bard ("Hear the voice of the Bard!" -line 1), and the voice of the Holy word, (Calling "the lapsed soul" in line 6). The text reads:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
 Who Present, Past and Future, sees;
 Whose ears have heard
 The Holy Word
 That walked among the ancient trees
 Calling the lapsed soul
 And weeping in the evening dew-
 That might control
 The starry pole
 And fallen, fallen light renew (Ll. 1-10; K 210).

Obviously ll. 4-7 allude to *Genesis* 3:8 where Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the Garden." Admitting this evident reference to the Bible, scholars at the same time point out difficulties and inconsistencies. First of all the voice heard in the *Genesis* is that of God, that of Jehovah the law giver and vengeful tyrant who becomes in Blake's later Prophecies the Urizenic father-priest-king image. Secondly, as noted by Frye (1966), "the Holy Word in Genesis walked in the garden not in the "evening dew" but in the "cool of day", not to weep and forgive but to bind them to the soil, and to place woman in a position of virtual servitude to man" (p. 12).

But a close reading of the poem and of the Bible passages reveals that Blake in this poem is interpreting the Fall narrative and its consequences in his own ingenious way. The Holy Word that walked among the ancient trees is at the same time God the Father who is Creator and his Holy Word who is God the Son and Saviour. This Holy Word of course became flesh and dwelt among us in flesh only at a later stage. Yet, this Word was already there in and with God the Father from all eternity. They are identified as one in *John* 1:1. This Word who was with God, this Word who was God walked among the trees. When God the Father was walking in Eden, the Christ was with Him already. Rather they were walking together. And in the aspect of God the Son and Saviour he was weeping for the lapsed soul, seeing that the soul is plunged into Experience and materialism symbolized by the dew. Consider this passage by Blake (1951) from *Jerusalem* which was written much later:

Thus Albion sat... And must have died, but the divine Saviour descended among the infant loves & affections, and the divine vision wept like evening dew on every herb upon the breathing ground (plate 42: 1-6).

Commenting on this passage Raine (1968) observes that here Blake uses "the same image of the Saviour ("the Holy Word") "weeping in the evening dew" and called the "lapsed soul", here Albion, the fallen Man (p. 28). According to Catholic theology, God has only the eternal present, and so at the very moment of the Fall, the Holy Word was implicitly there weeping over the Fall. He knew He was to assume the role of controlling "the starry pole." It was He who was to plunge into the nature of man and to renew the fallen light. Thus he must, "fallen, fallen light renew" (L. 10), the first "fallen" referring to the Word's Incarnation. For Blake, the redemptive role of the Saviour and his doctrine of love and forgiveness of sins were more significant and understandable than the wrath and punishment of God the Father. This doctrine of Forgiveness, is highly extolled and explained by Blake. It is Jesus who points out that our heavenly Father does not judge: "he makes his sun rise on the evil, and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ...Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Matthew* V: 45b-48). The Forgiveness of sins is the fundamental assumption for

Blake. The Brotherhood of man is based on it and without Brotherhood we cannot exist (*Jerusalem*, 96:28). In his controversial poem *The Everlasting Gospel* Blake gives greatest praise to Jesus forgiving the adulterous woman (*John* VIII: 3-11) thereby tearing to pieces the Law of Moses. The mark on Cain's brow which forbade anybody to kill him (*Genesis* 4:15) was in Blake's transcript of *Genesis*, the kiss of "the Forgiveness of Sins written upon the Murderer's Forehead." In *Jerusalem* again in a close parody of "Love one another..." (*John* 12:14) Blake wrote: "If you forgive one another, so shall Jehovah Forgive you, that He Himself may dwell among you (plate 61:17)."

In the second stanza of "Introduction" therefore, the Holy Word is announcing this hope of forgiveness, and the assurance that the Holy Word will "fallen, the fallen light renew." This reading of the stanza, I think resolves the crux of the problem in understanding this poem.

In the next two stanzas He is calling the lapsed soul by name i.e., Earth, and invites her to return to the light, to cast away experience and return to the pristine golden state of innocence. Earth is representing the mankind (the people on earth) and dewy grass is the realm of experience. Similarly, "starry floor" and "watery shore" are representative symbols of Urizenic world of experience. Consider the lines:

O Earth, O Earth return!

Arise from out the dewy grass

Night is worn,

And the morn

Rises from the slumbrous mass (Ll. 11-15; K 210).

These lines immediately remind one of Luvah's words in *The Four Zoas*, Night the Ninth: "Come forth, O Vala, from the grass and from the silent dew, / Rise from the dews of death for the Eternal Man is Risen" (Ll. 388-389; K 367).

The first words spoken by Jesus through the mouth of his "Bard" are, appropriately enough, quoted from the Hebrew Prophets. The first line refers partly to an Old Testament scene where Jeremiah warns King Zedekiah of Judah of his invincible folly, and prophesies that because they forsook the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other Gods and served them, because of their continued oppression and unrighteousness, the Lord will chastise Judah in the hands of the enemy King Nebuchadnezzar. Asking the people then to choose between the way of life and the way of death (*Jeremiah* 21:8) and after a series of warnings, Jeremiah made a desperate cry "O Land [earth], land, land, / hear the word of the Lord" (*Jeremiah* 22:29). A century earlier to Blake, Milton, "after twenty years spent in defending the liberty of the English people, helplessly watching them choose "a Captain back for Egypt", could express himself only in the same terms, in a passage at the end of *The Ready and Easy Way* that may have focused Blake's attention on his source", remarked Frye (1957) and quoted:

Thus much I should perhaps have said, though I were sure I should have spoken only to Trees and Stones; and had none to cry to, but with the Prophet, *O Earth, Earth, Earth!* to tell the very soil itself, what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to (p. 62).

Whether Blake was familiar with Milton's text is not our immediate concern. Even if that is granted, what is more important to us is that Blake's lines ultimately go back to Jeremiah's cry.

There is also an echo in the same line from *Isaiah* (XXI: 11-12): "One is calling to me from Seir, watchman, what of the Night? Watchman, what of the Night? The watchman says: The Morning comes, and also the night: if you will inquire, inquire come back [return] again".

Considering the last stanza of the "Introduction", Turn away no more; Why wilt thou turn away? The starry floor The wat'ry shore, Is given thee till the break of day (Ll. 16-20; K 210); one cannot miss the allusion to the biblical sense of the created world as a protection against chaos, usually symbolized in the Bible by the sea, as a firmament in the midst of the waters. This is the sense of *Job* 38:11: "Thus far shall you come and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped." It is this verse that Blake had in mind when he spoke of the "watry shore" as given to Earth until the Last Judgement; it is the same guarantee that God gave to Noah in the figure of the rainbow.

Just as in the *Genesis* story Adam and Eve were not ready to face God, so also here in this poem Earth is not ready to face the Holy Word. In *Genesis*, Adam said to God, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (3:10). And when God questions them, Adam and Eve are not directly admitting what they have done. They are attributing the responsibility of their deed to others (*Genesis* 3:12-13). Similarly without answering to the bard, or to the Holy Word, Earth turns away, and gives the answer

only in the next poem. That is why, both the bard and the Holy Word are asking her “to turn away no more” (L. 16).

The Holy Word Christ invites the mankind to arise from the world of experience to the golden state of glory. But, the suppressing strength and pressure of the Urizenic and jealous Jehovah’s teachings as emphasized by the institutionalized Church, make the voice of Christ both inaudible and unintelligible to man, Earth. Hence the Bard, William Blake joins the Holy Word and turns our attention to Christ’s clarion call of liberty and renewed life of glory. This I think is the central message of the poem “Introduction” of Experience.

In the poem “Earth’s Answer”, Earth personified as a woman/mother representing humanity as a whole, cannot respond because she is imprisoned by her fears of the false image of God of the conventional religion, the Urizenic Jehovah (See Figure 10).

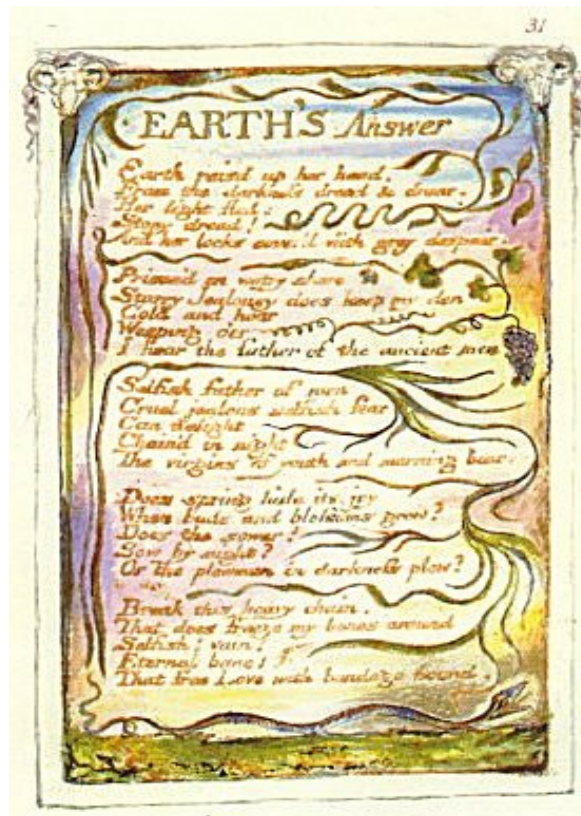


Figure 10.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blake_Earth's_Answer.jpg

Remember that Adam and Eve in *Genesis* were afraid of God and hid themselves. While in *The Four Zoas* in the Last Judgment (Night the Ninth) Vala is hearing the invitation of Luvah and joyfully welcoming it, and “rises among flowers & look toward the Eastern clearness” and “she walks yea runs, her feet are wing’d...” and asks, “where dost thou dwell? for it is thee I seek;” (Ll. 390-95; K 367), in the “Earth’s Answer” Earth is not accepting the invitation. Earth or mankind is chained by the stony laws of prohibition, issued by the jealous God. In the text of the poem, Earth is deprived of light:

Earth raised up her head
From the darkness dread & drear
Her light fled,
Stony dread!

And her lock cover’d with grey despair (Ll. 1-5; K 210).

These pictorial lines lead us to an atmosphere of darkness, dread and despair. The sense of desolation and impotence is keenly felt. Earth is in grey despair. In the engraved plate of this poem, this sense of desolation is pictured not in a direct way. At the lowest end of the plate we can see a worm like serpent gliding and hissing

(See Figure 10). From above the phrase “father of” in line 10 and shooting from “of” is a grape vine with a ripe bunch of grapes in the margin. Erdman points out that the serpent is symbolizing a man turned to serpent due to deprivation, as in another poem in the *Note Book*, which eventually became “Infant Sorrow”. Erdman (1975, p. 73) observes further: “It seems apparent that the grapes and serpent brought into illuminate ‘Earth’s Answer’ represent the parallel lament of the bound male, turned to a serpent by deprivation.”

Earth cannot hear the voice of the Holy Word who is “weeping in the evening dew”. What she can hear is reflected in:

Cold and hoar Weeping O’er I hear the Father of the ancient men
Selfish father of men! (Lines 8-11; K 211).

The weeping over of the Father of the ancient men, is not out of love for the fallen mankind. It is only a weeping out of frustration and self-pity. And this Father is the jealous tyrant of the Old Testament. As Gillham (1966) points out, this Urizenic Father God, is so powerful that He could force man to be happy and virtuous just by willing it... but the tyrant always wanted to be loved for himself, and this means that his creatures must appear to submit voluntarily to him. The result in the Old Testament is a God who is continually giving His creatures too much latitude, and continually punishing them for not using their freedom as he wishes them to (p. 160).

Earth realizes only this sort of unseen, remote jealous God, who has chained her, just as the fallen angels were “cast down to hell and delivered into chains of darkness to be reserved unto judgement” (II *Peter* 2:4). This is the condition after the Fall. Before the Fall, God was known to Earth, He walked among the “ancient trees” of Eden and was the intimate of Adam and Eve until they became “lapsed souls.” After the Fall, Earth does not respond to the love of the Word or know him for what He is. Referring to the Word of God, St. John says that “In Him was life and the life was the light of men” (*John* 1:4). He goes on to say, “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (*John* 1:5) and also, “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not” (*John* 1:10). The Bard Blake, realizing that Earth is unable to hear the Word of God attempts to clarify to Earth, of God’s mercy and grace, but she is aware only of the jealous and capricious figure, often found in the Old Testament, whose love is possessive and who punishes his children when they are disobedient. As Gillham (1973) observes, “The Bard and Earth conceive God differently and so are hopelessly at cross purposes, and when he speaks of God’s grief at the Fall and his mercy in judgement which allows of regeneration, she remembers only the strict version of *Genesis* in which God curses the ground for the sake of Adam’s sin”(p. 48). In “Earth’s Answer” “Starry Jealousy” controls the universe. But in “Introduction” Blake is reminding Earth, as Raine (1968) pointed out, “that this rule is the condition of her fallen state: there is another ruler “who might control/The starry Pole”” (p. 27). She is not realizing the Holy Word as this controlling and redeeming power.

Many of the critics are reading a parallel sexual theme both in “Introduction” and in “Earth’s Answer”. The last stanzas of “Introduction” invite Earth to “arise from out the dewy grass” (L. 22). But this is not a categorical demand that she must leave her flesh, as noted by Gillham (1966), but “Rather she is to awaken to the flesh to realize it for what it is” (p. 158). But Earth cannot realize this invitation in the sense of uncontrolling love. For her God is the solitary, selfish and wilful being who is incapable of love but insists that Earth loves Him. She feels that she is enchained in the humiliation of prudish laws and customs which imply that the flesh is indecent and ugly. Life is poisoned and restrained by the stony, prohibitory laws and distortions imposed on its energies. Earth declares that “free love with bondage bound” (L. 25) is an absurdity. It is “selfish”. It is “vain”. It is an “Eternal bane” (Ll. 23-24; K 211). What she implicitly says is this: were I free, I should rejoice as the spring does in life. But I dare not allow the seed of love be planted, nor even prepare by heart to receive it. It should be noted that the understanding of the sexual theme in this poem is well in tune with the Biblical Tradition. The Prophets in The Old Testament considered the relationship of Man and God as the unity and fidelity of Spouses and St. Paul in his epistles compares the relationship of Christ and the Church as the union and loyalty in Marriage (*Isaiah* 54:5; *Jeremiah* 3:14; *Hosea* 2:19 & 20; *Ephesians* 5: 23, 24 & 32).

6. Result of the Study

We noted in the Review of Literature, the general tendency of critics and scholars at large to focus on the revolutionary and outrageous and satirical approach of Blake to the Bible, but for a few scholars. As observed by Fisher (1961), the theme of *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem* have been most laconically expressed as Fall and Redemption:

...The entire theme is foreshadowed in his Song of Innocence and of Experience, satirically corrected and sharpened in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, symbolically tried and proved in the minor prophecies, outlined in The Four Zoas, and completed in Milton and Jerusalem. Using his interpretation of the Bible

from Genesis to Revelation as a mode, he looks back to man's origin as to a garden newly planted and sown, and forward to his consummation as to a city "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. xxi:2). According to the four-fold method of interpreting scripture, Jerusalem is literally the earthly city, allegorically the body of the faithful, morally the believer, and anagogically the heavenly city of the Redeemed (pp. 222-223).

Closely associated with the notion of Fall and Redemption are the ideas of forgiveness of sins and Universal Brotherhood. The scholars are in consensus about these fundamental themes of the later prophecies. But, scholars like Ferber (1978) argued that in spite of Christ's prayer "Our Father," Blake's Universal Brotherhood is not based on "the notion of a transcendent father or creator", which for Blake was "a profound error"(p. 439). But then they did not or could not explain many of the passages of Blake like *The Four Zoas* 1:10-23, where Blake, speaking about the Universal Brotherhood of Eden, affirms:

what are the Natures of those Living Creatures the Heav'nly Father only knoweth. No Individual [Man del.] knoweth not, nor can know in all eternity (K 264).

These lines in italics are Blake's later additions in the MS by pencil which can be even as early as 1804. That is because the title page of *The Four Zoas*, though dated 1797, also bears the mark "Written and Revised 1795-1804." If the revision was made in 1804, that means it was done at a time when Blake began to take the Bible as it is, after learning Greek, Latin and Hebrew at the age of 45 in order to understand the core of the Bible. In his letter to his brother James on 30.1.1803 Blake wrote:

I go on merrily with my Greek & Latin; am very sorry that I did not begin to learn languages early in life as I find it very Easy; am now learning my Hebrew Aleph, Beta, Gimel [Blake had transcribed this in Hebrew Script, as Keynes reproduces it]. I read Greek as fluently as an Oxford Scholar & the Testament is my chief master: astonishing indeed is the English translation, it is almost word for word, & if the Hebrew Bible is as well translated, which I do not doubt it is, we need not doubt of its having been translated as well as written by the Holy Ghost (K 821-22).

Blake's revisions of *The Four Zoas* were possible after Blake had mastered Greek and after he had completely believed that the Bible is the work of the Holy Spirit. Precisely for that reason, Blake might have quoted in Greek itself, *Ephesians* 6:12 in the second title form, changed from *Vala* to *The Four Zoas*, where St. Paul says "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Note 4). If this is true, Blake is not contending against the Heavenly Father. Moreover from the evidence we get from Blake's letter to Thomas Butts on 25-4-1803, it is clear that Blake had faith in the Heavenly Father and turned to him in distress: "I had been reading the CXXXIX Psalm a little before your Letter arrived. I take your advice. I see the face of my Heavenly Father; he lays his Hand upon my Head & gives a blessing to all my works; why should I be troubled? Why should my heart & flesh cry out? I will go on in the Strength of the Lord; through Hell will I sing forth his Praises, that the Dragons of the Deep may praise him & that those who dwell in darkness & in the Sea coasts may be gather'd into his Kingdom" (K 823). The study shows that a reading or rereading of Blake's songs and prophetic works in the background of the Bible is very much rewarding and helpful for a better understanding of Blake's works.

7. Conclusion

Blake proclaimed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that conventional notions of heaven and hell created a false division between principles that must be married to be one complete whole: the union of the contraries, of desire and restraint, energy and reason, the promptings of Hell and the denials of Heaven. So also, in Blake's view point, innocence and experience came from one source and must converge to be complete. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is a deliberately conscious prophetic attempt by the bard William Blake. Following Jesus Christ, who launched staunch criticism against the self-righteous and the pharisaic attitude of the clergy of His times with their hypocritical insistence on holding on to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law, Blake too ventured to challenge many of the plausible fallacies in the institutionalized Church. Even when he sounded outrageous in many lines, he has always held on to his Bible in its totality and always endeavoured to comprehend it and decode it as the Great Code of Art and has never let the Biblical spirit die. The deceptively simple lyrics of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* were deliberate attempts of such decoding of the Bible in a language comprehensible for all the rank and file of society, while he reserved the sophisticated mythological interpretations of the Bible in his prophetic works. Blake's life time of endeavouring composite art could be a testimony for the faith in Jesus Christ as can be derived from the last stanza of one of his poems "You don't believe"(quoted here from *William Blake: Poems* (2004).: www.PoemHunter.com—The World's Poetry Archive):

Reason says “Miracle”: Newton says “Doubt.” Aye! That is the way to make all Nature out. “Doubt, doubt, and don’t believe without experiment”: That is the very thing that Jesus meant, When he said Only believe! believe and try! Try, try, and never mind the reason why (p. 254).

Blake’s condemnation of the institutionalized Church and the reason for it is cryptically inscribed on his Laōkoon plate (See Figure 1 above): Christianity is Art & Not Money / Money is its curse (*K* 777). This explains why Blake was never a practising Christian, in spite of his predilection for the Bible and its themes. When he advocated a life cherished by imagination, he admonishes the Christians to go back to the words and example of Jesus, who was simple, meek and mild and at the same time raging violently against corruption and money, and who upheld forgiveness of sins as most important and was the friend of sinners and publicans and the lowly-hearted and children. Blake too was raising his hand against the legalistic and triumphal attitude of the established church, developed by a strict moral-code often divulging the Scriptural text to suit purposes, which often reflected the Pharisaic self-righteousness, on which Christ had vehemently pronounced his fulminating curses. Blake, enriched with the pristine imaginative innocence and at the same time growing mature in the world of experience, supported by his insight into the spirit of the Bible, concentrated to interpret the human soul’s two contrary states of innocence and experience and human events in the light and shade of the Scriptural narratives. Simultaneously he strived to shed light on the passages themselves, in his own ingenious way, giving great importance to the message of love and forgiveness of sins and belief in the Resurrection with Christ the Redeemer.

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Notes

Note 1. Blake's lines are usually quoted from: *Blake: Complete Writings with Variant Readings*. 1957: rpt. 1985. Oxford & New York: Oxford Univ. Press. All quotations from Blake follow this text, indicated by *K* followed by page number, unless otherwise mentioned; e.g., *K* 567.

Note 2. This is Blake's Annotation to p. 9 of Watson's book, no.2. (Or see *K* 390).

Note 3. All quotations from the Bible are, unless otherwise mentioned, from *The Holy Bible: containing the Old and New Testaments*. (2012). The New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India. Print. Citations will be referred to by the individual Book's name followed by Chapter & Verse.

Note 4. Blake quoting the Greek verse, had written below it Ephes. 5 Keph. 12 [in Greek Script] which is corrected probably by Keynes as 6:12. See *K* 263. The English translation given here is not the version in Keynes's book, but from the Revised Standard Version.

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