

“WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS”

WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE EZEKIEL’S
MERKABAH IN TEXT AND IMAGE

THE PÈRE MARQUETTE
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FOREWORD

The Joseph A. Auchter Family Endowment Fund generously supports the Père Marquette Lecture in Theology. The Fund was established as a memorial to their father by the children of Milwaukee-native Joseph A. Auchter (1894-1986), a banker, paper-industry executive, and long-time supporter of education.

The lecture presented here is the thirty-eighth in the series, inaugurated in 1969, that commemorates the missions and explorations of Père Jacques Marquette, S.J. (1637-1675). The lecture is offered annually under the auspices of Marquette University's Department of Theology.



CHRISTOPHER CHARLES ROWLAND

Christopher Charles Rowland is Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture and Fellow

of Queen's College, in England's prestigious Oxford University. Born 21 May 1947, he was educated at Doncaster Grammar School and Christ's College, Cambridge. At Cambridge, he earned the B.A. Theology Class I (Theological Tripos Part II with Hebrew Prize) in 1969, and a Class I Theological Tripos Part III (New Testament) in 1970. He was awarded the M.A. Degree in 1973, and in 1975 the Ph.D., for a dissertation entitled *The Influence of the First Chapter of Ezekiel on Judaism and Early Christianity*.

From 1974 to 1979, Rowland was Lecturer in Religious Studies (with special responsibility for New Testament studies) at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. From 1979 to 1991, he served as Fellow and Dean of Jesus College, and University Lecturer in Divinity, both at the University of Cambridge. Since that time, he has held the Dean Ireland's professorship at Oxford University. From 1998 to 2000, he served as chair of the Faculty Board of Theology.

Rowland has published widely across the fields of New Testament and Christian origins, where he has had a special interest in apocalyptic, and liberation theology. His many books and articles testify to the broad range of his interests, including in recent years a number of important contributions to the emerging fields of the history of biblical exegesis, as well as the reception history of the Bible. The many books he has written or edited include: *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (1982); *Christian Origins: An Account of the*

Setting and Character of the Most Important Messianic Sect of Judaism (1985; revised edition, 2002); *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery* (1988); *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (1989, with Mark Corner); *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (2004, with Judith Kovacs); *Liberation Theology UK* (1995, edited with John Vincent); *Understanding Studying Reading: New Testament Essays in Honour of John Ashton* (1998, edited with Crispin Fletcher-Louis); *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (edited 1999); *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader* (2002, edited with Andrew Bradstock); and *Apocalyptic in History and Tradition* (2002, edited with John Barton).

Not content with published contributions to the field, Rowland has also been very active both in mentoring the work of younger scholars, and in cooperation with scholars in Europe, the United States, and South America. At Oxford, he founded an interdisciplinary seminar in the history of biblical interpretation, with the express intention of examining not only texts, but also a wide range of other media, including art and music. This particular interest will be put nicely on display in today's Père Marquette Lecture. Rowland is also an editor for the Blackwell Bible Commentaries, a new series focused on the "impact history" of biblical texts. During a sabbatical leave during the present academic year, he is at work on a book on William Blake's biblical exegesis, tenta-

tively entitled *Blake and the Bible*, for Yale University Press.

Mickey L. Mattox
The Conversion of St. Paul, 2007

“WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS”
WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE EZEKIEL’S
MERKABAH IN TEXT AND IMAGE

This year marks the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of William Blake, the English poet, engraver, and self-styled prophet. His stanzas, popularly known as “Jerusalem,” have become the unofficial national anthem for millions of British people. The words, from Blake’s “Preface to Milton,” are familiar:

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pastures seen?

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold!
Bring me my Arrows of desire!
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,

Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land.

Would to God that all the Lord's people were
Prophets.
Numbers xi. 29V.

The four stanzas may be familiar. What will be less so is the fact that Blake penned the words "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets" underlining the importance of prophecy for all people. This was not a specialist vocation, for "Every honest man is a prophet; he utters his opinion both of private and public matters." Prophecy is not about prediction, but about "speaking out," particularly in the ways that the biblical prophets spoke against iniquity, injustice and oppression.

This lecture marks the anniversary of Blake's birth by considering the way in which this remarkable figure in English literature and religion looked back to his prophetic predecessors such as Ezekiel, as both his inspiration and his spiritual ancestor. In his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Blake imagines sitting with Ezekiel and asking him questions about his prophetic ministry. This indicates that among the prophets Ezekiel was crucial. This is borne out by Blake's writing and his painting. The lecture today will consider aspects of this and also show what an important inheritance of interest and fascination in the prophecy of Ezekiel there was for Blake to draw on.

1. MERKABAH MYSTICISM

One of the most significant discoveries over the last fifty years of biblical scholarship has been the recognition of the importance of merkabah mysticism for understanding the New Testament and emerging Judaism at the beginning of the Common Era. In recent years the Theology Department in this university has made an important contribution to that, and it is a privilege to be able to explore one, perhaps surprising aspect of that, in this year's Père Marquette Lecture.

Thirty years of studying Jewish mysticism has led to a growing unease with all sorts of abstractions, of which mysticism must be one of the most obfuscating. William Blake the English prophet, poet and artist, is often described as a mystic, in order to separate his work from the mundane and the material. Such dualism is not only a poor encapsulation of Blake's thought but perpetuates a view of mysticism which sees it as otherworldly and escapist. No doubt mystics down the centuries, whether through their visions or their detachment, have encouraged a world-denying attitude, but this hardly represents the extraordinary mix we find between the practical and the imaginative or intellectual. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the case of Paul, who has interest in divine mysteries but also evinces a rare ability in word and deed to engage in the practical politics of community organisation.

April DeConick helpfully points out that “mysticism” is not a word actually used by ancient people to describe their experiences.

“When the early Jews and Christians describe their mystical experiences in a single word, they do so most often by employing the term ‘*apokalypsis*,’ an ‘apocalypse’ or ‘revelation.’” In the Jewish and Christian period-literature, these religious experiences are described as waking visions, dreams, trances and auditions which can involve spirit possession and ascent journeys. The culmination of the experience is transformative in the sense that the Jewish and Christian mystics thought they could be invested with heavenly knowledge, join the choir of angels in worship before the throne, or be glorified in body. As a modern term, therefore, it refers to a “tradition within early Judaism and Christianity centred on the belief that *a person directly, immediately and before death can experience the divine, either as a rapture experience or one solicited by a particular praxis.*”¹

Merkabah mysticism is a very general way of describing a phenomenon often alluded to in rabbinic texts as *ma’aseh merkabah*, which had to do with the interpretation of the first chapter of Ezekiel. This

1 April D. DeConick, “What is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?” in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April D. DeConick, Symposium Series 11 (Society of Biblical Literature: Atlanta, 2006), 1-24.

describes that dramatic moment when the prophet Ezekiel, in exile in Babylon, sitting by a river has a dramatic vision in which he sees God enthroned in glory, on what appears to be a chariot, the Hebrew *merkabah*. The tortuous description offered reflects the prophet's difficulty in putting into words exactly what he saw. He saw creatures, eyes, flame of fire and above a dome God enthroned, appearing in human form. Not surprisingly this text caught the imagination of later interpreters, and it is almost certain that in addition to explaining what went on for Ezekiel these interpreters also believed that like Ezekiel they could catch a glimpse of what Ezekiel had seen. To put it in the words of one of the most distinguished interpreters of the history of the interpretation of this chapter, David Halperin: “When the apocalyptic visionary ‘sees’ something ... we may assume that he is seeing the ... vision as he has persuaded himself it really was, as (the prophet) would have seen it, had he been inspired wholly and not in part.”²

It is probable that meditation on passages like Ezekiel 1, set as it is in exile and the aftermath of a previous destruction of the Temple, would have been particularly apposite, as the rabbis sought to come to terms with the devastation of 70 CE. Of course, if the practical methods were among the most closely guarded secrets of the tradition, and if some influential rabbis were hostile to them, we should expect

2 D. Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot: early Jewish responses to Ezekiel's vision* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1998), 71.

the sources to be very reticent about them, especially when the practice was liable to cause theological and halakic deviance. Controversy concerning the status and legitimacy of the tradition is likely to have occurred during the first century, probably because of the way in which such traditions were developed in extra-rabbinic circles, not least Christianity. We know Paul was influenced by apocalyptic ascent ideas (2 Cor 12:2-4); he emphasises the importance of this visionary element as the basis of his practice (Gal 1:12 and 16; cf. Acts 22:17). Paul's apocalyptic outlook enabled him to act on his eschatological convictions; his apocalypse of Jesus Christ became the basis for his practice of admitting Gentiles to the messianic age without the practice of the Law of Moses. Problems with apocalypticism were a common feature of emerging Christianity and Judaism. In this there was common ground even if there was not much evidence in their literature of either tolerance on the part of Christians or interest on the part of the Jews.

There were many things that fascinated the ancient interpreters, but, arguably, most important of all was the way in which the prophet dared to describe the enthroned divinity. The Hebrew of this already shows signs of increasing the reserve. In addition to the piling up of similitudes such as 'in the likeness of ...', the Masoretic text by the omission of one letter almost certainly changes in the likeness of a man to in the likeness of fire, thereby reducing the anthro-

pomorphism, though this could not be eradicated completely, as the following verse goes on to describe the bodily form of the divinity. This became the basis of extravagant speculations about the body of God in later mystical Judaism, which may have both had their antecedents in Judaism and affected Christianity as it presented Christ as the visible, bodily, appearance of the unseen divinity, the words used in both John 1:18 and Col 1:15. So, despite the prohibition of images and the repeated assertion that humans could not see God and live, passages like Ezekiel and its companion visionary text Isaiah 6 indicate that not only was God visible in human form but that humans did manage to see the divine and live. Without wanting to get into the complexities of the relationship between the manifestation of the unseen god in human form and the prohibition of images, two points need to be made. Firstly, in Genesis 1:26-7 the Hebrew which is used for “let us create man in our image” is a word which concerns physical representation (as in a statue) and not some vague likeness which might be related to moral or ethical qualities. Secondly, within the earliest strands of the Hebrew Bible there are references to the *mal’ak YHWH*, the angel of the Lord, which appears in human form, sometimes indistinguishable from humans (Genesis 16), at other times more apparently ‘otherworldly’ (Judges 13). These biblical examples provide us with parallels to the picture in which a heavenly being possibly (Judges 13:3) acts as God’s representative in such a way that

he could be thought of as God himself (e.g. Judges 13:5ff.). The distinguished biblical commentator, W. Eichrodt has recognised this aspect of Jewish theology and comments on it in the following way:

Among the narratives relating to the angel one particular group stands out because it describes an emissary of Yahweh who is no longer clearly distinguishable from his master but in his appearing and speaking clothes himself with Yahweh's own appearance and speech ... Consequently when the words of the *mal'ak* in Gen. 21:18 and 22:11 make use of the divine 'I', this is not to be regarded as a naive self-identification on the part of the emissary with the one who has given him the orders but as a sign of the presence of God in the angel-phenomenon.³

While little detail is given about these angelophanies, it appears that in the earliest strands of biblical tradition there could be an appearance of an angel which in some sense was regarded as communicating the presence of God himself. Thus it was possible to call this being God (Gen. 31:11 and 13) despite the fact that this attribute was derived from his function as God's representative.

My intention in pointing to all this is not to pick a out pieces of information which may be of interest to the ancient interpretation of the first chapter of Ezekiel, so much as to pave the way for the main con-

3 W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM 1967), ii.33.

cerns of today’s lecture: the art and writing of William Blake.

2. WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

William Blake was a visionary who communed with angels and even his dead brother regularly. Memorably in a later work he outlines his peculiar visionary experience in words which are central to Blake’s imaginative and allegorical style:

What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do
you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a
Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company
of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is
the Lord God Almighty I question not my Cor-
poreal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would
Question a Window concerning a Sight I look
thro it & not with it.

(Catalogue 1810, on ‘The Last Judgement’)

Blake resists staying with what *appears* to be there as if it has no other dimensions to its meaning. One looks through it or around it to appreciate another dimension of existence. This is the same as the ancient Jewish mystics (John included) who, as they read, meditated upon and studied the prophetic visions, found that—in biblical words—the ‘door of perception’ opened up to them another realm of existence.

For Blake seeing with the imaginative eye was on a par with the physical sight.⁴ In the reader's engagement with Blake's texts, word and image jostle with each other in the page. Blake demands the involvement of the reader/spectator in creating meaning from poems in which there is no definitive meaning waiting to be discovered. The kind of interpretative process set up by Blake is illustrated by a passage from one of his letters, which offers a way of understanding the heart of Blake's hermeneutics. Here Blake comes as close as anywhere to describing what is going on in his work, and it is an emphasis on the effects of the text. It is in a letter where Blake is asked precisely for a code to help the reader/viewer understand his work:

You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. But you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the ancients consider'd what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Esop, Homer, Plato... Why is the Bible more Entertaining & Instructive than any other

⁴ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton 1971). Cf. Blake, "We are led to Believe a Lie When we see not Thro the Eye," and "I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it & not with it."

book? Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation and but mediately to the understanding or reason.'⁵

Blake came from an artisan background and was apprenticed to an engraver in London. His expertise in this craft was fundamental to his art. He so refined and perfected his skill that he evolved a way of producing the exercise of his own imagination in his own unique method of engraving. The engraving technique he perfected enabled him to translate the fruits of his inspiration immediately onto copper plates. Thereby inspiration and execution came to be united in a way with few parallels in the history of artistic production.

In his work, Blake was able to develop his own mythology, rooted in the symbols and images of the biblical prophecies and apocalypses, to challenge the domination of deference to the old words and phrases. He was an implacable enemy of devotion to 'memory' (tradition) at the expense of inspiration or imagination. Blake's relationship with the Bible was a complex one, and it would be possible to devote this lecture to what Blake wrote about the Bible. While there can be few writers and artists whose work is so permeated with biblical themes, Blake is at the same time one of the Bible's fiercest critics, not least in the way he inveighed against a theology which viewed God as a remote monarch and lawgiver as well as the

5 "Letter to Trusler," in Blake, *Complete Writings*, (Oxford, 1966), 793-4.

preoccupation with the words of the text. Throughout his life the Bible dominated Blake's imaginative world, even in the early period when he was more critical.

3. BLAKE, PROPHECY AND EZEKIEL

The central image of Blake, from whenever he first formulated his mythology, is Ezekiel's, the *Merkabah*, Divine Chariot or form of God in motion. The Living Creatures or Four Zoas are Ezekiel's and not initially Blake's, a priority of invention that Blake's critics, in their search for more esoteric sources, sometimes evade. Ezekiel, in regard to Blake's *Jerusalem*, is like Homer in regard to the Aeneid: the inventor, the precursor, the shaper of the later work's continuities. From Ezekiel in particular Blake learned the true meaning of prophet, visionary orator, honest man who speaks into heart of a situation to warn: if you go on so, the result is so; or as Blake said, a seer and not an arbitrary dictator.⁶

Blake recognizes the prophets of the Bible as kindred spirits; in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he dines with Isaiah and Ezekiel:

6 H. Bloom, "Blake's *Jerusalem*: The Bard of Sensibility and the Form of Prophecy," in H. Bloom, *The Ringer in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 65-79.

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition Ezekiel said, “The philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception: some nations held one principle for the origin & some another; we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius; it was this that our great poet King David desired so fervently & invokes so pathetic’ly, saying by this he conquers enemies & governs kingdoms; and we so loved our God that we cursed in his name all the deities of surrounding nations, and asserted that they had rebelled; from these opinions the vulgar came to think that all nations would at last be subject to the jews.’

“This,” said he, “like all firm perswasions, is come to pass; for all nations believe the jews’ code and worship the jews’ god, and what greater subjection can be?”

I heard this with some wonder, & must confess my own conviction. After dinner ... I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right & left side? he answer’d, “the desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite; this the North American tribes practise, & is he honest

who resists his genius or conscience, only for the sake of present ease or gratification?"

The various ways in which Ezekiel's vision informs Blake's art and illuminated books represent a significant part of his distinctive interpretation of the Bible and are closely related to the understanding of politics and theology which make him such a distinctive (and neglected) interpreter of the Bible in the history of English theology. Whether Blake was influenced by merkabah mysticism itself, I cannot at this stage decide. Many have pointed out that Blake seems to allude to a kabbalistic doctrine that Adam was a microcosm of the whole universe (*Jerusalem*, Plate 27). It may be possible to make a case for Blake being influenced by other aspects of Jewish kabbalistic tradition. What is clear is that Blake is part of the account one would want to give of the influence of Ezekiel 1 on Christian interpreters.

Whether or not Blake used Ezekiel's vision as the trigger of his own visions is unclear. We cannot, therefore, respond to the title 'Blake and merkabah mysticism' by suggesting that Blake was influenced by merkabah mysticism itself, though he was deeply indebted to the prophetic inspiration of Ezekiel. What is not in doubt, however, is that Ezekiel's *merkabah* has a prominent place in Blake's work, forming the inspiration of his major poetic work *The Four Zoas*, in which the mysteries of the human character are plumbed.

4. HUMANITY IN DIVINITY

The link between humanity and divinity, as well as the complexity of human personality is hinted at in Blake's painting 'Ezekiel's Wheels' (1804, Museum of Fine Art, Boston), and redolent of that humanity in divinity found in the Jewish midrash and early patristic exegesis of the *merkabah*. What is striking about this picture is the prominence of the human figure among the four creatures (man, lion, ox and eagle) that surround the divine throne-chariot.

Whether Blake knew the details of Jewish interpretation, we cannot be sure, though many have suggested that he may have been influenced by cabalistic ideas, especially in his later works. It is less the establishment of a genealogical connection than the demonstration of an affinity of interest in the *merkabah* and its relation with the human that I want to suggest. In Gen 28:12 Jacob's vision of angels ascending and descending to God was painted by Blake and was in antiquity the subject of much speculation about the link between heaven and earth:

R. Hiyya the Elder and R. Yannai disagreed. One maintained: they were ascending and descending the ladder; while the other said; *they were ascending and descending on Jacob* ... Thus it says, Israel in whom I will be glorified; it is thou whose features are engraved on high; they ascended on high and

saw his features and they descended below and found him sleeping.⁷

There is an earthly and heavenly dimension of Jacob's *persona*.⁸ What is important about the patriarch is that his features are those which are part of the divine *merkava* and as such looking at Jacob would enable any one who was aware of this to know something of the secret of the *merkava*. This is made more evident in the targumim on Gen 28:12, where it is stated explicitly that Jacob's features are those which are engraved on the throne of glory. There are four versions of this legend, three of which (Pseudo-Jonathan, the Fragmentary Targum and Neofiti) are

7 Cf. Blake, *Milton*, plate 14: "As when a man dreams, he reflects not that his body sleeps, Else he would wake; so seem'd he entering his Shadow: but with him the Spirits of the Seven Angels of the Presence Entering; they gave him still perceptions of his Sleeping Body ... for when he enter'd into his Shadow: Himself: His real and immortal Self; was as appear'd to those Who dwell in immortality, as One sleeping on a couch of gold ..."

8 Explored in Jarl E. Fossum, "The Son of Man's Alter Ego. John 1.51, Targumic Tradition and Jewish Mysticism," in *The Image of the Invisible God* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 135-151; and in S. Bunta, "The likeness of the image: Adamic motifs and anthropology in rabbinic traditions about Jacob's image enthroned in heaven," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 37 (2006): 55-84, esp. 56-63.

substantially the same. The version in Ps.-Jonathan is reproduced here:

And he dreamed and behold a ladder was fixed on earth and its top stretched to the height of heaven. And behold angels who went to Sodom and who had been banished from them because they revealed the secrets of the lord of the world. And they went until the time that Jacob left the house of his father. And they escorted him in kindness to Bethel. And on that day they went up to the high heavens, spoke and said, Come see Jacob the pious whose features are fixed on the throne of glory which you desire to look on. So the rest of the holy angels of the LORD descended to look on him.

It represents a view we meet elsewhere in the rabbinic tradition where all the patriarchs are identified with the chariot (*merkava*).⁹ In the targumic passage either Jacob was identified with the face of the man on the chariot or possibly with the human form of God seated upon it.

The figure of a man was linked with ancestors like Jacob or Abraham. These passages link the human in

9 See also b.Hul 91b. The significance of the form of the ancestors for understanding the likeness of God is stressed also in b.BB 58a: “R. Ba’anah used to mark out caves ... When he came to the cave of Adam, a voice came from heaven saying, Thou hast seen the likeness of my likeness (i.e. Abraham), my likeness itself (i.e. Adam) thou shalt not behold.”

the midst of the divine with the environs of divinity, much as Blake does in his picture. Blake wants to go further as he does in his poem 'The Divine Image'. That identification of the divine with the human, which is at the heart of the speculation about the human form of the divinity, is also crucial to early Christianity. Here the pre-existent Christ becomes the human form of the invisible God as biblical theophanic—whether of God appearing in human form or of the Angel of the lord—are identified with Christ. In early Christian use of this passage the human figure was linked with Christ (John 12:41; Justin, *Dialogue* 126).

5. BLAKE AND THE 'WHEEL WITHIN THE WHEEL' OF JOACHIM OF FIORE

In this Blake had been anticipated by his great apocalyptic predecessor, Joachim of Fiore.¹⁰ Joachim used the Book of Revelation as a way of understanding history and thereby emboldened groups and individuals to see themselves as being part of imminent eschatological events. There are two basic threads which run through Joachim's hermeneutic: firstly, that everything which happened in the Old Testament has its

10 *Liber Figurarum: Rotae Ezechiel*, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, MS 258A f. 16v.; *The Vision of Ezekiel*, 1517, Palazzo Pitto, Florence. See also M. Reeves and B. Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae of Joachim of Fiore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1972).

own actuality in time, yet is also a sign pointing forward to a future happening in the new dispensation which is (or will be) a fuller disclosure of God's purpose for humanity. The second thread is a trinitarian reading of history in which a coming third age, that of the Spirit, characterized by an outburst of spiritual activity in the form of monastic renewal, was imminent, even if this age of renewal and struggle might be expected to last for a significant amount of time. In his later years Joachim complemented his literary expositions of the Apocalypse with images that encapsulated the heart of his beliefs about history and salvation.

Most of Joachim's remarkable artistic representations concern the nature of history, applying in particular his distinctive typological interpretation of history which uses both the Apocalypse and trinitarian theology as an interpretative key, not only for the Bible but also for human history. Joachim's depiction of Ezekiel 1 relates to this. The 'wheel within the wheel' reflects his theory of concords between the Old and the New Testament (the New is hidden within the narrative texts of the Old). The creatures represent different aspects of the life of Christ, forms of interpretation of Scripture, the human character and the different orders of a future society (amplified in his depiction of the New Jerusalem). The centre of the wheel is taken up by Caritas (relevant to the 'tertium status') and the era of the Spirit.

Both Joachim and Blake trace a link between the divine and the human. For Joachim the basic human virtues are embraced by, and contained in, the glory of the *merkabah*. For Blake the relationship between human and divine is more intimate. It is unlikely that Blake knew anything about Joachim, but in certain respects his approach to Ezekiel has much in common with Joachim's, especially in its allegorizing of the text. What Blake termed the Four Zoas feature in much of his mature work, both poetry and art. Blake identified the Zoas with different aspects of the human personality (*Jerusalem* 36:31; 98:22): the body (which he termed Tharmas); reason (Urizen, the subject of the major critique of rationalist religion in Blake's work of the 1790's); emotions (Luvah) and, finally, imagination (Urthona). Blake also linked them with the four compass points (*Milton* 19:18; 34:35).

Plate 46 of 'Jerusalem' has long caused problem for interpreters. It is possible that its flaming chariot has affinities with Ezekiel's *merkabah*—the lion-headed human with eagles behind, perhaps with the hooves and horns of the ox. The eyes are there in the serpents which entwine the chariot, a feature of so many of Blake's drawings of the divinity. It may be an apocalyptic vision from which the riders in the chariot recoil. We are not told who the inhabitants are but the journey in the fiery chariot causes apprehensiveness and suggests that that journey is one of potential harm rather than joy, something which the

merkabah mystics feared as well as their journey to the divine regions.

Earlier Blake had used the ‘wheels within wheels’ as part of a critique of the ideology of the thinking of his day:

I see the Four-fold Man, The Humanity in deadly
sleep
And its fallen Emanation, the Spectre and its cruel
Shadow.
I see the Past, Present and Future existing all at
once
Before me. O Divine Spirit, sustain me on thy
wings,
That I may awake Albion from his long and cold
repose;
For Bacon and Newton, sheath’d in dismal steel,
their terrors hang
Like iron scourges over Albion: reasonings like
vast serpents
Infold around my limbs, bruising my minute
articulations.

I turn my eyes to the schools and universities of
Europe
And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Wolf
rages dire,
Wash’d by the Water-wheels of Newton: black
the cloth
In heavy wreaths folds over every nation: cruel
works
Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel,
with cogs tyrannic

Moving by compulsion each other, not as those
in Eden, which,
Wheel within wheel, in freedom revolve in har-
mony and peace.

(Jerusalem 15)

Here Blake relates the workings of the mind, which produce ignorance via machine-like activity, to the consequences in a society, which produces "religion hid in war." The ways of thinking in vogue at the universities, the mechanized life, has no room for thought, still less for imagination. The water wheels of Newton are mechanical and utterly predicatable and contrast with those in Eden. All of this echoes Ezek 1:16. In Eden the chariot of life surrounded by the four living creatures offers true humanity and the entry into the world of imagination.

An altogether more optimistic note is struck in Plate 98 whose words might be read as a chariot vision. When the infernal trinity, Bacon & Newton & Locke meet with Milton & Shakespeare & Chaucer, "The innumerable Chariots of the Almighty appeared in heaven." In this eschatological scenario "the Four living creatures chariots of humanity divine incomprehensible in beautiful paradise expand And the Four faces of Humanity ... going forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity and they conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic..." Here in the apocalyptic climax is what John of the Apocalypse says, we shall see his face, as indeed Ezekiel does. For Blake

that divine vision is the fullness of humanity revealed and enjoyed.

Humanity made in the divine image (subject of two contrasting poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*) thus reflects the divine. The balance between these characteristics in humanity is crucial. It is the dominance of reason over imagination which is at the heart of Blake’s critical aesthetics. The Four Zoas turn up in both ‘The Last Judgement’ and in a sketch for the title page of the late Genesis illustrations, where the contrasting habits of the four creatures are well brought out by Blake in the different postures they adopt. In the full length poem which describes their activities, they are described as “four Wonders of the Almighty, incomprehensible, pervading all, amidst and round about, fourfold, each in the other reflected: they are named Life’s—in Eternity—Four Starry Universes going forward from Eternity to Eternity.”¹¹ Their role as an apocalyptically inspired transformation in the human personality is hinted at in *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, where Blake writes:

The Four Living Creatures mention’d in Revela-
tions as Surrounding the throne; these I suppose to
have the chief agency in removing the old heavens
& the old earth to make way for the New heaven

11 *The Four Zoas*, 1797, 9:281. In Blake, *Complete Writings*, 364.

& the New earth, to descend from the throne of
God & of the Lamb.¹²

Blake completed (in draft form only as he never turned it into a printed text) a work called "The Four Zoas" written around 1797. Blake wrote in a letter of 1803 to Thomas Butts that he had written "a number of verses on a grand Theme... . From immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes thirty lines at a time, without premeditation & even against my will." This suggests that the poem was the result of what amounts to automatic writing.¹³ Its inspiration is, in part at least, Ezekiel, or perhaps Ezekiel as mediated through John's Apocalypse. The work is essentially an exploration of human psychology in which each creature becomes a multi-faceted aspect of the human personality. It is about the warfare between the different parts of the human character. The poem is complicated not only by the use of Blake's idiosyncratic imagery but also by his very distinctive use of biblical characters (thus Rahab becomes the chief opponent of Jesus, for example). The dream-like inspi-

12 *A Vision of the Last Judgement*, 1810, p. 82-84. In Blake, *Complete Writings*, 612.

13 The extent to which Blake's etching technology facilitated direct inspiration has been a matter of debate; see J. Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially pp. 42-43; and M. Phillips, *The Creation of the Songs: From manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

ration leads to a tangled story and the sudden change of subject that destroys the appearance of any continuous logical narrative. In this use of Ezekiel, Blake was drawing on the complex biblical hermeneutics of writers like Jacob Boehme, but, as with so much else in his writing, he made his own original interpretation.

6. DIVINE IN HUMAN IN BLAKE'S "JOB" SEQUENCE

Blake's reading of Job's story resembles that of the story of Paul in the New Testament where Saul becomes Paul and reads the Bible with new eyes. It is a personal upheaval in which the past seems to be left behind but in fact is taken up and read differently in the light of the apocalyptic vision. One might say that Paul, blameless according to the letter of the law (Phil 3:6), leaves it all behind (Phil 3:7) for the sake of a religion based on vision (Gal 1:12 & 16), rather than one based on memory. According to some recent writing on the Pauline letters, Paul was a Jew who was radicalized by a vision, which, as with some of his contemporaries, turned his life upside down. What happened for Paul was that he moved from a hermeneutic of the letter to one of the spirit and in his practice relaxed the entry requirements for outsiders to become members of the people of God. In support of this religion he used parts of the Bible to criticize other parts of scripture. This process is most apparent in Galatians, where the promise to Abra-

ham in Genesis is used to challenge the Torah and the Sinai covenant.

Despite Paul's rhetoric about the 'clean slate' of his conversion, his way of living and interpreting the world moved within the parameter of the ancestral scriptures. The extent of the continuity is brought out in the "Job" sequence too. The iconographical similarity between plates 1 and 21 suggests that Job remains inside the tabernacle of the Bible. The Old Testament (the religion of the book, is not abandoned (it is after all part of 'the Great Code of Art'). What really matters is how Job reads it and the relationship it has with the rest of his life.

The other key text in plate 21 stresses the abandonment of sacrifice: Christianity gave up Temple and sacrifice, or, better, interpreted them in a transferred sense of the life in community and fellowship. The contrast between Job praying and his friends sacrificing in 41.5 cf. 42.8 (pl. 18) is indicative of Job's change of position as a result of the personal upheaval, which he has undergone.

The Eliphaz and Elihu plates as well as the nightmare experience of Job, in different ways, bear witness to the importance of the dream and the vision in Blake's reading of the book of Job. This is a crucially important way of gaining access to God. Blake's insight focuses on the few texts about visions and dreams, especially chapters 38-41 which then offer an interpretative framework for his reading of the book as a whole.

Another aspect of visionary texts is the way in which contrasts between the visionary world, the world above, and the world below, contrast with one another. This is key to the understanding of all the visionary texts in the Bible, especially the Apocalypse. The dualistic characteristics of visionary texts appear in Job 1-2, where the reader is given a glimpse into the activities of the heavenly court. In the early plates of the sequence we find the distinct contrast between above and below. This disappears in the divine theophany (ch. 38-41). The overcoming of the division between heaven and earth is a major theme of the New Testament Apocalypse. According to the cosmology of the Book of Revelation, the present divide between heaven and earth, the age to come and this age, is only a *temporary phenomenon*. At the climax of his vision, John sees a new heaven and a new earth; but the significant thing about the new creation is that the contrast of the old creation has gone; heaven is no longer the dwelling place of the holy God separated from humanity, which dwells on earth (Rev. 21:3). What Blake has done (as is the case with John 1:14) is regard the collapsing of the human and divine, which in the Book of Revelation is an eschatological event, as something which is possible in this life. We shall see in our consideration of 'The Last Judgement' the extent to which Blake explores Johannine eschatological themes. In Engraving 17 God and humanity combine. Not only (to use the language of Revelation 21-2) do humans

see God face-to-face but the divine name is on their heads: "we shall be like him," writes the author of 1 John 3:2.

In the 'Job' sequence, Job's understanding of God changes from transcendent monarch to immanent divine presence, epitomized by the words quoted on plate 17: 'At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. If ye loved, ye would rejoice because I said I go to the Father' (Jn 14:20).

7. BRINGING THE ENTHRONED DIVINITY DOWN TO EARTH

A repeated visual and poetic theme in Blake's work is the challenge to divine monarchy and transcendence. This is achieved by the way he depicts divine figures enthroned, similar to God in "Ezekiel's Wheels," and then challenges notions of the transcendent divine monarch.

Blake's concern throughout the "Job" illustrations is to challenge the monarchical transcendent god of church and state, and to stress the prominence which is to be given to the visionary element in religion. Job begins as an adherent of a religion of the letter, but is overwhelmed by apocalypse and converted to a religion of the spirit. This is a sequence which reflects Blake's major theological concerns, but at several key points indicates Blake's exegetical insight, not least in his appreciation of the centrality of the apocalyptic

dimension of the book and the importance of a christological interpretation of it in the context of interpretation of the Christian Bible.¹⁴ Blake's focus on the apocalyptic framework of the book of Job, chapters 1-2 and 40, is used to portray Job's conversion from a book-religion to a religion of immediacy and vision. The dualistic framework which characterizes the opening depictions of Blake's 'Job' sequence is left behind at the end: God in Christ appears to Job and his wife without the apocalyptic, cosmological trappings evident in the opening visions. Therefore, there is a development in Job's theology, from belief in the divinely transcendent monarch to a religion of divine immanence. This change of understanding corresponds with one of Blake's major political pre-occupations: a challenge to the way in which theology becomes an ideological undergirding for political monarchy. This parallels similar challenges to theological monarchy as a paradigm for earthly politics elsewhere in the Blake corpus, e.g. *Europe* 11 and possibly "Ezekiel's Wheels."

Ezekiel 1 is also the basis for Blake's depiction of John's vision in Revelation 4-5. In his "The Four and Twenty Elders" (c.1803-05, Tate Gallery, London), Blake evokes the amber and blue of the Ezekiel vision while depicting the fourth and fifth chapters of Revelation together: the rainbow; the eyes; the sealed

14 In this respect I differ from David Brown in *Tradition and Imagination*. For Brown, Blake's interpretative brilliance rests more on imagination than exegesis.

scroll. Given the way the lamb is such a prominent feature in Blake's writing from the early *Songs of Innocence* to the later *Jerusalem*, the lamb in this picture is curiously passive and anonymous. Just as interesting in the light of its enormous impact on modern biblical study was Blake's fascination with the then newly discovered Apocalypse of Enoch.

The Apocalypse of Enoch, brought back from Ethiopia where it had been preserved by the Ethiopian Church, was first published at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Though Blake may have been aware of the book and had access to excerpts of translations from it for several years before, at the time of his death he left his illustrations for the Apocalypse incomplete.¹⁵ Among the unfinished sketches, one depicts I Enoch 14:8ff, a chapter which has much exercised the minds of students of Second Temple Judaism, as it offers an extended description of the vision of God, "The Great Glory," enthroned in the inmost recesses of the heavenly Temple. I Enoch 14 is full of imagery borrowed from Ezekiel 1, which, as we have seen, itself became the basis for later visionaries to glimpse again the awesome vision that appeared to the prophet by the waters of Babylon.

Blake's harshest caricature parody of the enthroned monarchical law-giver and insistence on the need for

15 J. Beer, "Blake's Changing View of History: the Impact of the Book of Enoch", in *Historicizing Blake*, ed. S. Clark and D. Worrall (London: Macmillan, 1994), 159 ff.

an understanding of God less abstract and remote is well exemplified by Plate 11 from *Europe*.¹⁶ The one enthroned with a book of brass, holds the power which holds humanity in thrall through the web of religion binding them to obedience to a religion of law rather than encouraging mutual forgiveness. Here is the forbidding deity characteristic of the religion of Europe, according to Blake, the remote deity, too exalted to wipe tears from eyes. For Blake, the worship of God involves a recognition of God not as remote creator divinity, captured in his Ancient of Days in part of the preface to *Europe, a Prophecy*, but in the person of others: "The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius..."¹⁷

BLAKE THE LATTER DAY EZEKIEL

Neither Ezekiel nor Blake was primarily a mystic. Both thought of themselves as prophets. There is one further aspect of Blake's indebtedness to Ezekiel that we need to explore: Blake's role as a prophet.

At the end of Ezekiel's prophecy, the prophet is shown the buildings of a city and is told to note

16 *Europe, a prophesy*, 1794. Cf. *The Book of Urizen*, 1794, 4:40, where the book of brass concerns "one King, one God, one Law." Blake, *Complete Writings*, 224.

17 *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 22; Blake, *Complete Writings*, 158.

what he sees in it and tell it to the people (Ezek 40:4). He has the opportunity to walk through its streets and describe what he sees. John as an Ezekiel for his own day, and his contemporary, the writer of 4 Ezra likewise, are similarly commanded to explore the beauty of the cities they are shown in their vision. In 4 Ezra 10:55, for example, Ezra is commanded to “go into the city and see the great buildings in all their splendour.”

The seer on entering the city, will encounter such things that his eye cannot take them all in. We may account for the experience described by comparing it with the revelation of the ideal temple city in Ezekiel 40-48. The “man” who holds the measuring tools says to the prophet: “The man said to me, ‘Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel’” (Ezekiel 40:4). Ezekiel is expected to comprehend everything that he sees and hears and to transmit it to Israel. We should recall that the measurements and parts of the heavenly temple/city were a subject of speculation already from ancient times, and a somewhat later analogous text is the Aramaic “New Jerusalem,” extant in a number of copies at Qumran.¹⁸ In a forthcoming article, “The

18 See Michael E. Stone, “Apocalyptic Literature,” *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, ed. M. E. Stone (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamen-

City in 4 Ezra” in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, Michael Stone has explored the significance of this reference in 4 Ezra and its possible links with early Jewish mysticism.

It is the command to explore the streets of the city, which infuses Blake the poet prophet in his wonderful poem “London:”

I wander through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,
In every infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every blackening church appals,
And the hapless soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down palace-walls.

But most, through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot’s curse
Blasts the new-born infant’s tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.

‘London’ from *Songs of Experience*

This poem encapsulates his prophetic vocation and his understanding of his activity as well as any oth-

tum 2.2; Assen and Philadelphia: van Gorcum and Fort-
tress, 1984), 385.

er. It is as a latter day Ezekiel or John that Blake the poet walks the streets of London and sees the marks of the beasts and of the eschatological woes in his midst in this poem.¹⁹ The old man guided by the child is an image which recurs in Blake's illuminated books. Here is the sense that it is the prophet as the child who has access to the mysteries and is able to go through the door into the darkness. The imagery echoes the door open in heaven, but here the illumination is that which belongs to every honest person who is a prophet. Blake would not have known about this but as the poet prophet discerning what Ezekiel (and the author of 2 Esdras, a work which had great importance for early modern radicals²⁰) were saying and like them expects to do, in and exploring the city. Yet, more in the tradition of Ezekiel, this time it is to discern "marks of weakness, marks of woe," not the glories of the celestial city or the divine merkabah.

Blake like Ezekiel and John of Patmos, but unlike the early merkabah mystics, explicitly thought of himself as a prophet to his generation. For him the visions became not a kind of retreat into some kind of spiritual comfort zone. Not that the mysti-

19 E.P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 179-94.

20 A. Hamilton, *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras (4 Ezra) from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999).

cal ascent to heaven through the celestial palaces surrounded by threatening angels was ever that for the Jewish mystics. It is when visionary experience informs a sense of the incompatibility of human action and divine justice that the prophet speaks, when, as Blake put it, one sees through the eye and not with it, and ordinary things become transformed in the divine light, whether of salvation or judgment. Blake is a compelling example of the prophetic vocation ready to bear witness to the Beast and Babylon in his midst. His prophetic vision owes so much to the inspiration of his prophetic forebears, not least the strange prophet who saw the divine *merkabah* by the waters of Babylon, which thereby transformed his life and his hope.

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