The Reasons for "Urizen"

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Since 1929, most critics have agreed with Dorothy Plowman that the name Urizen has Greek origins:

The name "Urizen" is, I believe, intended to indicate this. Taking it (as we are entitled to in the absence of proof that Blake intended otherwise) as derived from the Greek word . . . meaning "to bound" or "limit," with the cognate form "Uranus," signifying the Lord of the Firmament, or that first self-imposed setter of bounds whose rule became a tyranny that his own sons were impelled to break and supplant, we have a symbolic name conveying exactly that state described in the opening lines of the Preludium.[1]

While, as S. Foster Damon pointed out, "it is not certain that Blake knew Greek as early as 1793, when he first used Urizen's name,"[2] few question the likelihood that Urizen derives in some way from the Greek. Less recognized, however, is the possibility that Blake's coinage has Hebrew antecedents as well, since the earliest direct evidence we have that Blake knew any Hebrew at all comes from two indecipherable messages on illustrations for Young's *Night Thoughts*, begun in 1795. Yet, the entries in John Parkhurst's *An Hebrew and English Lexicon, without Points* (1762; 4th ed. London, 1799) that correspond to a Hebrew transliteration of the name so closely resemble Blake's characterization of Urizen that it is hard to imagine his not having consulted Parkhurst at some point in the early 1790s.

According to Parkhurst, the word *razon* is a verb meaning:

To poise or *balance* a thing by the hand, in order to feel whether it be heavy or not. . . . So the idea of the word seems to be, *To weigh, balance, try*, or *examine carefully*. Hence, as a participial N. masc. plur. . . . *Counsellors*, whose business it is to *weigh* and *examine* the expediency of public measures. . . . As a N. . . . *A counsellor*, according to some. . . . Der. Lat. *Ratio — onis*, whence *rational, rationality*, &c. Eng. *Reason*, &c. (679)

Parkhurst's gloss for *razon* is transferred almost verbatim to *The Book of Urizen*.[3] Not only is Urizen the counsellor — "Hidden set apart in my stern counsels" (4:8, E 71); weighing the expediency of public measures — "and on / This rock, place with strong hand the Book / Of eternal brass, written in my solitude" (4:31-33, E 72); but after the birth of Orc.

7. He form'd a line & a plummet
To divide the Abyss beneath.
He form'd a dividing rule:
8. He formed scales to weigh;
He formed massy weights;
He formed a brazen quadrant;
(20:33-38, E 80)

As far as Parkhurst's English derivative is concerned, David V. Erdman points out that "The 'reason' in 'Urizen' has long been accepted."[4]

While it might seem possible to ascribe the Hebrew etymology to some kind of commonly available English source, the peculiarities of eighteenth-century Christian Hebraism not only make it unlikely that Blake derived these meanings of *razon* from any source other than Parkhurst, but also make plausible the assertion that Blake was not merely punning with the Greek/Latin/English cognates but, rather, applying the rules of contemporary linguistics. During the eighteenth century, a number of historical factors converged to produce a school of Christian Hebraism that rejected virtually all of the tenets of rabbinic Hebrew, replacing them with what are now recognized to be absurd manipulations of the language.[5] A major linguistic abuse was the assumption that all Hebrew words sharing the same phonetic base derive from the same root (like attributing all words containing the consonants *sng* to the same root — sing, singe, snag, snug, etc.). After collating words with identical roots, the would-be Hebraist contrived sometimes quite outrageous explanations for their relationship to each other. In the case of *razon*, Parkhurst's explanation is unique. In contrast, in *Critica Hebraea: or, A Hebrew-English Dictionary, without Points* (London, 1767), Julius Bate, Parkhurst's contemporary, interprets the first *razon* as "leanness, scantiness," the second as "prince," that is, "a person who lays himself out for the good of others," and then suggests the combination of one "who is wasted with cares, perhaps" (582); modern Hebraists believe that the two *razon*s derive from entirely different roots.

A second peculiarity of eighteenth-century Christian Hebraism is the belief that Hebrew is the parent language. Revisions of the *Lexicon* reflect this assumption, as Parkhurst explains in the preface to his second edition (1778; reprinted in the 4th ed.),

In the former publication were added, at the end of the explanation of many Hebrew Roots, such *English* words as were either plainly or probably *derived* from them. And though no great stress was laid on this part of the work, yet it was apprehended, that it might tend to fix the meaning of the *Hebrew* in the learner's memory, and might at the same time entertain him to see so many words still preserved in *English*, from the common mother of all tongues, and set him upon new enquiries of this kind, both in our own and other languages; I have now considerably enlarged this *etymological* part of my Work, by the addition not only of many *English*, but of many *Greek, Latin*, and *Northern* words, which however I have often judged it more proper to insert in the body, than at the end of the Expositions of the *Hebrew*. (9)

Since, as far as I know, the specific derivation of the Latin *ratio* and English "reason" from the Hebrew root *razon* is found only in Parkhurst's *Lexicon*, it seems reasonable to infer that Blake consulted Parkhurst at some point before 1793.[6]

The rest of Urizen's name involves a third characteristic of Hebrew, the three-letter root. Because most Hebrew radicals are short, comprising three — or occasionally two — letters, Christian Hebraists usually sepa-

rated longer words from the rest, interpreting them as aggregates of shorter roots. Like most of his contemporaries, Parkhurst defined "pluriliterals" through a three-part process: he divided these longer words into their supposed components; he defined the components individually; and he explained how the components combine to produce a meaning appropriate for the biblical context. By analogy, Urizen can be interpreted as a compound of "Ur" and "rizen." According to traditional Hebrew, *or* is a common word meaning light, along with all of its metaphoric associations. To Parkhurst, however, the Hebrew *or* is much more complex:

I.   *To flow.* This is the idea of the word, though it occurs not as a V. simply in this sense, but as a N. . . . *a river, a flood.* . . .
II.   As Ns. . . . *A river, stream,* or *flux* of water. . . . Hence perhaps *Yar* or *Yare,* the name of a *river* in England, and *Jaar,* of one in Flanders.
III.   As a Participial N. . . . *The light,* so called from it's wonderful *fluidity;* for it is not only a *fluid,* but one of the most *active* and *perfect fluids* in nature. . . . No doubt . . . *Ur,* a city of the Chaldeans, whence Abraham was brought, . . . had it's name from the *light* or *fire* there worshipped. . . . As a V. . . . *To be light, shine, be enlightened.* . . . As a N. masc. plur. . . . *Lights,* that is, *streams* or *fluxes of light,* as is plain from the mention of the *solar, lunar,* and *stellar fluxes* . . . As a N. [*Me'or*] *A mean of light,* . . . *a luminary, an orb,* which either *forms* or *reflects the light,* and so is in either case an *instrument of light* . . .
IV.   As a N. masc. plur. . . . URIM and THUMMIM, *Lights* and *Perfections,* . . .
V.   As a N. fem. sing. . . . *The hole* which a serpent makes in the earth, q.d. *A light-hole.* . . .
VI.   Though *fluidity* or *flowing* be the natural condition and perfection of *water* and *light,* yet in other things to be *flowing, flux,* or *fleeting,* is an *imperfection* and an *evil.* . . . Hence . . . *To curse,* i.e. *to pronounce flux, fleeting,* or *transitory,* or *to wish to be so.* . . . *To make light of, treat as light* or *vile,* is a word of similar import. . . . As a Particip. . . . *Cursed.* . . . As a N. fem. [*me'erah*] *A curse.* (37–40)

This same cluster of meanings, from flux through light to curse, can be found in *The Book of Urizen.* Urizen was "Hidden set apart in my stern counsels," because "I have sought for a joy without pain, / For a solid without fluctuation / . . . strong I repell'd / The vast waves, & arose on the waters / A wide world of solid obstruction" (4:8, 10–11, 21–23, E 71–72). In chapter 3, Urizen is engulfed in flames: "In living creations appear'd / In the flames of eternal fury" (5:1–2, E 72); but as he goes on: "But no light from the fires. all was darkness / In the flames of Eternal fury" (5:17–18, E 73); until finally, "He in darkness clos'd, view'd all his race / And his soul sicken'd! he curs'd" (23:22–23, E 81).[7]

In *The Four Zoas,* Blake introduces a new Hebraic etymology for Urizen, "prince of light," an oft-repeated epithet ironically implying that the character is really a prince of darkness. As already mentioned, Bate defines *razon* as "prince," and in fact, "prince" is the universally accepted meaning of the word. Therefore, it is quite significant that while Parkhurst's glosses tend to be

chock-full of extraneous, extra-linguistic information, the word "prince" is noticably absent from the entry for *razon.* This means that even though Parkhurst was likely Blake's original source for a Hebraic etymology of Urizen, at some point between coining the name in 1793, and beginning work on *The Four Zoas* in the late 1790s, he had access to another source, not necessarily better, just one containing meanings omitted by Parkhurst.

While we certainly cannot draw firm conclusions on the basis of a single name, still, this brief examination of the reasoning behind Urizen leads to several possible inferences regarding Blake's use of Hebrew. First, obviously, Blake must have begun experimenting with Hebrew earlier than 1795, probably as early as 1793, the date of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion,* though possibly earlier. Even though Urizen does not assume his fully developed Hebraic characterization until *The Book of Urizen,* it is emblematically present in earlier works. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion,* Urizen is identified as the "counsellor" ("Creator of men! mistaken Demon of heaven," 5:3, E 48), whose light has been extinguished ("Religious dreams and holy vespers, light thy smoky fires: / Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn," 6:14–15, E 49). Similarly, in *America,* Orc refers to "The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands / . . . That stony law I stamp to dust: and scatter religion abroad" (8:3–5, E 54). In *Europe,*

> Albions Angel rose upon the Stone of Night.
> He saw Urizen on the Atlantic;
> And his brazon Book,
> That Kings & Priests had copied on Earth
> Expanded from North to South.
> (11:1–5, E 64)

And in *The Song of Los,* after "*Urizen faded,*"

> Adam stood in the garden of Eden:
> And Noah on the mountains of Ararat;
> They saw Urizen give his Laws to the Nations
> By the hands of the children of Los.
> (3:4, 6–9, E 67)

The second inference is that Blake's earliest source for Hebrew was Parkhurst's *Lexicon.* While by 1793, Blake did have available to him the rabbinically correct grammar and dictionary *Lingua Sacra* of David Levi (London, 1785–87), as well as a number of other Hebrew-English dictionaries compiled by Christians (not necessarily Hutchinsonians), none other than Parkhurst's contained the macaronic pun around which the name Urizen was formed, so apparently he did consult the most popular dictionary of his time, at least for this one name.[8] Finally, given the later inclusion of the new epithet "prince of light" for Urizen, it seems that Blake did not limit himself to Parkhurst.

When we add these inferences to what we already know about the non-Hebraic etymologies for names in Blake's myth, we can also form three hypotheses concerning Blake's process for naming characters. First, it seems likely that few, if any, of the invented names (excluding biblical names like Beulah) originated in the Hebrew. While Parkhurst's glosses for *or* and *razon* do include the meanings originally associated with Urizen, the assumption that Blake coincidentally combined the very two roots that comprise an appropriate Greek cognate is too far-fetched. Rather, he probably began, as Plowman suggested, with the Greek for horizon, and then sought an appropriate etymology in the parent tongue. The fact that Parkhurst lists no Greek equivalent for *razon*, even though the *Lexicon* normally included known Greek derivatives for Hebrew roots, also supports the contention that Blake began with the Greek and sought out Hebraic etymologies, not the other way around. Second, despite assertions by V. A. De Luca and Aaron Fogel to the contrary, the meanings of the names apparently are significant.[9] The fact that Blake did not depict Urizen in terms of the complete Hebraic etymology until *The Book of Urizen*, even though he had already used the name in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion, America, Europe,* and *The Song of Los*, suggests that the definitions in Parkhurst were instrumental in shaping Urizen's later characterization. And finally, the new epithet "prince of light" indicates that even after the names were coined, Blake continued to seek out new meanings to invest his characters with new qualities, thereby enriching the symbolic dimensions of his myth. Therefore, as Parkhurst would have advised, we would do well to explore the parent tongue for the various meanings inherent in Blake's Bible of Hell.

[1]"Note" to the facsimile of *The Book of Urizen* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1929) 17.

[2]*A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (1965; Boulder: Shambhala, 1979) 419.

[3]All Blake citations are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), referred to as E.

[4]*Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 179 n. 9.

[5]For a more detailed discussion of the historical background, see my article "Blake as an Eighteenth-Century Hebraist" (*Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, forthcoming).

[6]There are several reasons why Blake would choose Parkhurst's dictionary. As Leslie Tannenbaum notes, not only was it "the most widely read and respected Hebrew lexicon of the time," but its attitude towards Hebrew is based on the doctrine of John Hutchinson, an anti-Newtonian whose theories attracted Blake (*Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982] 100, and 315–16 n. 56); also see Edward Larrissy, "Blake and the Hutchinsonians," *Blake* 20, (1986): 44–47.

[7]Bate, too, assumes that the words for light and curse are etymologically related (582). Also, in the second and third lines of *Tiriel*, the juxtaposition of the blind curser with his dying wife Myratana seems based on the same Hebrew root *or*, and its variant *me'or*. "With Myratana. once the Queen of all the western plains / But now his eyes were darkned. & his wife fading in death" (E 276). In Hebrew, the word *tana* means "one who gives, teacher," and compounded with *me'or*, "a means of light," suggests that while alive, Myratana was Tiriel's source of vision, but at her death, she became *me'erah*, the source of his curse. If this etymology is correct, then Blake could have begun using Hebrew as early as 1789.

[8]I am currently compiling *Christian Hebraism: A Source Book of English-Language Materials* (New York: Garland, completion date 1989), which will contain a comprehensive annotated bibliography of Hebrew sources available to Blake.

[9]See V. A. De Luca, "Proper Names in the Structural Design of Blake's Myth-Making," *Blake Studies*, 8 (1978): 5–22; and Aaron Fogel, "Pictures of Speech: On Blake's Poetic," *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982): 217–242.