

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

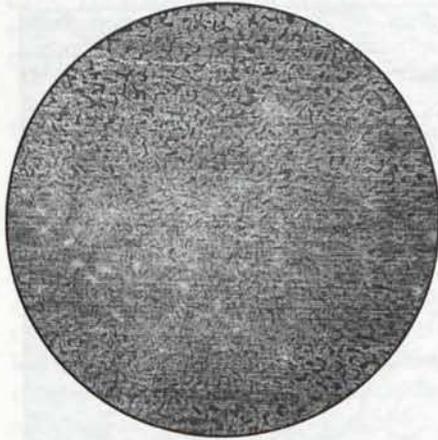
M I N U T E  
P A R T I C U L A R

**Blake and Thomas Burnet's Sacred Theory of the Earth**

Morton D. Paley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 25, Issue 2, Fall 1991, pp. 75-78





1. Engraving showing the earth in Chaos. Thomas Burnet, *The [Sacred] Theory of the Earth*. 1: 36. Courtesy of the Royal Library, Stockholm.



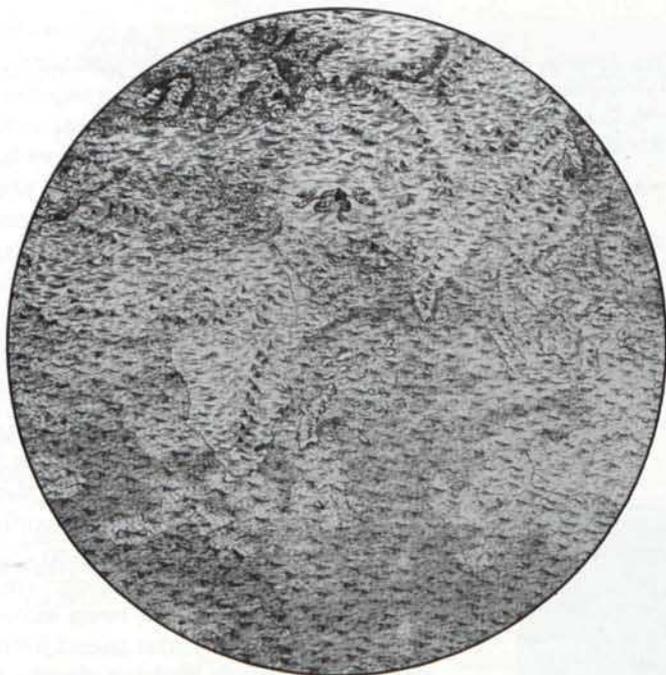
2. William Blake. *The Song of Los*. Copy E. Frontispiece (plate 1). Reproduced with the permission of the Huntington Library. RB 54043.

## Blake And Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory Of The Earth*

Morton D. Paley

The importance of Thomas Burnet to some of William Blake's contemporaries is well recognized. One of Coleridge's unrealized projects was "Burnet's *theoria telluris* translated into blank verse, the originals at the bottom of the page."<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth wrote parts of Burnet's theory into *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Prelude*.<sup>2</sup> The young Shelley may have been introduced by his millennialist friend John Frank Newton to Burnet's ideas.<sup>3</sup> There is much in Burnet that Blake too would have found of interest. In his recent major study of Blake and the sublime, Vincent Arthur De Luca convincingly suggests that Blake was influenced by Burnet in constructing his own myth of the origins of the present state of the earth, including the creation of Urizen's world in *The [First] Book of Urizen* and the third Night of Vala, and the situation of the Mundane Egg in *Milton*.<sup>4</sup> De Luca's fine exposition is limited to the first two Books of Burnet's work, comprising his accounts of the Creation, the Deluge, and the original Paradise. The relevance to Blake of the third and fourth Books, concerning the Conflagration and the New Heavens and New Earth, remains to be discussed, as does another aspect of Burnet's book—its illustrations.

Early editions of *The [Sacred] Theory of the Earth*<sup>5</sup> were illustrated with anonymous but well executed engravings that are likely to have interested Blake the engraver as well as Blake the cosmogonist. (A comparison of the first three editions in English shows no significant differences among the designs.) The first is a striking frontispiece depicting Jesus standing above seven disks that, counting clockwise, appear as follows:



1. A dark circle filled with jumbled marks, similar to the illustration of the earth in its chaos on page 34.

2. A light disk matching the representation of the "first earth" before its dissolution on page 67.

3. The earth under water with Noah's ark, accompanied by angels, floating on the waves, as engraved on page 101.

4. The earth with its continents formed, as in the foldout engraving following page 150.

5. The earth in flames. This is the subject matter of the third Book, "Concerning the Conflagration," in volume 2.

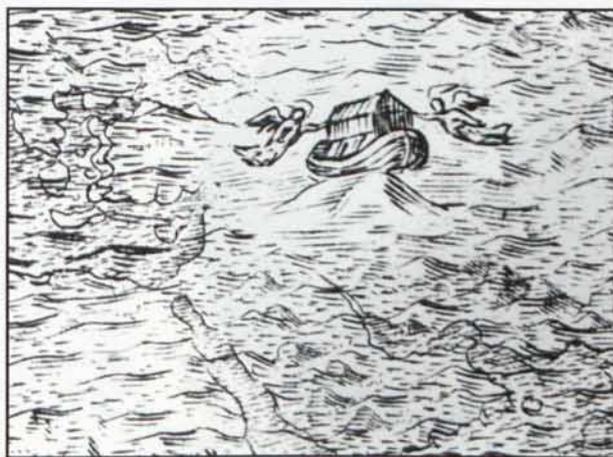
6. The restored first earth, virtually identical with the second disk, upon which the millennial world will be created.

7. A sun, illustrating Burnet's conviction "that the Earth, after the last day of Judgment, will be changed into the nature of a Sun, or of a fixt Star. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

The first and third disks are of special interest to us here. "There is a particular pleasure to see things in their Origins," writes Burnet, "and by what degrees and successive changes they ran into that order and state we see them afterwards, when completed" (1: 35). According to the *Sacred The-*

*ory*, the beginning of the earth was as a Chaos in which the elements of earth, air, and water were intermixed before their separation. This is pictured as the first disk of the frontispiece and, in larger scale, on page 36 as a mass of jumbled particles (illus. 1). This disk bears a striking resemblance to the one in the frontispiece of Blake's *Song of Los* (illus. 2), where the sun is either eclipsed by another heavenly body forming in front of it or is itself in the process of formation. In either case, Blake has seemingly borrowed his visual conception from Burnet's book.

Another such borrowing occurs with respect to the Deluge scene of the third disk in the frontispiece. After the formation of a perfectly smooth, egg-like earth, pictured as consisting of four concrete, flattened-out circles (illustrated on page 44), the waters were contained in the Abyss. When the crust of the earth dried, however, it cracked. "The whole fabrick brake, and the frame of the Earth was torn in pieces, as by an Earthquake" (1: 50). Portions of the crust fell into the Abyss and forced out the water, which then covered the land. On page 68 an engraving enlarges the third disk of the



3a. Engraving showing the earth after the Deluge, with the Ark and angels. Thomas Burnet, *The [Sacred] Theory of the Earth*. 1: 68. Courtesy of the Royal Library, Stockholm.

3b. Detail.

frontispiece, showing the earth covered by water and a houseboat-like Ark accompanied by two angels (illus. 3). If we compare this part of the illustration in Burnet to Blake's design in the upper part of *Jerusalem* 39[44] (illus. 4), the resemblance is remarkable. Although other sources for Blake's arks have been suggested,<sup>7</sup> none is as close to this particular *Jerusalem* design as the one pictured in the *Sacred Theory*.

Our discussion so far has been about Burnet's first volume, comprising Books I and II, which concern the creation of the earth, the original Paradise, and the Deluge. Books III and IV, which treat of the end of the world and the millennium, also deserve some attention. A short sketch of Burnet's chief ideas about these events will suggest why Blake would have found them of interest, especially as regards the structure of time, the Conflagration that will end the earth as we know it, and the regeneration of all things in the Millennium.

Burnet cites the Jews' belief that the world will last 6,000 years, a tradition that he says derives from "*Elias the Rabbin, or Cabbalist*" (2: 23). In *M 24* (E 121), "Los is by mortals nam'd Time"

(67); "He is the Spirit of Prophecy the ever apparent Elias" (71). In 22: 15-7 (E 117) Los says:

I am that Shadowy Prophet who Six  
Thousand Years ago  
Fell from my station in the Eternal  
Bosom. Six Thousand Years  
Are finishd. I return!

According to the *Sacred Theory*, the six days of the world-week would be followed by the sabbath of the Millennium on the model of Moses' septenaries: six days of creation, then a sabbath, after six years a sabbath year, and after a sabbath of years a year of Jubilee. "All these lesser revolutions," writes Burnet, "seem to me to point at the grand Revolution, the great *Sabbath* or *Jubilee*, after six Millenaries . . ." (2: 102). Compare *Milton* 23: 55 (E 119):

Six Thousand years are passd away the  
end approaches fast.]

Before the advent of this great Sabbath or Millennium, however, the world as we know it must be destroyed by fire.

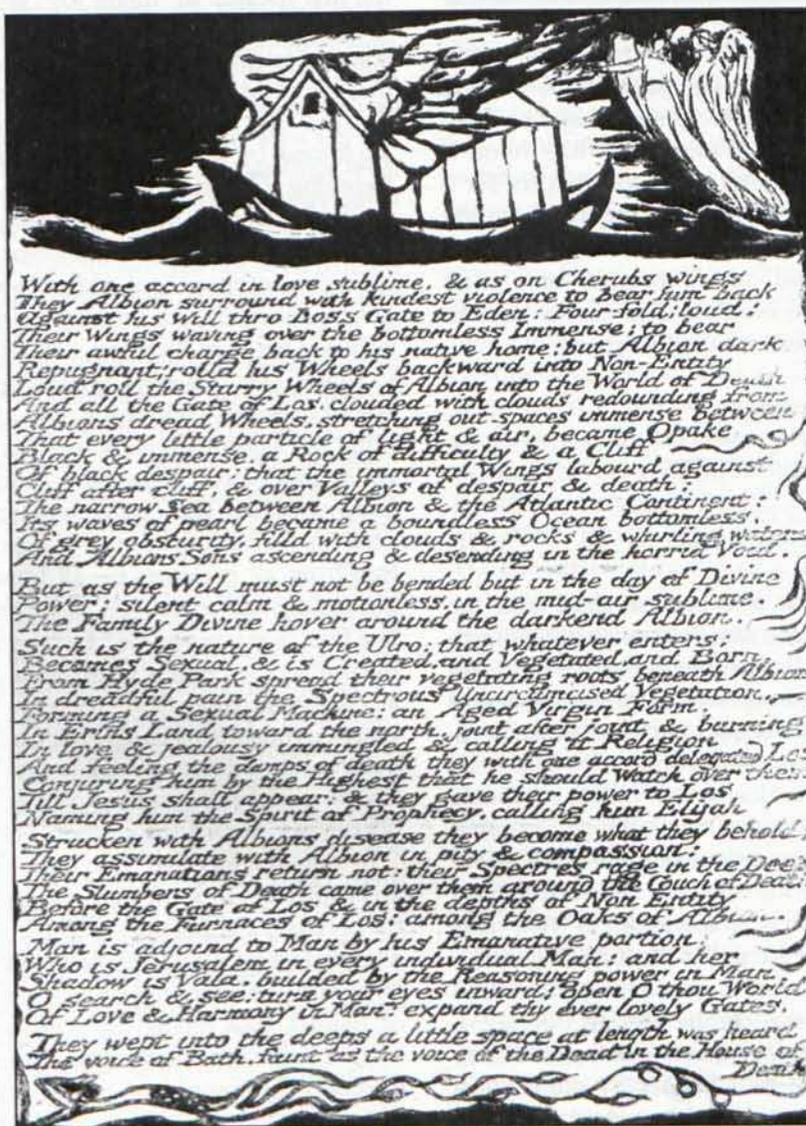
Burnet places great emphasis on a physical description of what the final Conflagration will be like (2: 73-74), citing 2 Thess. 7-9 and the "one general Fire" of Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Such a conflagration occupies much of pages 118-20 of *Night the Ninth of The Four Zoas*, and in *Milton* Los tells his sons:

Wait till the Judgment is past, till the  
Creation is consumed  
And then rush forward with me into the  
glorious spiritual  
Vegetation; the Supper of the Lamb & his  
Bride; and the  
Awakening of Albion our friend and  
ancient companion. [25: 59-62]

After the burning of the earth there will occur "the *Regeneration* or *Renovation*" of the world prophesied in Isaiah 65 and referred to by Jesus in Matt. 19.28 (Burnet 2: 112-13). Christ will return to usher in a millennial state in which humankind will live in "Indolency and Plenty" (2: 126) but will nevertheless enjoy the extension of

knowledge, especially of the sun (2: 142). The millennial state will be characterized by universal peace, righteousness, and the absence of pain (2: 126). The position of the axis of the earth will be set parallel to the axis of the Ecliptic, as it was in antediluvian Eden, creating a perpetual spring. Similarly, in Blake's regained paradise of *Night the Ninth of The Four Zoas*, where justice is executed upon the tyrants and warriors (123), the Regenerate Man presides over the feast of *Eternals* (132-33), and "the fresh Earth beams forth ten thousand thousand springs of

life" (139: 3). For both authors, the seeds of such a vision lie in a tradition of Christian eschatology that emphasized the concrete, physical aspects of the millennium, and it is not possible to say precisely where Blake is indebted to Burnet and where it is a matter of a common tradition. Nevertheless, the many similarities between their scenarios for the future of the earth, as well as the visual correspondences discussed earlier, strongly suggest that Blake was familiar with *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*.



4. William Blake, *Jerusalem*. Plate 39 [44]. Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library. PML 953.

<sup>1</sup> *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957) 1: no. 61.

<sup>2</sup> See M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973 [1971]) 99-106.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (New York: Collier Books, 1962 [1950]) 428n54.

<sup>4</sup> *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 155-56, 157, 158, 162-63, 191.

<sup>5</sup> What I refer to as Burnet's "book" was originally published in Latin in two parts, each of which was Englished by Burnet himself, as follows: Part I in Latin, 1681, in English 1684; Part II in Latin 1689, in English 1690. See M. C. Jacob and W. A. Lockwood, "Political Millennialism and Burnet's *Sacred Theory*," *Science Studies* 2 (1972): 265-79. The printed title pages of the first three editions omit the word "Sacred," which does, however, appear in the engraved frontispieces.

<sup>6</sup> *The Theory of the Earth Containing an Account of the Original of the Earth and of all the General Changes Which it hath already undergone, or is to undergo Till the Consummation of all Things*. 3rd. ed. 2 vols. (London, 1697). Subsequent references are to this edition, cited by volume and page numbers.

<sup>7</sup> See Nicolas O. Warner, "Blake's Moon-Ark Symbolism." *Blake* 14 (1980-81): 44-59.

## Blake's "Infant Joy": An Explanation of Age

Walter S. Minot

Blake's "Infant Joy," in *The Songs of Innocence*, is not a major poem in the collection, but it has been a troublesome poem to interpret for a number of reasons, among them the significance of the infant's age as "two days old" rather than as some other specific number. The crucial lines in the poem are the first stanza:

I have no name  
I am but two days old. —  
What shall I call thee?  
I happy am  
Joy is my name, —  
Sweet joy befall thee. (E 16)

The first and second lines and the fourth and fifth lines seem to belong to the infant speaker, while the third and sixth lines (as well as the whole second stanza) belong to another voice, a respondent. Since babies of two days old are realistically too young to speak, various critics have offered a number of interpretations of these lines. Wicksteed is the one critic who specifically explains why the infant is "two days old." He identifies the infant's joy with God's creation of heaven as described in Genesis on the second day (123). Wicksteed suggests that the infant may be only two days past conception rather than birth, thus making the joy the joy of generation (123; 124n). Margoliouth finds Wicksteed's explanation of the second day "far-fetched,"

but he suggests that the two days may be two days of joy for the parents since the pregnancy has been established (55).

I propose a simpler reading. When the first speaker in "Infant Joy" says it is "but two days old," there is no reason not to take that literally to mean that the child was born two days ago. The fact that "I have no name" can be explained by the ancient custom of baptising (or christening) children on the third day after birth. For example, the birthdate of William Shakespeare has been accepted (not without some doubts) as April 23rd because he was baptised on April 26th and, according to Sidney Lee, "it was a common practice to baptise a child three days after birth" (8), a point that is also confirmed by Adams (21n1). Thus, the child is happy because it is completely innocent (in the Blakean sense) since it is free from all experience—all human institutions and limitations. Nor should line five, "Joy is my name," be taken to mean that the child is a girl with the actual given name "Joy," for as F. W. Bateson reminds us in his note on the poem in his edition of Blake's works, "in the eighteenth century, girls were not often, in fact, called Joy then" (115).

In sum, the infant at "two days old" is completely innocent, free, and joyful for probably the last time in its life, for after that (according to Blake's view of the world) the infant will be christened, or named, thus limited by repressive human institutions such as the church. Certainly the companion piece to this poem, "Infant Sorrow" in *Songs of Experience* (E 28), shows the restraint of an infant "Striving against my swaddling bands," or the repressions of society.

But a look at the longer manuscript of "Infant Sorrow" suggests the connection with baptism even more strongly, for the speaker in the poem says (lines 19-21): "But a Priest with holy look / In his hand a holy book / Pronounced curses on his head" (E 797). If we accept the manuscript emendation of "my" for "his" (E 799), then the speaker in "Infant Sorrow" may be saying that baptism was an occasion on which the priest "Pronounced curses on my head," an ironic Blakean view of the Christian rite of baptism.

My reading of the opening stanza of "Infant Joy" seems to make ordinary sense of the opening two lines of the poem, and, while it may not identify the respondent to the speaker—who could be the mother, the piper mentioned in the "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* (as suggested by Gleckner, 298-99n1) or some unnamed speaker—it seems to simplify the context as well.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Joseph Quincy. *A Life of William Shakespeare*. Student's ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923.
- Bateson, F. W., ed. *Selected Poems of William Blake*. New York: Macmillan, 1957.
- Blake, William. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Newly rev. ed. David V. Erdman, ed. Commentary by Harold Bloom. New York: Anchor, 1988.
- Gleckner, Robert F. *The Piper & The Bard*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1959.
- Lee, Sidney. *A Life of William Shakespeare*. New ed. London: Smith, Elder, 1915.
- Margoliouth, H. M. *William Blake*. London: Oxford UP, 1951.
- Wicksteed, Joseph H. *Blake's Innocence and Experience*. London: J. M. Dent, 1928.