

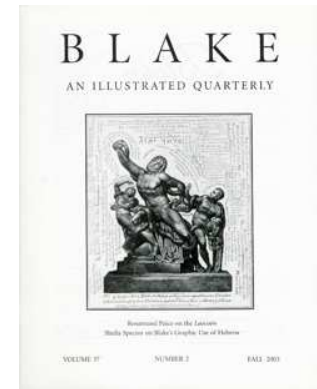
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Blake's Graphic Use of Hebrew

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BY SHEILA A. SPECTOR

The one certainty that emerges from the controversies surrounding the relationship between Blake's verbal and visual art is that neither medium alone was capable of expressing the plenitude of his Divine Vision. As the articulation of a conception beyond the range of either conventional painting or poetry, Blake's visual art, as Christopher Heppner has said, "is in continual flight from the purely and/or merely visual towards the more explicit modes of meaning available only to language itself."<sup>1</sup> Conversely, it might be added, the poetic is in continual flight from the purely and/or merely literal, the language of the prophecies being illuminated by the composite art. Basically, Blake lacked a medium of expression through which to articulate the full range of his imagination, for it exceeded the material limitations of the visual and the verbal, inevitably leaving a gap between his conception and the means of its execution. Consequently, much of Blake's artistic experimentation was dialectical, involving the attempt to develop a vehicle through which to coordinate the two. Most likely, it was in conjunction with this aim that Blake turned to Hebrew. Because of its significance as the language of the Old Testament, and hence, as the purported language of Adam, Hebrew provided Blake with a medium that could be used to expand the magnitude of his poetry.<sup>2</sup> Beyond its literal implications, however, Hebrew could also contribute to the graphic dimensions of the art as well, its symbolic and mystical associations providing a useful tool for extending the range of the visual art.

Hebrew was clearly not a major element of Blake's graphics, there being fewer than a dozen examples of obvious Hebrew lettering in the entire corpus.<sup>3</sup> Even so, its use clus-

ters into definite chronological periods, each reflecting a distinctive approach to the alphabet. Specifically, the first period, introduced by graphic experimentation on the verso of a *Tiriel* drawing, spans the decade of the 1790s, *Night Thoughts* 30E and 435 using pseudo-Hebrew to imply some sort of indecipherable supernatural message. After that, we have no evidence that Blake drew any letters again until 30 January 1803, when he wrote his brother James that he was studying Hebrew. During the decade introduced by that letter, Blake produced *Job's Evil Dreams*, *Enoch* and *Milton* plate 15, each of which contains what can be considered a text-based use of Hebrew, revolving around explicit passages from the Old Testament. Finally, Blake returned to Hebrew in his last years when, on *Milton* 32\*(e), the title page and plate 2 of the Linnell *Job* engravings, and *Laocoön*, he again experimented with hebraic graphics, though this time Blake seems to have replaced the literal sense of the text with symbolic aspects of the alphabet that expand the verbal and visual components into the dynamic unity of his last works. Before analyzing how Hebrew contributes to the graphic art, though, it is necessary first to consider the non-linguistic aspects of the alphabet.

### Non-Linguistic Aspects of the Hebrew Alphabet

Because of its special history, Hebrew developed in conjunction with numerical, visual and mystical modes of thought that extend the use of the alphabet far beyond its conventional function as a component of a material sign system (illus. 1).<sup>4</sup> Numerically, Hebrew is used for computational purposes to a far greater extent than the system developed by the Romans. Mathematically, each of the twenty-seven characters of the alphabet (twenty-two letters, five of which have different forms for use at the end of a word) has a specific value, so that letters, or even words, can be used as the equivalent of numbers. For example, the word for "life," חַי (hai), composed of the eighth and tenth letters—הֶ (heth) and י (yod)—is equivalent to the number 18, with which it is used interchangeably, hai signifying 18, and conversely, 18 the concept of life. Certain

I would like to thank John E. Grant for his many insightful comments and suggestions about an earlier version of this paper.

1. Heppner 233. Along the same lines, in "Visible Language: Blake's Word'rous Art of Writing," W. J. T. Mitchell notes that "Blake treats his pictorial art as if it were a kind of writing and summarizes the entire history of writing from pictogram to hieroglyphic to alphabetic script in the pages of his illuminated books." At the same time, "he also pushes alphabetic writing toward the realm of pictorial values, asking us to see his alphabetic forms with our senses, not just to read through or past them to the signified speech or 'concept' behind them, but to pause at the sensuous surface of calligraphic and typographic forms" (83).

2. My earlier study of Blake's use of Hebrew, "Blake as an Eighteenth-Century Hebraist," has been superseded by my monograph, "Glorious incomprehensible": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Language*.

3. Because of their obscurity, the possible Hebrew letters found in *The Sea of Time and Space* (Butlin [hereafter B] 803), as well as *Christ Nailed to the Cross: The Third Hour* (B 496) and *Sealing the Stone* and

*Setting a Watch* (B 499) are beyond the range of consideration in this study; see also Heppner 242 and 292n14.

Given the confusion surrounding the order of plates in many of Blake's books, for the illuminated books the numbering used in this essay will conform to that found in the William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press Series, gen. ed. David Bindman; for *The Four Zoas*, *The Four Zoas by William Blake: A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with Commentary on the Illuminations*, ed. Cettina Tramontano Magno and David V. Erdman (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1987); and for the *Night Thoughts* illustrations, *William Blake's Designs for Edward Young's Night Thoughts*, complete edition, ed. John E. Grant, Edward J. Rose, Michael J. Tolley, and David V. Erdman, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1980).

4. For a popular introduction to the Hebrew alphabet, see Munk. More scholarly explanations of the letters can be found in Ginsburgh.



PLATE I.—TABLE OF HEBREW AND CHALDEE LETTERS.

Number	Sound or Power.	Hebrew and Chaldee Letters.	Numerical Value.	Roman character by which expressed in this work.	Name.	Signification of Name.
1.	a (soft breathing).	א	1. (Thousands are	A.	Aleph.	Ox.
2.	b, bh (v).	ב	2. denoted by a	B.	Beth.	House.
3.	g (hard), gh.	ג	3. larger letter ;	G.	Gimel.	Camel.
4.	d, dh (flat th).	ד	4. thus an Aleph	D.	Daleth.	Door.
5.	h (rough breathing).	ה	5. larger than the	H.	He.	Window.
6.	v, u, o.	ו	6. rest of the let-	V.	Vau.	Peg, nail.
7.	z, dz.	ז	7. ters among	Z.	Zayin.	Weapon, sword.
8.	ch (guttural).	ח	8. which it is,	Ch.	Cheth.	Enclosure, fence.
9.	t (strong).	ט	9. signifies not 1,	T.	Teth.	Serpent.
10.	i, y (as in yes).	י	10. but 1000.)	I.	Yod.	Hand.
11.	k, kh.	כ	20. Final = 500	K.	Caph.	Palm of the hand.
12.	l.	ל	30. Final = 600	L.	Lamed.	Ox-goad.
13.	m.	מ	40. Final = 700	M.	Mem.	Water.
14.	n.	נ	50. Final = 800	N.	Nun.	Fish.
15.	s.	ס	60. Final = 900	S.	Samekh.	Prop, support.
16.	O, aa, ug (gutt.).	ע	70. Final = 1000	O.	Ayin.	Eye.
17.	p, ph.	פ	80. Final = 1000	P.	Pe.	Mouth.
18.	ts, tz, j.	צ	90. Final = 1000	Tz.	Tzaddi.	Fishing-hook.
19.	q, qh (guttur.).	ק	100. (The finals are not	Q.	Qoph.	Back of the head.
20.	r.	ר	200. always considered	R.	Resh.	Head.
21.	sh, s.	ש	300. as bearing an in-	Sh.	Shin.	Tooth.
22.	th, t.	ת	400. creased numeri-	Th.	Tau.	Sign of the cross.
			cal value.)			

1. "Table of Hebrew and Chaldee Letters," plate i of S. L. MacGregor Mathers, ed. and trans., *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (London, 1887; reprint, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1968).

groups of letters, especially those containing particular combinations of א (alef), ה (he), ו (vav) and י (yod), that are associated with the name of God, are avoided in arithmetical computations. Thus, instead of yod-he or yod-vav, a 10-5 or 10-6 combination, teth-vav, that is, 9-6, is used to signify 15, and teth-zayin, 9-7, for 16.

*Gematria* (from the Greek γεωμετρία), the numerological computations developed by Kabbalists, extends these practices to the fullest.<sup>5</sup> Believing that words with identical numerical values are mystically related, Kabbalists substitute words of equivalent value for each other in the biblical text. In other words, any group of letters totaling 18 could be used to replace the Hebrew word *hai*, thereby producing entirely new meanings for the text. In addition, Kabbalists practice letter substitutions, for example exchanging all א's, the first letter, for ת's, the last letter, כ's, the second letter, for ו's, the next to the last, and so forth. Finally, they extract the first letters of words in particular sentences to develop acronyms that themselves become the basis for further numerical computations.

Beyond their numerological signification, the letters also serve as visual icons, being associated with the natural objects they resemble. Of those letters found in Blake's drawings, the most significant include the א (alef), named after the ancient word for the head of an ox; ב (beth), named for the word "house"; ג (gimel), a camel; ד (daleth), a door; ה (he),

a word of uncertain derivation, though visually associated with a window; ו (vav), a peg or nail; ז (zayin), weapon or sword; ח (heth), of unknown derivation, though symbolizing an enclosure, fence; ט (teth), also of unknown derivation, symbolizing a serpent; י (yod), from hand; and כ (ayin), the eye.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the letters are also associated with the gamut of phenomena in both the corporeal and spiritual worlds. On the physical level, different numbers and letters signify body parts, the senses, physical activities, emotions, and planets; on the spiritual plane, they represent the angels, their intelligences, spirits, their significations, aspects of the Supernal Man, names of God, and commandments of the Law. In this context, the fifth letter, he, signifies sight, and is governed by the angel Melchidale; vav, hearing, governed by Asmodel; yod, copulation, governed by Hamaliel; ayin, laughter, and Hamael.

Most significantly, Kabbalists, identifying language as the material of Creation, believe that each letter is incarnate, deriving from a Divine hypostasis through which the God-head produced the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> Associating each letter/number with a particular state in the twenty-seven steps of cre-

6. The Hebrew etymologies are from Klein.

7. In their edition of *The Works of William Blake*, Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats first introduced the subject of Kabbalism into the critical dialogue generated around interpretations of Blake's illuminated books. In order to clarify the confusion caused by differing

5. For an overview of *gematria*, see Scholem 337-43.



ation, they divide the process into three parts.<sup>8</sup> The first ten numbers, comprising the World of Emanations, correspond to the ten *Sefirot*, or Divine hypostases, that emanated successively each from its immediate predecessor. In this context, the first letter, א (*alef*), corresponds to the first emanation, the "Supreme Crown"; the second letter, ב (*beth*), to "Divine Wisdom"; third, ג (*gimel*), "Human Intelligence"; and so on to the sixth, ו (*vav*), "Grace"; and finally culminating in the tenth, י (*yod*), the "Divine Kingdom," also known as the *Shekhinah*, or "Divine Presence." Each of these emanations has numerous theological, mythical and anatomical associations, the most germane to this paper being the association Christian Kabbalists developed between the sixth, *vav*, "Grace," and Christ. Located in the symbolic "heart" of the human configuration of the emanations, the *vav* is depicted as the intermediary between the corporeal cosmos inhabited by man, the spiritual realm of the emanations and, finally, the Godhead Himself. The World of Emanations constitutes the highest spiritual level of the created cosmos. Beyond that, the next twelve numbers, which correspond to the next twelve letters of the alphabet, contain the "Starry World," including the First Mover, the Circle of Fixed Stars, and the seven planets, followed by the Rational Soul, the Animal Soul, and the Elements of Sense. Finally, the last five numbers refer to the corporeal cosmos, which contains the four elements, inanimate matter, vegetation, animals, and finally, number 27, ט (*toph*), man himself.

The most important letter is א (*alef*). Symbolizing unity and the undifferentiated reality of the One, it is considered the most spiritual of the letters, having been emanated directly from the Godhead Himself, and itself serving as the source for subsequent emanations. As summarized by Jacques Basnage in his popular *History of the Jews* (translated into English in 1708):

The א or A is the Doctrine. This Letter denotes the inaccessible light of the Deity; that *infinitum*, call'd *Ensoph*, and relates to the first of the *Sephiroths*, which is the Crown: But this is not all; for this Letter is compounded of a *Vau* [ו] and two *Jod's* [י], which has still some great

Mysteries compriz'd in it; for the *Vau* that makes the middle Branch, signifies the *Tipheret*. The two *Jods* are two Arms, which open to embrace the *Malchut* or the Kingdom. The *Jod* on the right indicates Wisdom, which always carries her views upwards; and sheds her influences upon the other splendors beneath her. The *Vau* is the intelligence, which Wisdom has conceived, and the *Jod* above bespeaks the Knowledge which the Intelligence has produced. Another inverts the Letters which compose the word *Alef*, which making *Pala*, and signifying to conceal, he here discovers another way the first of the *Splendors*; that Crown which is actually conceal'd; for Eye has not seen it, nor has it enter'd into the Heart of Man. (189)

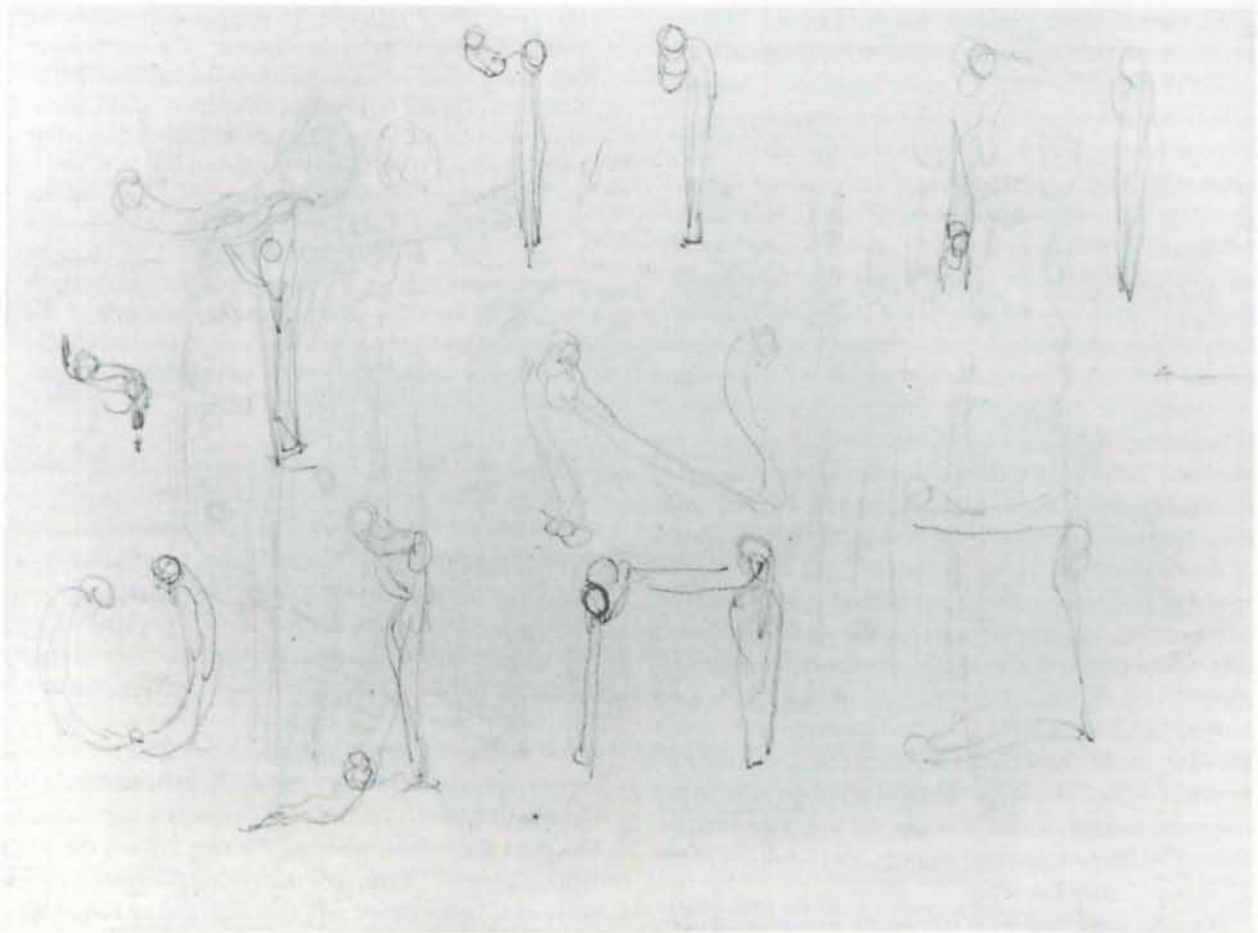
In his account, Basnage alludes to most of the non-linguistic aspects of the letter. In addition to the concept of incarnation, and the associations with numerical values, planets, angels, intelligences, spirits, Divine names, bodily organs, physical senses and emotions, Basnage also personifies language, endowing the letters with gender and will. Not only are the two *yods* described in terms of arms reaching up to embrace *Malchut*, but, as he will explain in his discussion of the letter ב (*beth*), at least one Kabbalist believes "that this Letter is a Woman, and that the two Lines ב are two Arms, betwixt which she receives and embraces her Husband *Tipheret*." This would be especially significant to Christian Kabbalists, who believe that *Tiferet*, the sixth *Sefirah*, signifies Christ. For this reason, Basnage reminds his reader, "Jesus Christ says that one *Jod*, or rather least point of the Law shall not pass away" (190), each containing its own kind of mystery.

These mysteries are visual as well as literal. As Basnage notes, the graphic א (*alef*) can be broken down into two י's (*yods*), the one descending on the left, and the other ascending on the right, connected by the diagonal ו (*vav*), like two hands pegged onto an intervening nail. Numerically, when broken down in this way, the quantitative value of the *alef* is increased to 26, the value of the two *yods*, at 10 each, and the 6 of the intervening *vav*; and 26 is the number of the Tetragrammaton—יהוה—the ineffable name of God, rendered as *Jehovah* in English. Consequently, the *alef* contains the totality of the macrocosm, from 1, the "Supreme Crown," down through the corporeal cosmos. Visually, therefore, the outline of the *alef*, the symbol of the "Supreme Crown," can be interpreted cosmically, the expanses at the top and bottom corresponding, respectively, to the spiritual and corporeal realms, above which is the Godhead, and beneath which is man. The intervening *vav* provides the horizon, the starry realm intended to mediate between the spiritual and material worlds. In the kabbalistic myth—as well as Blake's version—the initial fault occurred on this median plane, when the Rational Soul/Urizen, looking down, lost sight of the upper spiritual realms, and mistaking himself for the height of existence, became an impediment, preventing man, in the lower space, from perceiving higher things.

attitudes towards Kabbalism, I published "Kabbalistic Sources: Blake's and His Critics," in which I distinguished between the printed sources of Kabbalism available to Blake and those used by later critics. In my "Wonders Divine": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Myth*, I establish the historical context for the kind of Kabbalism to which Blake would have had access, and then trace his gradual incorporation of the kabbalistic myth into his illuminated books.

8. The twenty-seven steps of creation are comparable to Blake's twenty-seven heavens, both systems tracing the cycle of existence from Creation through Apocalypse. Because my purpose here is to analyze Blake's use of the alphabet, I have somewhat simplified the discussion of Kabbalism, whose multifaceted complexity actually comprises a four-part structure that conforms to the Tetragrammaton. This particular delineation derives from Stehelin 156-66.





2. William Blake, *Study of Hebrew Characters in Human Form*. By permission of the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester.

### Graphic Experimentation

From the beginning, Blake seems to have been attracted to the graphic potential of the Hebrew alphabet. In what might be the earliest surviving example of his Hebrew lettering, found on the verso of a sketch for the drawing, *Tiriel Denouncing His Sons and Daughters*, executed around 1789, Blake outlined a random *Study of Hebrew Characters in Human Form* (B 199v), in an apparent attempt to personify the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet (illus. 2). Blake seems to have begun with the **ש** drawn in the center of the page, and from there, randomly filled in the rest of the letters. Reading from right to left, the top row apparently contains a **ה** (*he*, the fifth letter), **ו** (*vav*, sixth letter), and **ז** (*zayin*, seventh letter). Right in the middle of the page is a giant **ש**, apparently followed by a **ד** (*daleth*, fourth letter) and a **י** (*yod*, tenth letter). Then, the bottom seems to contain a **ב** (*beth*, second letter), followed by a **ה** (*heth*, eighth letter), a **ג** (*gimel*, third letter), and a **ת** (*teth*, ninth letter). The human heads and torsos on the letters suggest an attempt to personify in a manner comparable to that alluded to by Basnage in his discussion of the Hebrew letters. As Heppner

notes, "The little fantasy drawing of small human forms on their way to becoming letters of the Hebrew alphabet, [is] a representation in the form of a miniature allegory of a powerful tendency within Blake's art" (233).<sup>9</sup>

The next examples are numbers 30E and 435 from the *Night Thoughts* illustrations, both of which contain pseudo-Hebrew messages. Collectively, *Night Thoughts* 108 and 30E, along with page 43 of *The Four Zoas*, call into question the conventional assumption that the lettering must contain a literal message somehow related to the visual text. In what is likely its earliest extant version, the rough sketch on *Night Thoughts* 108 contains the figure of a bearded old man, usually identified as Death. The figure holds in his hands a

9. Although Butlin tentatively dates the letters 1803 (1:82), circumstantial evidence suggests the possibility of an earlier provenance. The *Tiriel* drawing, whose verso is used for the lettering, was executed in the late 1780s, and David V. Erdman dates comparable experimentation with the Roman alphabet in the early 1790s (see *The Notebook of William Blake*, ed. Erdman, N74-75).



partially unfurled scroll that, in this early state, contains a few illegible scrawls, usually interpreted as indicating how it is possible that "Life lives beyond the Grave." When finally engraved, the picture is used to illuminate the next page of text, in which the line, "This KING OF TERRORS is the PRINCE OF PEACE," is highlighted. In the engraved version, the figure looks away from, rather than towards, the viewer, and in this case, the scroll contains what can best be described as pseudo-hebraic letters that are virtually impossible to decipher. Some are in mirror writing, others are symmetrically ambiguous, while the rest, though generally approximating Hebrew, actually are not. The effect of the lettering is non-verbal.<sup>10</sup> Functioning like runes, which some of the characters actually resemble, the writing appears to contain the secrets of immortality possessed by Death, though impenetrable to us in our mortal state. Of course, the opposite inference is also plausible: what appears from a distance to be the secret of life might also be revealed, upon closer examination, to be nonsense ("This KING OF TERRORS is the PRINCE OF PEACE"?). The fact that both interpretations are equally feasible suggests the larger significance of the graphics, that we will have to use our imaginations, rather than our rational faculties, if we wish to penetrate the essential truth beyond the range of Young's meanderings.

The same hermeneutic can be applied to page 43 of *The Four Zoas* where, in *Night the Third*, Blake uses the same illustration, this time apparently to underscore Urizen's hubris in identifying himself as God (Magno and Erdman 49). By using the same illustration for both Young's conventional interpretation of Death and the Urizenic imposture, it is possible that Blake is implying an equivalence between the two false doctrines, both to be abrogated in part by the regeneration of Urizen himself, at the climax of Blake's epic. In both cases, the pseudo-Hebrew lettering might be seen to reflect back on the inadequacy of a literal reading of Scripture, the kind of interpretation upon which both Urizen's and Young's vacuous theologies are predicated.

The same kind of reasoning applies to *Night Thoughts* 435. Although the letters are clearly recognizable, they do not spell any words in conventional Hebrew. Rather, it would appear, they are used to evoke the secrets of eternity, especially those contained in a book held by the personification of Eternity, the subject of the text on the plate.

10. In their commentary about page 63, Robert Essick and Jenijoy La Belle summarize early attempts to read the letters (*Night Thoughts* or *The Complaint and The Consolation* xiv-xv). See also John E. Grant, "Visions in *Vala*" 162. The fact that these readings generally conform to preconceptions about the message might be attributed to Hebraists' projections of their own expectations onto what remain inherently ambiguous figures that, with a bit of imagination, can be made to resemble any number of possible Hebrew letters.

The most significant aspect of the Hebrew in these drawings is its unintelligibility. Clearly, Blake had no interest in conveying a literal message; yet, he painstakingly executed the lettering, in the one obfuscating the characters, in the other clarifying them though signifying nothing comprehensible, in both cases apparently to imply a message that extends beyond the bounds of either the visual or the verbal medium. In contrast, when he did wish to convey a decipherable message, Blake reverted to the Roman alphabet, as in *Night Thoughts* 60/*Four Zoas* 51. Exploiting Young's allusion to Belshazzar, Blake's illustration depicts, according to Essick and La Belle (xiv), the figure of a prophet interrupting Belshazzar during his feast—he drops his glass and the wine spills out—to see the writing on the wall. Here, the Roman letters spell out the first word and a half of the warning in Daniel (5:24-28), "MENE" and "TEKEL." As explained by Daniel: "MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting." Missing from Blake's picture is the third word, "PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." Blake's choice of Roman rather than Hebrew letters seems to indicate that in this instance, he considered the content of the message to be more significant than its medium.<sup>11</sup>

#### Biblical Commentaries

The next extant example of Hebrew graphics is found in the letter to James Blake of 30 January 1803, in which Blake boasts

am now learning my Hebrew. אבנא 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 (E 727)

The passage is problematic for several reasons. Most obviously, as indicated by the *Tiriel* and *Night Thoughts* illustrations, not to mention the verbal art, Blake had clearly been interested in Hebrew long before this letter to his brother, and presumably, some time in the previous decade and a half, Blake would have mentioned it to James. Moreover, by the nineteenth century, the problems with Hebrew linguistics and Bible translation were fairly well known, as Blake certainly would have discovered from his experimentation with hebraic etymologies.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the

11. In personal correspondence, Grant associates these illustrations with a series of messages found throughout Blake's *Night Thoughts*, including NT 53, 108, 109, 298, 302, 303, 330, 388, 434, 435, 436, 18:4E, 20:5E, 52:17E, 60:19E, 30E.

12. On the impact of biblical High Criticism, see McGann 152-72.





3. William Blake, *Job's Evil Dreams*, no. 11 of the Butts Job illustrations. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.



inclusion of Hebrew lettering was obviously gratuitous, just to show off to James how well William could draw the first three letters of the alphabet—which we have no reason to assume that James would have recognized. Yet, despite all this, the letter does indicate that, meaning aside, in the next decade Blake would use the Hebrew allusively, to refer to a specific context. Here, in the letter to James, he includes the first three characters to create a hebraic equivalent to learning one's ABCs.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, during this period, while Blake worked on the series of Bible and Milton illustrations, as well as his own prophecy *Milton*, he included Hebrew lettering in three pictures—*Job's Evil Dreams* of the Butts series, *Enoch*, and *Milton*, copy C, plate 15—in each case manipulating a biblical text to comment on the larger theme of the visual art.

Begun soon after the letter to James, the watercolor *Job's Evil Dreams* (c. 1804–07) contains the first example of what appears to be an attempt to combine the symbolic implications of literal Hebrew with graphic art (illus. 3). Depicting a dream state, the drawing portrays Job resisting being pulled down. At the bottom of the picture are the flames of hell, out of which rise three demonic beings that attempt to restrain the prone figure of Job, who apparently otherwise might rise beyond their grasp. The figure on the left holds Job's ankles, the one in the middle his loins, and the demon on the right lifts a chain towards Job's head, presumably intending to lock up Job's mind. Stretched out above Job, in a parody of the *Elohim Creating Adam* (1795), is Satan, identifiable by his cloven hoof and the serpent entwined around his body.<sup>14</sup> Not breathing life into Job, whose head is turned away, Satan gazes down, at a point beyond his extended left arm that, itself cradled by the serpent's head, in turn cradles Job's head. Above Satan's body is the lightning that pierces the two tablets, to which Satan points with his right hand. The movement of the picture is downward, as the lightning, Satan and the demons all combine to manipulate Job to the lower reaches. In contrast, Job, lying flat on his back, pushes upward, thus keeping as much distance as possible between himself and the serpentine Satan, who otherwise would be pulled by gravity down onto Job.

Unlike the later engraving for the Linnell series, in this early version of the drawing, Blake includes Hebrew lettering to underscore the threat implied by Satan. His choice of text, consistent with Jewish iconography, contains the tablets of the Law, frequently illuminated by abbreviations

of the ten commandments. Blake's text comes from Exodus 20. Read from right to left, the first tablet contains the single Hebrew word שָׁמַיִם, "heaven," which occurs twice in the Commandments: in verse 4, "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth"; and verse 11, "for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it." The second tablet contains commandments from verses 12 and 13:

אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן (from Exodus 20:12: Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.)

לֹא תִרְצַח (Exodus 20:13: Thou shalt not murder.)

לֹא תִנְאֻף (Exodus 20:13: Thou shalt not commit adultery.)

לֹא תִגְנוֹב (Exodus 20:13: Thou shalt not steal.)

Of the ten, Blake cites those most concerned with material existence. While the commandment to honor one's parents is itself idealistic, the justification is corporeal, for long life. Similarly, by omitting the fourth commandment from verse 13—"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour," the text in the illustration concentrates on crimes of property violation. In selecting these commandments, Blake seems to be implying that the evil dream imposed by Satan consists of corporeal values, at the expense of the spiritual ideals relegated to the other tablet.

Consistent with the choice of commandments, it can be argued that Blake selectively introduces errors to underscore the erroneous law being imposed by Satan. Leaving the correctly spelled "heaven" to speak for itself on its own tablet, Blake crowds the second stone with linguistic anomalies that apparently emphasize the theme of the picture as a whole. Most noteworthy in the context of English Hebraism is the pointed ת at the end of the first word. Here, Blake correctly includes the final *khaph*, ת, at the end of the word signifying "your God." Even more noteworthy, though, is the inclusion of the vowel י in the letter, both because vowels were eschewed by many Christian Hebraists of the day (including John Parkhurst, whose lexicon Blake likely used<sup>15</sup>), and because that particular form is extremely rare. This suggests that Blake had a Jewish text in front of him as he completed the drawing. In contrast, the second word, "gave," contains an error, Blake's version omitting the final *nun* at the end of the word. That is, Blake has נָתַן instead of נָתַן.

13. In contrast to the English expression, the common Hebrew equivalent is to cite only the first two letters, that is, to say that one is learning the *alef-beth*. The fact that Blake transliterates the English version rather than using the Hebrew seems to be further evidence that he did not study the language with a Jewish teacher.

14. See John E. Grant, "Blake's Designs for Young's *Night Thoughts*" 80–82.

15. In "The Reasons for 'Urizen,'" I argue that Parkhurst's *Hebrew and English Lexicon, without Points* was probably Blake's main source of Hebrew. For more complete discussions of Parkhurst's influence on Blake, see my "Blake as an Eighteenth-Century Hebraist" and "Glorious incomprehensible" 47–49.



The assumption that the error was committed out of ignorance seems belied by the technical accuracy of the previous word. It is at least conceivable that the anomaly was deliberate, reflecting a corruption of the concept of giving, a possibility in the context of this particular version of the Godhead, especially since Satan's finger points directly at the word *elohecha*, the genitive form of *Elohim*.

Significantly, the next commandment, *lo tirzah*, "Thou shalt not kill," is executed flawlessly, Blake apparently having no quarrels with its sentiment. Interestingly, the word *tirzah* provides the basis for both the plate, "To Tirzah," a late addition to the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, as well as the mythological figure who, in the major prophecies, seems to symbolize the material concept of time, mortality.<sup>16</sup>

In the next commandment, Blake again introduces an anomaly, this time reversing the first *N*, from the word *lo*, "thou shalt not," of the injunction against adultery. Considering the fact that there is a correctly executed *N* directly above this reversed one, as well as one for the third letter of the next word, it seems likely that Blake deliberately corrupted the letter of this particular negation, possibly to indicate ambivalence about the commandment.

Collectively, the Hebrew in this picture seems to associate the literal interpretation of the Bible with the false image of God, now specifically identified as Satan. In this context, the tablets containing the law are products of the Satanic imposture, as symbolized by the broken Hebrew engraved on their surface. Yet, the fault lies with Job's own limited mode of perception. According to kabbalistic belief, the material manifestation of the Bible, as perceived by man in his fallen state, is incomplete, reflecting the inability to apprehend the One. Similarly, the damaged text on this picture is a projection of Job himself, his perceptual limitations being personified by the figure of Satan. The challenge, as suggested by the letters, is to see through the distorted literal level into the Divine truths of Scripture.

This theme also dominates the two samples of Hebrew lettering contained in the lithograph of *Enoch* (1807; illus. 4). Erroneously identified as *Job in Prosperity*, the subject of the picture was not identified until 1936, when Laurence Binyon and Geoffrey Keynes credited Joseph Wicksteed with the discovery that the Hebrew lettering on the book in the picture spells out the name Enoch.<sup>17</sup> As interpreted allegorically by Essick, Enoch represents the Divinely inspired instructor of the arts, especially writing, as represented by the other figures surrounding the father figure in the center of the picture.

16. On the name Tirzah, see my "Sources and Etymologies of Blake's 'Tirzah.'" On her linguistic and mythic significance in the major prophecies, see my two monographs, "Glorious incomprehensible" 134-36 and "Wonders Divine" 126 and 135.

17. Binyon and Keynes 8. In *The Separate Plates of William Blake*, Essick provides a comprehensive history of the lithograph (55-59).

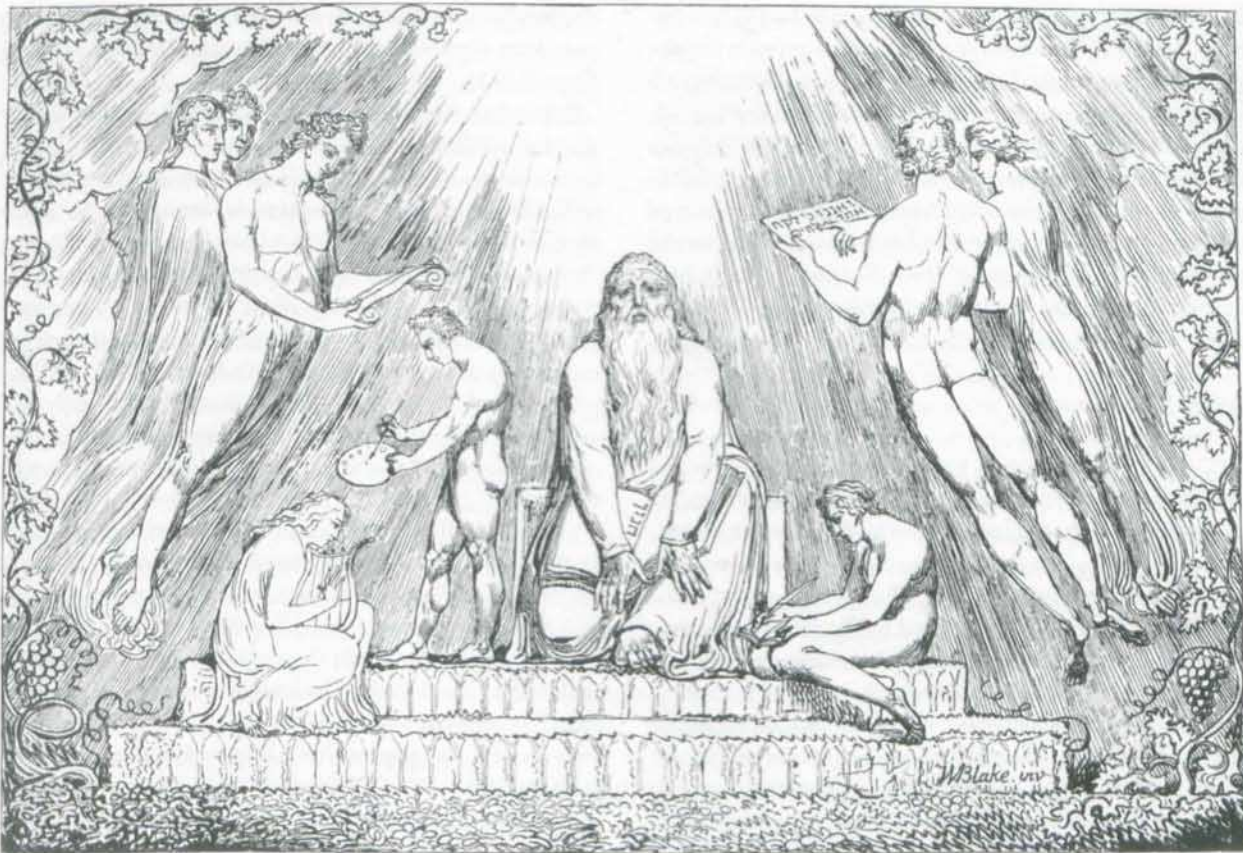
The inclusion of the Hebrew, though, seems to suggest that as with the biblical character himself, the situation is far more complex. Historically, the ambiguous phrase in Genesis, that "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:24), has generated a great deal of speculation, the most mystical being that he was the first man to ascend to heaven without having to undergo the pains of death. As such, Enoch became the subject of mystical discourse, especially in the apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period. In the most significant account, 1 Enoch, or the Ethiopic Book of Enoch, Enoch provides the basis for the earliest form of Kabbalism, *Merkavah*, or Chariot Mysticism. Consequently, beyond the spare biblical account can be found a fairly extensive body of myth, most revolving around the mystery of his death.<sup>18</sup>

Consistent with the legends, the figure in the picture is the illuminated center, looking straight ahead, half-seated half-kneeling, holding on his lap an open book on which his name is written. Enoch's stillness is emphasized by the activities of the surrounding figures, placed like spokes in a wheel whose center, the source of light, is located beyond the margins of the picture. As noted by Essick, those closest to Enoch are the three artists, the painter, musician and poet, all deeply engrossed in their own creativity. Beyond them are two groups of figures, each reading some sort of scroll, the one to the right containing legibly written Hebrew. Probably the most striking aspect of the picture as a whole is that with the exception of Enoch, no one seems the least bit affected by the light, all looking down towards the material forms of their productions, as opposed to the spiritual source of their inspiration. Only Enoch looks "through the eye." Not requiring the text for his vision, he gazes out rather than down towards the book, which would be pulled down were he not holding it.

This apparent disparity between the letter and the spirit of the Law seems underscored by the use of Hebrew on the plate. Written on the book held by the central figure is *Enoch*, the Hebrew for Enoch. While the lettering is lexicographically correct, the text is located on the wrong half of the page. Because Hebrew is read from right to left, the name should either be in the center, as the title, or at the right margin. Here, however, it seems to be justified to the left margin. While, obviously, the left hand of the central figure blocks our view of the appropriate location of the name, Blake could either have moved the hand over or he could have visually turned the book in the other direction, placing the lettering on the side secured by the left hand of

18. The First Book of Enoch was not translated into English until 1821, long after Blake had finished this lithograph. However, John Beer argues that Blake's picture might have been influenced by an unsigned article, "Concerning the Writings and Readings of Jude," itself clearly influenced by the Book of Enoch, that was published in *The Monthly Magazine* for 1 February 1801. For an analysis of the influence of the Book of Enoch on Blake's later work, see Bentley.





4. William Blake, *Enoch*. By permission of the British Museum.

the figure. It seems possible that Blake deliberately chose to place the name in an odd position, thus emphasizing the need to look beneath the surface appearance of the text. For his part, Enoch seems oblivious to the book, which almost falls from his lap. Bathed in the Divine light, he has already transcended the limitations of the material volume.

In contrast, the two figures at the right holding the scroll, though facing the light, look down at the writing, the one at the right pointing, with his left hand, to the final word of the phrase, *elohim*:

וַאֲנִינוּ כִּי לִקַּח אֶת־אֱלֹהִים

In their anxiety about the material manifestation of the Word, they apparently overlooked the omission in their text of the ך (yod, symbol of the Divinity), which is the third letter (Trinity) of the first word (God) in the biblical text. (The middle three words of the sentence—"because [he] took him"—are correct, containing no anomalies.)

Worked on around the same time as the *Job* and *Enoch* illustrations,<sup>19</sup> *Milton*, copy C, plate 15 combines the biblical text of *Job's Evil Dreams* with the symbolic import of

*Enoch* to provide a mythic representation of the Urizenic imposture. In dramatizing the motivation of the hero, Blake places Milton with his back to us, as he apparently climbs up into the Urizenic world in order, as punctuated by his right foot, "to Annihilate the Self—hood of Deceit & False Forgiveness." Although the two figures constitute the focal point of the picture, they are flanked by the two tablets of the Law, this time held by a sorrowful Urizen. By replacing the Satan of *Job's Evil Dreams* with Urizen, Blake redefines the concept of morality, substituting for the conventional duality of good and evil the delusions produced by an erroneous interpretation of the text. In contrast to the Satanic prototype, Urizen is not as old, not assisted by acolytes but alone, not powerful but sorrowful, almost as though he realized the necessity of reforming his mode of thought.

Consistent with the transformation, this time the Hebrew on the tablets is virtually indecipherable. While it is possible that the tablet in Urizen's right hand might contain on the first line the word תְּהוֹ, *tohu*, "chaos," and on the third, לֹ, *lo*, "not," there is no way to be certain what the

19. According to Viscomi, the full production and evolution of *Milton* span the period from 1804 to 1818, though it was probably

first printed in 1811. For a detailed discussion, see "The Production and Evolution of *Milton*: 1804-1818," chapter 32 (315-29) of his *Blake and the Idea of the Book*.



letters signify.<sup>20</sup> Rather, the point seems to be the corruption of the text. Because the visual tablets provide the obvious allusion to the Ten Commandments, Blake has no real need to etch particular letters to convey a literal reading of the Law. All he need do is sketch in a few Hebrew-like characters to imply the irrationality of Urizenic thinking, that which Milton will revise throughout the rest of the epic. In contrast to the illegible lettering found on the scroll in *Night Thoughts* 30E/*Four Zoas* 43, though, here the graphics are text specific, the allusion to the Ten Commandments being obvious, even without legible lettering.

### Verbal Illumination

During the period when Blake completed *Jerusalem*, his last illuminated prophecy, he also experimented with alternate ways of combining pictures and poetry in his composite art, in some cases actually reversing the orientation between the two media. That is, while in the earlier books, the verbal message was illustrated by the visual ornamentation, in some of his last works, the visual message was complemented by surrounding graphics whose ornamentation is verbal.<sup>21</sup> Consistent with this reorientation, the Hebrew lettering used in the last years of his life tends to be more symbolic than verbal. That is, generally unconstrained by a specific text, as the Hebrew of the middle phase had been, here the Hebrew seems to be used more for its mystical and graphic associations than for the literal meanings signified by any particular group of letters.

As a transition to this new approach, the Hebrew in *Milton* 32\*(e), a late addition to the prophecy, printed after 1821,<sup>22</sup> provides a graphic ornamentation for a verbal text. Apparently intending to exploit a macaronic pun, Blake includes the Hebrew word/phrase, *כְּרִיבִים* / *כִּי*, to correspond with the English "as Multitudes" and the Latin "Vox Populi" in the margins of the plate.<sup>23</sup> The correct Hebrew for "as multitudes" is a single word without the first *yod*—*כְּרִיבִים*—a spelling that could also signify the Hebrew for cherubs, the order of angels surrounding the Holy Ark (this is a complex word to which the Hebraist John Parkhurst devotes almost twenty pages [339-57]). The Cherubim were especially significant to Blake, who associated them with the

original forms of "all the grand works of ancient art," which were later copied by the classical artists (*Descriptive Catalogue*, E 531).

Beyond any literal associations it might have, the Hebrew also has symbolic and graphic significance. Symbolically, the inclusion of the extra *yod* could indicate the presence of the "hand of God," the word *yod* meaning "hand," while its number, ten, signifies God. Thus, it is possible that to illuminate a verbal passage explaining the difference between individuals and states, Blake includes a verbal ornament whose implications graphically illuminate the refrain repeated periodically in the Bard's Song: "Mark well my words. they are of your eternal salvation!" Visually, the verbal phrase is interwoven with the tendrils decorating the side of the page, becoming part of the ornamentation as well.

In the Linnell Job, Blake completely inverts his approach to the media. In the earlier book illustrations, like those for Young's *Night Thoughts*, the verbal text was spatially central, its literal contents providing the focal point for the surrounding pictures. In the engraved Job, however, the biblical text is reduced to the level of ornament, the central "text" being Blake's visual rendition of "כְּרִיבִים" / *Illustrations of / The Book of Job / Invented & Engraved / by William Blake / 1825*.<sup>24</sup> To be distinguished from the biblical text, this is Blake's composite reproduction of the "original," of which, by implication, the later versions and interpretations are merely derivative. In this reconstruction, the verbal line found in the biblical text is reduced to the level of visual ornamentation, and within this context, the two examples of Hebrew lettering, as with that of *Milton* 32\*(e), seem to be graphic rather than literal, both revolving around the full symbolism of *א* (*alef*), the first letter of the alphabet.

When considered as an example of Blake's Hebrew, the most significant aspect of the lettering on the title page is the absence of errors. The two words, literally meaning "the book of Job," are both appropriate and correct, visually comprising the top part of the circle formed by the line of angels surrounding the English title of the book. That the Gothic letters of the English title are decorated by angels suggests a limited form of sanction, the implication being that the English, i.e., verbal, text can convey only so much about the true import of *sefer 'iyob*, a book whose Hebrew title stands, as Burwick notes, "aloft upon a cloud of material reason (the statement of legal conformance, given here within the cloud, is excluded from the frame in all twenty-one subsequent plates)" (136). Significantly, the Hebrew contains a perfectly engraved *alef*, almost identical to the one found in the early doodling, though without the stylistic grace of the two on *Night Thoughts* 435. The symbolic implication, as will be clarified on the next plate, is a starkly outlined letter that omits the Divine spirit.

These inferences are underscored by the illumination of plate 1. In this picture of *Job and His Family*, Blake depicts

20. Essick and Viscomi provide a "conjectural" transcription in their Blake Trust edition of *Milton*, 143, with commentary on 24-25.

21. Burwick notes that in the Job series, Blake "gives us in sequence a visual narrative mediated through a frame containing the verbal text," and that the "abundantly annotated *Laocoön* . . . mediates the visual image through a welter of polemical graffiti . . . Indeed, Blake uses the *Laocoön*, much as Lessing used it . . . to argue the nature and limits of verbal and visual signs" (128).

22. According to Viscomi, plate 32\*(e) is a late addition to copy C of *Milton*, being printed on paper Blake did not begin using until c. 1821. For a full discussion, see *Blake and the Idea of the Book* 327-28.

23. See Essick and Viscomi's edition of *Milton* for possible interpretations of the Hebrew (188-89).



the initial fault of Job in terms of a literal, as opposed to imaginative, reading of the Bible. In what might be viewed as a parody of the title page of the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake portrays Job and his wife seated beneath a tree whose fruits, in contrast to those of the earlier drawing, are musical instruments. Surrounded by kneeling children, Job and his wife are seated, with their knees bent in Urizen's characteristic pose, to form two tablets, and both have open books on their laps. Severely boxed in by the borders of the picture, the illustration is contained within a border depicting the outline of a Gothic church, at the bottom of which is an altar whose flames appear to generate the entire picture. The message beneath the altar is from 2 Corinthians 3:6 and 1 Corinthians 2:14: "The Letter Killeth / The Spirit giveth Life / It is Spiritually Discerned." Beyond the outline of the church is a ring of clouds containing the opening of the Lord's Prayer.

Both literally and figuratively illuminating the engraving, the verbal lines help to recontextualize the visual message. By expanding the perspective beyond the border of the picture itself, the circumscribing ornamentation indicates that Job's own perspective is foreshortened, the physical presence of the unused instruments, which themselves are enclosed within the lines of the church, obscuring the spiritual message above and its explanation below. Not an evil man, Job "feared God & eschewed Evil," as the illuminating text explains. But he lacked vision, and as a result, he projected a moralistic interpretation onto the Bible, creating God in his own literalistic image. The function of his experience, then, will be to expand his own imaginative faculties so that he might elevate himself spiritually, rather than literalistically debasing the concept of God.

Mystically, the narrative can be said to revolve around the loss of the *alef*, symbol of the unified vision of God, as manifested by the first Divine hypostasis, the "Supreme Crown." Hence the use of Hebrew on plate 2, *Satan Before the Throne of God* (illus. 5). Visually, the picture introduces God, drawn in the image of Job from plate 1,<sup>24</sup> the only difference being that God, whose hair is spiked to resemble a king's crown, looks down, while Job had looked up. Between God and Job is presumably a figure of Satan, though without the cloven hoof or encircling serpent, it is hard to tell (Burwick notes the resemblance between Satan and Job's eldest son). At the bottom of the picture, Job and his family all have reading materials in their hands, though with the exception of his wife, whose gaze is ambiguous, all look away from the texts. Although not as foreshortened as plate 1, plate 2 is also confined by the religious institution, this time a Gothic trellis working its way up the side of the page, its spire projected beyond the border of the engraving. Even though it is not physically present, its imaginative lines con-

fine the verbal illumination in the clouds above the picture.

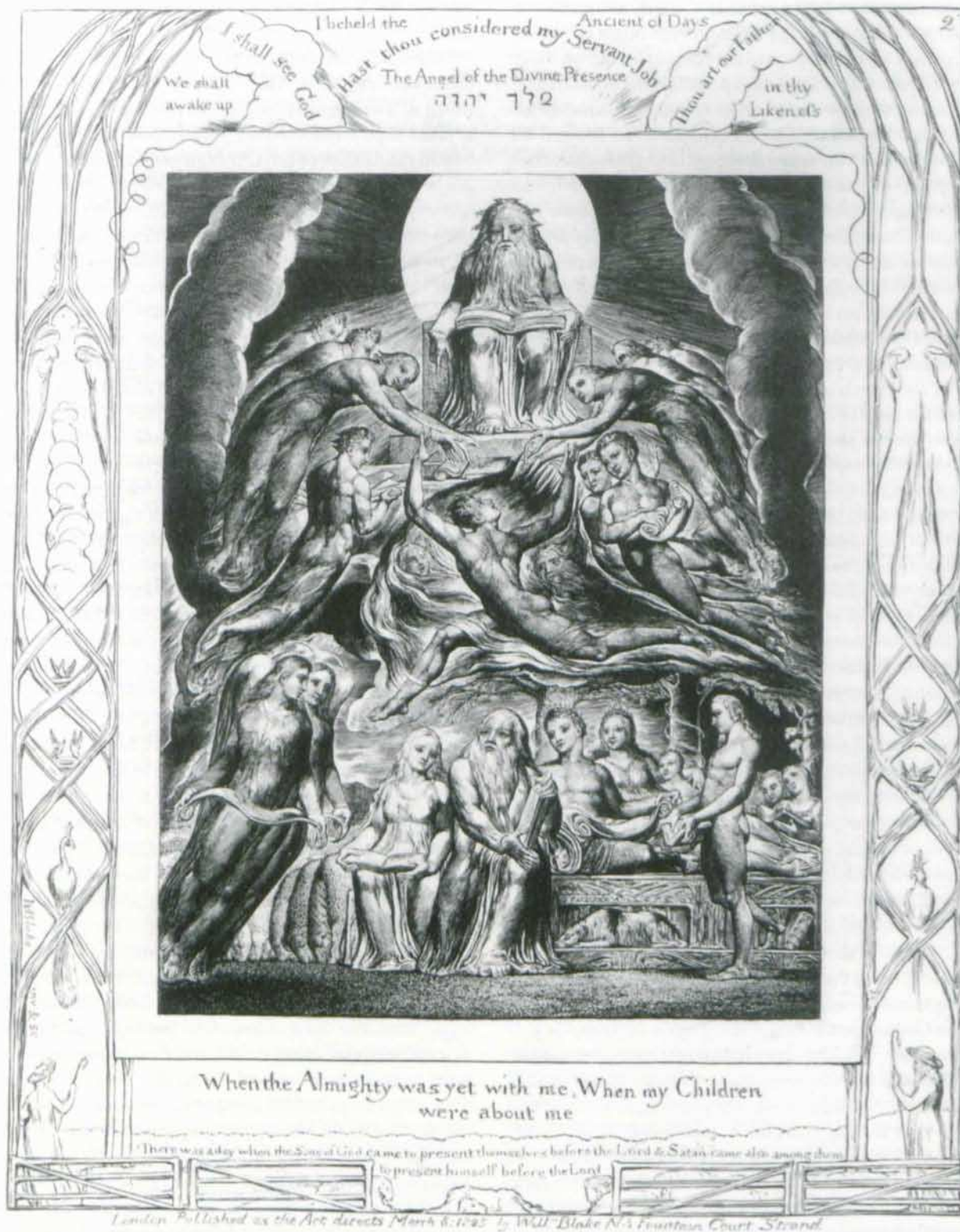
Viewed from center to circumference, the text focuses in on the Hebrew phrase, מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה, *melekh "Jehovah,"* above which is "The Angel of the Divine Presence." Beyond that is "Hast thou considered my Servant Job," and finally, "I beheld the Ancient of Days." Although the Hebrew phrase can be literally translated as "the king Jehovah," its use could convey both ironic and mystical dimensions beyond what can be conveyed by a simple English translation. First of all, the Hebrew can be read as a corrupted form of the English "The Angel of the Divine Presence," that would be מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה with the inclusion of an *alef*. Second, for the name of God, Blake chooses the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable Name whose numerical value, 26, is the same as the total of the components of the omitted *alef*. Thus, by substituting the corrupted spelling, Blake may be visually implying Job's debased concept of God, who has been transformed into a royal image of man. At the same time, the Hebrew could suggest a corresponding degeneration of the concept of angel, from which the *alef* of the One has been eliminated.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the version of the "Angel of the Divine Presence" found in Job's conventional mode of thought is incomplete, for it lacks the visionary component provided by the spirit of the letter, the 1 and 26 of the *alef*, whose total, 27, symbolizes man. Symbolically, the loss of the *alef* can be attributed to the intervening line, "Hast thou considered my Servant Job," the challenge that caused the literalistic debasement of the concept of God into the pseudo-One who abdicated his responsibilities to Satan. Above the challenge, though, is the phrase "I beheld the / Ancient of Days." Taken from Daniel 7:9, the term "Ancient of Days" was used by Kabbalists to designate the highest physiognomy of the Supernal Man, corresponding to *alef*, "the Supreme Crown." Thus, even though the challenge may have obscured Job's vision, thereby degrading the "angel" into a corporeal "king," the Divinity is still ever present.

This Divine Presence might be graphically indicated by the formal properties of the picture itself. In the center, it is possible that Satan is depicted in the form of an *alef*, his raised arms, like those described by Basnage, reaching up, as if ironically to embrace God, while his legs extend outward to encompass Job and his family. From a broader perspective, Satan himself could be viewed as part of a larger *alef*, formed by the whirlwind rising on either side of God, and the figures extending down towards either corner. Kabbalistically, the diagonal corresponds to the mediating *vav*, the symbol of Christ whose function is to unite the lower material world with the spiritual realm. Thus, from the cosmic perspective, Satan's challenge could be perform-

24. See S. Foster Damon's commentary on the plate, in *Blake's Job*, 14.

25. According to Burwick, "'The Angel of the Divine Presence' is manifest as satanic contradiction, and the Hebrew words, 'Jehovah is King,' pronounce the surrender to his tyranny" (144).





5. William Blake, *Satan before the Throne of God*, from *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, plate 2. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.



ing the christological function of helping to expand Job's visionary faculties so that he might perceive the Ancient of Days. Hence the absence of cloven hooves or serpents. Just as the depiction of God is a projection of Job, so, too, is that of Satan.

Blake does not include any more Hebrew lettering in the series, its absence in this version of *Job's Evil Dreams* (plate 12) possibly indicating a graphic economy. By now, the bare outline of the tablets has become enough to convey his criticism of the Commandments. Instead, he engraves Job's prayer at the bottom of the page: "Oh that my words were printed in a Book that they were graven with an iron pen & lead in the rock for ever." Blake's illuminations graphically literalize the verse.

Although there are no other Hebrew words in the Job series, it is possible that Blake exploited the symbolic values of the *alef* as an underlying form through which to criticize Job's vision of God. As Munk points out in his first chapter in *The Wisdom of the Hebrew Alphabet*, the mystical value of the *alef*, as symbol of God's unity and omnipotence, is visually conveyed through its graphic form (43-44). As such, the *alef* is the symbol that unifies God and man, *alef* also being the first letter of the name Adam. Consequently,

The **N** is seen as a ladder placed on the ground reaching heavenward. . . . Thus the **N** conveys to man that—in order to free himself from earthly bondage—he must infuse his physical existence with spirituality so that he can ascend to the summit: the Divine. . . . In summary:—**N** is the channel by which the Infinite Spiritual is brought to the finite physical. . . . (54)

While there is no way to be certain whether or not the formal resemblance of some pictures to the letter *alef* is intentional, still, there are enough similarities to warrant their exploration.

It is quite possible that as early as *Europe*, Blake was interested in the structuring potential of the *alef*. On copy E, plate 13 (plate 12[14] of the Blake Trust/Princeton facsimile, ed. Dörrebecker, 4:239), the two angels, extending their wings up the sides of the plate, and connected in the middle by an intervening cloud, create the symmetrically distorted impression of the kind of *alef* Urizen might use to support himself and his book of brass (illus. 6). Unlike the true *alef*, in this one the intervening *vav*, which should symbolize the christological function, has been flattened out into the horizontal plane on which sits the erroneous image of a god who lacks the dynamics of a true diagonal reaching up to the heavens. This kind of outline can also be found on several of the Job plates. As seen on plate 2, a horizontal swath occupies the middle third of the picture, with God resting on its top, and Job and his family pressed down by the bottom. Yet, as noted, the extended figure of Satan seems to generate the energy of the true diagonal, his challenge



6. William Blake, *Europe a Prophecy*, 1794, copy E, plate 13. Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

providing the means by which to correct the *alef*. In contrast, on plate 16, *The Fall of Satan*, the lines produced by the flanking angels, whose extended wings resemble those framing Urizen in *Europe* 13, here clearly comprise an intervening diagonal, as Satan is summarily—with a true vertical—exiled to hell.

It is also possible that the *alef* contributed to Blake's development of human figures as well, especially as culminating in the *Laocoön*. In *Europe*, plate 17(18) (Blake Trust/Princeton 4:249), Blake could conceivably be indicating the future role of Los as Christ figure by positioning him like a dynamic *alef*, his torso and extended left leg suggesting the diagonal of the *vav*, and his left arm (*yod*) lowered in the attempt to raise the figure he attempts to bring along with him. Similarly, the central statue of the *Laocoön* might also be viewed as a symbolic *alef*, which in its totality signifies the dynamic unity of God, while its components—the two *yods* and the median *vav*—total 26, the number of the Tetragrammaton (illus. 7). In addition, the two *yods*, each signifying 10, reach up to embrace heaven, while the diagonal *vav*, numerically 6, symbolizes Christ, who mediates between the upper and lower worlds. In Blake's version, while his right arm reaches up to the level of God,



being situated next to the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, his left arm is lowered to restrain the intertwined serpent, located just above the Hebrew for Lilith, the she-demon, thus emphasizing the mediating function of the *vav*, through which the viewer will be able to apprehend the occluded Divinity of the figure. In this way, the engraved *Laocoön* might be seen as revolving around the dynamics of an *alef* in the process of completing itself, thereby providing the means by which the reader/viewer could discern the true form of the Divinity occluded by the overlay of Greek art.

This is not to imply that the engraving was original to Blake. To the contrary, Blake's *Laocoön* was likely based on the reconstructed cast of a marble statue that was carved around 25 B.C., and rediscovered in the Palace of Titus in Rome in January 1506. When found, the statue lacked, among other things, the right arm on the central figure. In his version, Blake tilted the head more to the left, contracted the stomach muscles and moved the right knee more to the left.<sup>26</sup> Essick suggests that Blake might have been influenced by Johann Winkelmann's description of *Laocoön's* body, in *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*. Still, the figure's form is also quite close to that of the male in *Europe* 17(18). Even though *Laocoön* looks up while the other looks back at the person he is bringing along with him, their heads are in the same position. A Kabbalist might infer that Blake had attempted to bring out the *alef* he had envisioned incarnate within the Greek statue. Not insignificantly, although he had first begun working on the concept of the *Laocoön* around 1814-15, in a commission for Abraham Rees's *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, published 1816-19, Blake returned to the concept at the end of his life, the *Laocoön*, completed c. 1826-27, being his last illuminated work.

Sporadically interspersed in the verbal component of the visual line are four Hebrew messages. Directly in the center of the picture, between the figure of *Laocoön* and one of his sons, is the only grammatically correct Hebrew on the entire plate, the name of Lilith: לִילִית.<sup>27</sup> Probably derived from Babylonian demonology, Lilith was the first wife of Adam. Because, like him, she was also formed from dust, Lilith demanded sexual equality, and when her husband refused, she ran away, to be transformed into a she-demon who killed new-born infants and seduced men. In kabbalistic myth, Lilith is Samael's female counterpart, queen of the "other side," becoming the demonic counterpart of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence (Jerusalem in

Blake's myth). Not an isolated name, Lilith is visually enclosed in a space circumscribed by *Laocoön* and the son on his left, bisected by *Laocoön's* arm that restrains the serpent. Visually, the Hebrew is the lower part of a duality opposed by the English word "Good," coordinated by the serpent. Within the context of the picture as a whole, the verbal duality of good and evil/Lilith is, on the one hand, a product of the intervening serpent, and on the other, enclosed within the lowered *yod* of *Laocoön's* left arm. Consequently, while the duality occupies the central area of the picture as a whole, it is spatially reduced to an aberration that, presumably, will be eliminated when *Laocoön* raises his arm to complete the form of the *alef*. In the meantime, the mediating *vav*, whose width is visually expanded by the touching arms and legs of *Laocoön* and his son, extends the christological function which will ultimately facilitate the completion of the *alef*. Within this visual context, the grammaticality of Lilith's name reflects the facile appeal of the letter, ultimately to be superseded by the spirit of the *alef*.

Although the Hebrew Lilith is in the middle of the picture, the most prominent example of Hebrew is the heading at the top: מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה. Revolving around the same concept as that used for plate 2 of the *Job* engravings, here the Hebrew rendering of "The Angel of the Divine Presence" contains the *alef*, though reversed. In addition, the context is far different. In the *Job* drawing, the Hebrew was used to describe the devolution of transcendence, from the Ancient of Days (the kabbalistic *alef* of the Supernal Man, to Christian mystics the symbolic Christ) down to the mediating angel, manifested in our world by the symbol of material power, the king. Now, assuming that the inclusion of the *alef* was deliberate, Blake reverses the perspective, portraying the *alef* in terms of the concept of incarnation, the internal Christ, the means by which man can apprehend the One.

Located spatially where Blake frequently (as in *Enoch*, for example) places the source of light, the Hebrew is part of a triangle whose point is apparently the head of *Laocoön*, which describes the materialization of art:<sup>28</sup>

Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War  
only Read Matthew C.X. & 10 v.  
by pretences to the Two Impossibilities Chastity & Abstinence Gods of the Heathen  
He repented that he had made Adam  
(of the Female, the Adamah)  
[scratched out] & it grieved him at his heart  
The Angel of the Divine Presence  
מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה

26. For detailed discussions of Blake's *Laocoön*, see Essick's *Separate Plates of William Blake*, 98-101, and Essick and Viscomi's edition of *Milton*, 229-33. Essick and Viscomi note that some of Blake's changes may have been influenced by Marco Dente's engraving of the statue before its restoration.

27. On the Lilith myth, see Graves and Patai 65-66; on the mystical implications, see Scholem 356-60.

28. According to Morton D. Paley, the aphorisms surrounding the statue transform the *Laocoön* "into מַלְאָךְ & his two Sons Satan & Adam by surrounding it with texts denouncing money, war, and empire and affirming the ultimate value of art" (235).







In this area of the picture, the messages of the verbal and visual art coalesce, as the horizontal lines cross, and thereby block, any potential source of light beyond the picture. The reason, as the verbal lines explain, is materialism, and the result is an inverted concept of God. While it is always possible that Blake simply erred in executing the *alef*, we should not discount the likelihood that as a careful artist, Blake deliberately reversed the letter, perhaps in order to shift the burden of interpretation to the readers/viewers who must for themselves reverse the perspective on the Divinity, and thereby recognize the fallacy of the "good versus Lilith" duality, so that Laocoön might be freed to raise his left arm towards the heavens and thus complete the potential *alef* on which the picture's form might be predicated.

Until then, only half of the *alef* will be possible, as indicated by the inscription beneath the plinth: "Ⲛⲓ & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact, or History of Ilium."<sup>29</sup> Reflecting the degeneration from the original inspiration of "the Cherubim of Solomons Temple," the Greek rendition of Laocoön, while good art, lacks the full inspiration of "the Cherubim." Consequently, it can only be identified by *ya*, the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton (*yod* and *he*), lacking the final *Ⲛ* (*vav*), Christ, and *Ⲛ* (*he*) of the full name of God, in English rendered "Jehovah."

The final instance, barely visible in the upper left corner of the picture, involves Christ as "The Eternal Body of Man," that is, "the Imagination, that is God himself / The Divine Body." The English is followed by a corrupted version of the Hebrew name Jesus: *Ⲛⲓⲥⲱ*, in which the *ayin* is reversed, and the mediating *vav* is omitted. *Ayin*, the name of the letter, is also the Hebrew word for "eye"; and, as already noted, the *vav* is the kabbalistic symbol of Christ. Again, assuming that the variations were deliberate, the reversed *ayin* and omitted *vav* could suggest that the conventional interpretation of Jesus is a corruption that ignores the true christological vision. By implication, the audience will be able to reconstruct the true Christ by symbolically reversing the *ayin* and adding the *vav*, that is, by retrieving the true art occluded by the transformations of later versions.

This brief excursion into Blake's graphic use of Hebrew suggests that we may have been asking the wrong ques-

tion: it is less a matter of *what* the words mean than *how* the letters signify within the total context of a particular picture or plate. In "Glorious incomprehensible": *The Development of Blake's Kabbalistic Language*, I argue that Blake was never interested in Hebrew as a conventional sign system. Rather, believing in the Adamic theory of language, Blake incorporated Hebraisms into his verbal art, ultimately as the vehicle for expanding consciousness in order to apprehend the One, through whose speech the act of Creation had been accomplished. I also argue that at some point during the composition of *The Four Zoas*, Blake redefined the name Albion (etymologically a Latin reference to the white cliffs of Dover), in terms of spurious hebraic roots—*al*, meaning "God," and *ben*, for "son"—to justify his belief that the English were the true chosen people, and English the Divine language, containing within its material shell ("rough basement") the *alef* incarnate. Blake's graphic use of Hebrew lettering seems to complement the belief that English derived from Hebrew, the language of God.

In the first instances—the lettering on the verso to the *Tiriel* drawing, and the pseudo-Hebrew words in the *Night Thoughts/Four Zoas* illustrations—Blake seems to be seeking ways to penetrate the mystical essence contained within the material form of the letter. By the second phase, the text-based use of Hebrew probably completed after he had redefined Albion as the "son of God," Blake exploits the symbolic values of the letters, reforming the Word, as found in the biblical text, to comment prophetically on contemporary England as the promised land. At the end of his life, when he again returns to the Hebrew alphabet, his use is purely mystical. Consolidating the disparate approaches to Hebrew, Blake seems to have unified all of his earlier experimentation around the concept of the *alef*. As the first letter of the alphabet, the *alef* is the first of the Divine emanations, the unknowable Supreme Crown from which all successive potencies were emanated. Yet, the visual correspondence between the letter and the human form suggests the existence of an incarnate relationship between God and man, who was created in His image. Consequently, even though the Job engravings were based on a series of drawings initiated approximately twenty years earlier, and even though the *Laocoön* design was not original to Blake, in both cases he seems to have revealed the incarnate *alef* that he might have intuited as early as the mid-1790s, when he worked on *Europe*, as the means by which he—and we—might apprehend the One.

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29. It should be emphasized that at this point, I am referring to the mystical plenitude of the Tetragrammaton, as opposed to a signifier signifying the concept of God. While both *yod* alone and the *yod-he* combination are names of God, the full Tetragrammaton—*yod, he, vav, he*—is a mystical concept, the ineffable Name which is never pronounced (when the Tetragrammaton is encountered in the text, the signifier "ha-shem," i.e., "the Name," is usually substituted). Therefore, while *yod-he* does signify God, it still comprises only half of the Tetragrammaton.



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