DISCUSSION

Reply to G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought

The Dates of Jerusalem

BY G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

AILENE WARD, "Building Jerusalem: Composition and Chronology," Blake 39.4 (spring 2006): 183-185, concludes that the "new Prophecy" of Blake with "60 Plates" referred to by George Cumberland in 1807 (BR[2] 246) "cannot have been Jerusalem [as we have it], and can therefore only have been Milton." However, Milton as we have it consists of a maximum of only 50 plates, not the 60 of Cumberland's reference.

She places "Jerusalem" firmly in the decade of the 1810s and dismisses the plain "1804" on its title page as merely evidence of Blake's "desire to link the two poems" Milton and Jerusalem, which are both dated 1804 on their title pages.

Her evidence that there cannot have been 60 plates of Jerusalem finished in 1807 derives chiefly from internal evidence of a post-1807 date on more than 50 of the 100 plates of Jerusalem. The character "Hand" appears on 26 Jerusalem plates, and Hand, with his "Three Brains in contradictory council" (Jerusalem pl. 70, l. 5) and his three pointing hands (pl. 93), is generally agreed to represent Robert, John, and Leigh Hunt in whose Examiner Blake was anonymously and recklessly attacked on 7 August 1808 and 17 September 1809 (BR[2] 258-61, 282-83). These 26 plates must have been finished after 1807. Further, BB p. 228 cites 37 Jerusalem plates which are anomalous (in terms of size, density of errata, erroneous catchwords, etc.) as suggesting lateness. However, the connection of odd plates with lateness is not very secure. Perhaps the 26 plates with Hand and 14 of the odd plates were finished after 1807.

There is a good deal of evidence that Jerusalem as presently constituted differs from previous versions. The simplest evidence is the title-page reference to a work "In XXVIII Chapters" (rather than the present four chapters) and the "End of the 1st Chap." on plate 14, whereas the last words of chapter 1 are now on plate 25.

Further, watermarks on some proofs suggest an early date: EDMEADS & [PINE] on Jerusalem plate 9 and EDMEADS & PINE 1802 on Jerusalem (F) duplicate plates 28, 45, 56, plus a loose plate 28. These two watermarks also appear in Sings of Innocence (Q), which Joseph Viscomi, Blake and the Idea of the Book (1993) 243, 378, dates c. 1804.

Is there evidence for Jerusalem before 1807 aside from the title-page date of 1804 and vague references in his letters to "My long Poem" (e.g., 25 April 1803)? Well, some of the events in it were of 1790-1803:

- I heard in Lambeths shades [where Blake lived 1790-1800];
- In Felpham [1800-03] I heard and saw the Visions of Albion[.]
- I write in South Molton Street [1803-21] what I both see and hear .... (Jerusalem pl. 38, ll. 40-42)

Some characters in Jerusalem derive from his trials for sedition of 1803 and 1804, particularly the references to Privates Scofield and Cock who accused him, Lieutenant Hulton who preferred the charges, and Justices of the Peace Brereton, Peachey, and Quantock who heard the charges.

There is clear evidence that Jerusalem depicts some events of 1790-1804, and the "1804" on the title page clearly implies that the work was written and probably at least partly etched then. It is exceedingly difficult to ascertain what Jerusalem consisted of in 1804 or even in 1807, but it is very likely that some of it was committed to paper and to copper in 1804.

Reply to G. E. Bentley, Jr.

BY AILEEN WARD

FIRST, I wish to thank G. E. Bentley, Jr., for his careful reading of my paper and his thoughtful reply. However, I must respectfully disagree with a number of his points. Though he states it is "exceedingly difficult to ascertain what Jerusalem consisted of in 1804 or even in 1807," he stands by his earlier argument that George Cumberland's 1807 memorandum stating that Blake "has eng[ave]d 60 Plates of a new Prophecy" must refer to Jerusalem, the only poem by Blake of over 60 plates (BR[2] 246 and fn), and dismisses my conclusion that it refers to Milton ("Building Jerusalem" 185), which, as he notes, "consists of a maximum of only 50 plates" in its final form. Rather, he concludes from the evidence of the 1804 date on the title page and other considerations that Jerusalem as a whole "was written and probably at least partly etched then," that is, by 1804.

However, the 1804 title-page date is not plain evidence for the composition of Jerusalem, as Bentley implies, but prob-


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lematical, as I have argued and as Bentley himself earlier suggested ("misleadingly dated '1804,' BR[2] 246fn). When its design is compared to those of Blake’s other poems containing title-page dates, the “1804” looks like an afterthought rather than an integral part of the whole page, and thus was quite possibly added after the poem was finished some years later ("Building Jerusalem" 185). Bentley’s other evidence for an early date (i.e., before 1807) consists of the existence of several contradictory chapter references (corrected in the final version) as well as the 1802 watermark on some proofs duplicating those of copy Q of Songs of Innocence, dated c. 1804 by Viscomi. But in pulling these proofs (pls. 9, 28, 45, 56) some time later it seems quite likely that Blake merely used paper on hand left over from the 1804 printing of Songs of Innocence. Bentley further argues that some of the events mentioned in Jerusalem also support an early (pre-1807) date: for example, Blake’s residences in Lambeth, Felpham, and South Molton Street, where he moved in the autumn of 1803 (BR[2] 748), as well as the various allusions to Blake’s trial for sedition (1803-04) in the mentions of Scofield, Cock, Hulton, Breton, Peache, and Quantock scattered throughout Jerusalem. But these events, recollected several years later, are hardly precise enough to prove that Cumberland’s 1807 mention of a “new Prophecy” refers to Jerusalem. Rather, the allusions to the devastating review of The Grave in August 1808 (BR[2] 258-61) scattered throughout Jerusalem in the 26 plates with references to “Hand” provide a surer clue ("Building Jerusalem" 183n8; BR[2] 286fn). Bentley concedes that “these 26 plates must have been finished after 1807,” that is, 1808 and after. But it should be noted that 17 of these post-1807 plates mentioning Hand are found in the first 60 plates of Jerusalem, which cannot have been written until after August 1808 and which cannot therefore have been the “60 Plates of a new Prophecy” which Blake is said to have shown to Cumberland in 1807. Since the “new Prophecy” cannot have been Jerusalem, it can only have been Milton, which was well underway by the summer of 1807. Bentley also cites Blake’s “vague” reference to “My long Poem” in his letter to Butts of 25 April 1803 as evidence of the early composition of Jerusalem. However, the allusion is not vague but fairly clear: the long poem descriptive of “the Spiritual Acts of my three years Slumber on the banks of the Ocean” (E 728) must refer to Milton, which was probably drafted during the Felpham years (E 728-30, 806) but not etched till after his return to London in the autumn of 1803. Jerusalem, on the other hand, appears not to have been begun until at least 1808, as its early references to Hand would indicate.

To turn from textual matters to historical, the contemporary allusions in Jerusalem are mostly to events which occurred after 1811 ("Building Jerusalem" 184nn11-14). Bentley does not consider the biographical question of what Blake might have been doing in the years between his return from Felpham in September 1803 and the summer of 1807 which would make the writing and engraving of 60 plates of Jerusalem practically impossible: first, the completion of Milton as a “Grand Poem” (E 730), continuing with minor revisions until at least the autumn of 1808; second, his labors on the manuscript of The Four Zoas, on which he continued to work until at least 1807, and perhaps the mysterious composite version of Milton with Jerusalem (see note 1, above); third, almost 30 commercial engravings (see table, BR[2] 820-21) executed between 1803 and 1806, as well as the engraving of Milton (first printed c. 1810) during these years. A similar question arises concerning Blake’s activity between 1810 and 1818 ("Building Jerusalem" 185), when he produced little original art of significance after completing The Grave in 1808 and The Canterbury Pilgrims in 1810; rather, he was occupied with illustrations for the Wedgwood Catalogue and the Rees Cyclopedia, as well as engraving Flaxman’s 37 designs for Hesiod, Works and Days (1816-17), and making a copy of his large drawing of The Last Judgment, on which he labored for almost eight years (BR[2] 320fn). This is the time in which he most probably composed the better part of Jerusalem.” Indeed, it is hard to imagine otherwise—six or eight years in the life of a major artist and poet at the height of his powers with little to show for them beyond routine illustrations for a pottery catalogue and an encyclopaedia, the engraving of Flaxman’s Hesiod designs (see table, BR[2] 821-22), and yet another copy of The Last Judgment.

To conclude: the balance of evidence suggests that the “60 Plates of a new Prophecy” of George Cumberland’s 1807 note cannot refer to Jerusalem. Quite apart from the basic improbability that over half of Blake’s major work was completed two decades before his death, to view the first 60 plates of Jerusalem as arising from his experience prior to 1807 is to miss the profound spiritual transformation in Blake’s life occurring in the years between the composition of Milton and Jerusalem, recorded in the change from the attack on his enemies in the “Public Address” (1809) pp. 51-56 and the self-justification in the ending of Milton, pls. 40-43, to the spirit of contrition of the prologue of Jerusalem: the confession of “the most sinful of men” in the proem to Jerusalem and the glimpse of the Heavenly City with which it ends.


3. It might also be noted that Cumberland’s 1807 visit to Blake is itself hypothetical. In the summer of 1807 Cumberland “apparently came to London ... and called on Blake” (BR[2] 246): there is no corroboratory evidence for the call. The information in a series of notes about Blake, which Cumberland made in his notebook at this time, may well have come from Cromek, with whom he was on familiar terms, and not from Blake himself: his diary notation about the “new Prophecy” may be hearsay, or a piece of literary gossip.

4. Essick and Viscomi 36.

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6. In 1812, however, he contributed a set of "Detached Specimens of an original illuminated Poem, entitled Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion" to the annual exhibition of the Associated Painters in Water Colours (BR[2] 311-12 and 312fn). The exact number of these plates is a matter of speculation, perhaps half a dozen, and none is higher than pl. 53 in the final numeration. In any case, this shows Blake’s work on Jerusalem well advanced by 1812.