

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 10, Issue 4, Spring 1977, pp. 115-116



# ANOTHER LOOK AT THE STRUCTURE OF *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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Recently Gary J. Taylor has suggested that the mosaic format typical of the primer and early children's books is probably a specific influence on the form of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.<sup>1</sup> He finds in the primer a patchwork texture and generic diversity of parts ("illustrations, short poems . . . , dialogues, hymns, proverbs, catechism, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments") similar to Blake's; calls special attention to some pictorial resemblances; and concludes that "Blake very well could have been parodying one of the most widely known of formats, as well as one of the most insidious shapers of men's minds." His case on the whole is a good one,<sup>2</sup> made still stronger by the fact, unmentioned in his argument, that the most likely specific model for the contemporaneous *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*--Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs*--is also a form of pious children's literature. As Blake for his own corrective purposes made ironic use of the popular children's hymns, so he may have treated the primer.

It is the Bible itself, however, with something like the literary form of a scrapbook, which is the ultimate progenitor of the mosaic format of both the primer and *The Marriage*. Taylor's summary characterization of *The Marriage* as primer just as accurately describes *The Marriage* as bible: "a rich mosaic of parables, emblems, un-commandments, history, and credo."<sup>3</sup> Pointing this out hardly vitiates his argument, inasmuch as the primer--given the size of its sections, its woodcut illustrations, and its insistent didacticism--is manifestly the more proximate formal influence. But I want to invoke the presence of the Bible's form behind the primer and *The Marriage* in order to suggest a supplementary Biblical influence on the structure of Blake's work, one linear like a plot rather than planar or textural like a mosaic.

The Bible, notwithstanding the piecemeal appearance of its surface, has been received in cultural history as a unified mythos, an essentially single progression of significant events from creation to apocalypse. *The Marriage*, it seems to me, notwithstanding the piecemeal appearance of its surface, develops a version of this progression. I do not mean to belabor the commonplaces that Blake's canon is Bible-soaked and his thinking nearly always expressed in terms of a story of fall and resurrection. Rather, my point is that the echoes of the Biblical mythos--crucial episodes

in their proper sequence--are numerous and specific enough to give *The Marriage* another dimension of coherence which reinforces Blake's parodic tactics and revisionary intentions.

As the pieces of Blake's mosaic fall into place, a dotted narrative line emerges whose segments parallel these episodes in Biblical history: Fall and Exile, the Law, Priesthood, the Prophets, the Coming of the Messiah, the Proclamation of the Gospel, the Life of Jesus, and the Apocalypse. Since, for my purposes, what is most meaningful is the order in which these occur, what follows is little more than a listing.

*Fall and Exile.* However the symbolic and syntactical ambiguities of "The Argument" on Plate 2 are resolved, it is clear enough from specific allusions ("red clay," "serpent") and from the action of the poem (the just man, who once kept his way, is driven by the villain into barren climes) that the event under reconsideration is the original sin.

*The Law.* On Plate 4, "The Voice of the Devil" identifies and corrects the errors caused by "All Bibles or sacred codes." The most famous of sacred codes is of course the Ten Commandments, whose explicit numbering is recalled here and whose repressive character is the prototype for the "Errors" enumerated and corrected. The parodic "Proverbs of Hell" (Plates 7-10) correct similar errors generated by less official forms of prudential wisdom.

*Priesthood.* On Plate 11, Blake offers a version of the events leading to the ordination of the first priests, a history recorded in the book of Leviticus which has been treated rather differently in orthodox interpretive tradition.

*The Prophets.* The second "Memorable Fancy" on Plates 12 and 13 finds Blake at table with Isaiah and Ezekiel. Their conversation, in stressing the iconoclasm of prophecy and the unmediated nature of its vision ("Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception"), corrects the mollifications and distortions in "religious" readings of the Prophets.

*The Coming of the Messiah.* Earlier, in Plate 3, Blake implicitly identified himself with the Messiah. On Plates 14 and 15 he makes the meaning



of that identification more explicit: his engraved works, by cleansing "the doors of perception" and expunging "the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul," are to be the agency of salvation.

*The Proclamation of the Gospel.* The Doctrine of Contraries is Blake's answer to popular notions of good and evil based on orthodox misreadings of Scripture. Although its presence is felt implicitly throughout *The Marriage*, on Plate 16 the doctrine receives its most succinct and powerful expression.

*The Life of Jesus.* The fourth "Memorable Fancy" (Plates 17-20) echoes the Biblical accounts of Christ's temptation by Satan in such a way that the episode is made to serve Blake's ends. In Blake's ironic version of the temptation, it is an Angel who tries to dissuade the Messiah (Blake) from his course; it is the Messiah who suggests leaping into the void; and it is the Angel/Tempter who replies, "do not presume." The comic complication of roles lends support to Blake's attack on two fronts: categories of good and evil are salutarily confused and religious doctrines of restraint are undermined. This and the final "Memorable Fancy" (Plates 22-24), because they constitute a reinterpretation of Jesus' life, become both more pointed and more humorous when considered in particular relation to the Gospels. The smug and pious Angels, for example, who invariably speak King Jamesese ("thy phantasy has imposed upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed.") are Pharisees as funny as any in Medieval drama. And in these penultimate sections of *The Marriage*, as in the Gospels, it is the confutations of Idiot Questioners which sound the most recurrent tone. But the most specific allusions to New Testament episodes, and the most outspoken corrections of prevailing notions concerning the significance of Jesus' ministry, come from the Devil in the last "Memorable Fancy": ". . . if Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree; now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of ten commandments: did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbaths God? murder those who were murdered because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labor of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defense before Pilate? covet when he pray'd for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments."

*The Apocalypse.* Like the book of Revelation, "A Song of Liberty" (Plates 25-27) depends heavily on eschatological imagery of tumult and destruction--fire, thunder, earthquake, war. Both record a vision of "things which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1), and so stand as fit endings to cosmic histories.

To telescope *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in this way is to reduce shamelessly its real complexities. Blake's treatment of Biblical material can scarcely be separated from its larger context without distortion. Nor is the sequence of Biblical allusions and parallels as neatly progressive as my outline suggests. In fact, Biblical episodes

are echoed backwards and forwards in *The Marriage* in much the same way they are echoed in the Bible itself. As the Bible has been perceived ever since the early Christians, the New Testament is contained in the Old and the Old in the New. One example of how this principle operates in *The Marriage* is the allusion to Golgotha ("tomb") in "The Argument" whose proper subject is Eden. Nonetheless, the gist of a progression of significant episodes seems to me as clear in *The Marriage* as it is in the Bible.

The advantage of my reductive outline is that it serves to reveal the Biblical mythos in *The Marriage* which is so eclipsed by Blake's primary mosaic structure that it has hitherto gone unnoticed. That primary structure, which is argumentative and develops in terms of alternation and reinforcement, has been variously demonstrated to be unified and coherent.<sup>4</sup> My aim has been to indicate a secondary narrative structure which supports the primary. Whereas the one gives shape to Blake's grappling with ideological truths and falsehoods, the other reproduces and reinterprets the succession of familiar Biblical events on which the falsehoods are based. To find a version of the Biblical mythos underriding Blake's overt argumentation is unsurprising. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is, after all, an unsimplification of the orthodox "religious" reading of the Bible.

<sup>1</sup> "The Structure of *The Marriage*: A Revolutionary Primer," *Studies in Romanticism*, 13 (1974), 141-45. This is as good a place as any to mention that the well-known influence on *The Marriage* of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* is a matter of incidental parody and refutation. The *Heaven and Hell*, whose Memorable Relations Blake satirizes in his Memorable Fancies, does not seem to have exercised any general influence on the design of *The Marriage*.

<sup>2</sup> Although his argument is generally convincing, Taylor does make too much of certain pictorial correspondences between *The Marriage* and the primers. He says that a common frontispiece to primers is the "Tree of Knowledge" which, in one primer at least, depicts a figure in a tree knocking alphabetic fruit to a figure below. Then he goes on to point the parallel that "in *Marriage*, pl. 2 . . . an energetic figure in the tree hands down fruit to a figure of some beauty below" (p. 144). Actually, in Blake's illustration it is unclear--perhaps deliberately so--what the figure in the tree (which is barren) is handing down. See David Erdman's annotations in *The Illuminated Blake* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), pp. 15, 99; and Geoffrey Keynes's commentary on Plate 2 in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press in association with The Trianon Press, Paris, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> See the following: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, facsimile, with a note by Max Plowman (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1927); Martin K. Nurmi, *Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Critical Study*, Kent State Univ. Bulletin, Research Series III (Kent, Ohio, April, 1957); *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, introduced by Clark Emery (Coral Gables, Florida: Univ. of Miami Press, 1963). Taylor conveniently summarizes these discussions at the outset of his essay.