

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

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

Blake's Comme-bined Cherubim: A Note on  
Milton, Plate 32

Leslie Brisman

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 21, Issue 3, Winter 1987/1988, pp.  
95-98



## MINUTE PARTICULARS

### Blake's Comme-bined Cherubim: A Note on *Milton*, Plate 32

Leslie Brisman

A few years ago, when I was acting as Education Chairman of a Hebrew Day School, a parent came to me with a complaint: The school's curriculum specified that children would be exposed to medieval biblical commentary as well as being encouraged to write their own. But his child was not being taught Rashi, and Rashi (the writings of Solomon ben Isaac, 1040-1105) ought to be regarded as *the* inspired commentary, the commentary that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai to help him understand Mosaic law. I did not relish the prospect of confronting the teacher in question with this complaint. A woman of massive proportions, with a voice that could shake mountains, she had already laid the ground-rules for any conversations about her teaching: One had to meet her in her classroom and to crouch into one of the child's desks while she glowered from behind—and then, at a crucial moment, from *on*—her no less massive desk.

"Rashi?" she thundered. "And do you know who this Rashi is?" She closed her eyes and intoned Exodus 25:18, the description of the ark-work: "'Make two *keruvim* of gold, make them of beaten metal at the two corners of the ark-cover.' And what does your Rashi say? '*Keruvim: Dmut partzuf tinok labem*. Cherubim: They had the face of babes.' What did this Rashi know? He had seen some cute little *putti* on the ceiling of the cathedral of Troyes, *putti* with their dimpled red cheeks, their soft round bellies, their chubby thighs half hiding their little penises, and that's what he thought *keruvim* were: darling little cherubs! NO WAY!" she bellowed, now mounting the desk top: "These *keruvim* are fearsome creatures, big-eyed, bushy browed, with [here pointing to her own brilliantly orange-dyed locks] flaming hair. They are creatures to overwhelm [pound], to threaten [pound], to ward off [grand pound on the desk]!"

"Why not present Rashi's interpretation as open to question?" I mumbled. "Why not suggest to the children both *putto* and monster? And how do you know yours is *the* interpretation?" "I know," she roared, "because I am inspired!"

Although Blake would have cared no more for this particular incarnation of the Covering Cherub than for

the Rashi she thought she knew all too well, it is curious that the poet and the lady in question share a trope that the medieval commentator would not risk. His wisdom does not purport to come directly from a voice speaking from between the cherubim.<sup>1</sup> The idea that "inspiration" means the power to interpret ancient texts is an idea perhaps always in the back of our minds as we read Blake or the Bible—but still deeper in the unconscious mind of the eleventh-century interpreter. Rashi is sometimes engagingly open about his uncertainty in interpreting a difficult passage; at other times he sounds sure of himself, but his surety is that of decorous, philological knowledge. Sometimes he is playful, but the playfulness is, I believe, almost always borrowed. This is surely the case with regard to the cherub. Because he lived in northeastern France and died in 1105, about a hundred years before the Cathedral of Troyes was even begun, we can feel reasonably certain that he never saw a *putto* there; nor would he have seen one there had he lived a little longer. He would have had to stretch the inner eye's prophetic vision some four hundred years to developments in Italian Renaissance painting. But though he had seen none of those fat-cheeked baby-faced cherubs (let alone their cute little penises), he had certainly seen—twice, in fact, in Talmud Sukkah and in Talmud Hagigah—passages about cherubim containing the playful etymology of Rabbi Abbahu, a Palestinian who said *cherub* means "like a youth"—the comparative letter *kaf* plus *ravya*, Aramaic for "growing boy."<sup>2</sup>

Had he had Akkadian and Assyrian at his command, Rashi would no doubt have been happy to derive *keruv* from roots meaning "to pray or bless, to be propitious to man." The desire to have the cherubs benignant rather than malicious forces indicates no belated, Satanic mildness (Hayley wisdom), but better philology—as well as better pedagogy—than Mme. Covering Cherub could imagine. There is an additional double irony, which both Rashi and Blake might have delighted to discover, in the fact that *tinok* in modern Hebrew decidedly means "babe" rather than "stripling, youth," while *keruv* is a cabbage. The cherubim of today's esemplastic imagination are not the visionary property of the Kohanim, the ancient priests, but of Alfred R. Kahan, president of Coleco: the cabbage patch kids. Rashi's verbal "child's play," however, is simply a repetition of Abbahu's anachronistic philology—the idea that the Biblical Hebrew word *keruv* comes from the later, Babylonian Aramaic word *ravya*. Both the Talmud and eighteenth-century Christian Hebraists, some of whose work was surely known to Blake, delighted to treat the letter *kaf*, when part of a root, as though it were the comparative prefix attached to a root, and to invent etymologies accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

Abbahu's philology is hardly definitive hermeneutic wisdom on the question of cherubim. Although Exodus 25:20 pictures the cherubim as covering the ark with their outspread wings, these are decidedly not "covering cherubs" in the sense of figures that, like the teacher, deny, impede, frustrate, or ward off. They are literally constructed to be of a piece with the *kapporet*, the covering of the ark that is associated with *kapparah*, merciful covering up of sin. The biblical concept of atonement seems related to this matter of the furnishings of the ark insofar as what is done cannot be undone; it can only be "covered over," mercifully overlooked. God is where there is forgiveness—overlooking—of sins. If one emphasizes the copulative, or restates this as "God is forgiveness of sins," we already hear Blake, to whom we will turn shortly. Meanwhile, it is worth noting the architectural symbolism of cherubim that are of a piece with the *kapporet*, so that they appear to rise out of atonement as embodiments of lovingkindness. A second feature of the cherubim which might have engaged Blake's imagination is that their faces are described as towards each other and towards the *kapporet*: "Their faces are turned to one another; toward the cover shall the faces of the cherubim be" (25:20). They both face each other and regard the symbol of atonement that is spread out between them, "substantially expressed" from the pure (gold) substance of which they are made, and by which they are seamlessly drawn together. There is a Kabbalist notion that the cherubim are male and female and that they face each other in love; the space they define between them, the space where God says his presence will be manifest, is the space of love. Not original to the Zohar, however, the idea of the cherubim as creatures in love is already present in the Talmud:

Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another. And they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman.<sup>4</sup>

To be true to the Talmud we must specify that the love of God for his people is tenor, represented by the vehicle of earthly love. My desire to say that God is the love of man and woman is not very Talmudic, though it is very Blake. Now the God Blake internalizes sometimes is the Old Testament God of wrath. As Isaiah tells Blake, "I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception. . . . I was then perswaded. & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God."<sup>5</sup> But the voice of God is also the voice of the turtle heard in the land when the winter of indignation is past, and the God who for Blake has a human face, who is found in one human face turning in kindness to another, is represented by cherub facing cherub over the ark.

It is time to turn directly to Blake—plate 32[35] in copies C, D of *Milton*. The context is a discussion of the

Divine Mercy, which for Blake is associated with *kapparah* or atonement precisely as *kapparah* is related to *kapporet*, the covering over the ark out of which the cherubim emerge. At several critical junctures in Blake's epics, perhaps most notably in the Cambel-Gwendolen story in *Jerusalem*, the forgiveness of sins is related to the root meaning of *kapparah*. In Parkhurst's *Lexicon*, Blake would have discovered that the verb "is frequently rendered, To atone, expiate, or appease; but in all these instances the attentive reader can scarcely help observing, that the radical idea of *covering* is preserved." It is an idea Blake transforms from dictionary to plot. Atonement in Blake is further related to an undoing, or at least an abstraction, of the Christian plot by which a state becomes an individual—Christ, "Whom God hath set forth as a propitiatory or mercy-seat."<sup>6</sup> Forgiveness of sins depends on the ability to distinguish "states from individuals in those states. / States change; but individual identities never change nor cease" (E 131). On the personal level, this means that one has to learn to distinguish a state of mind from an individual in that state of mind. Two people who love each other may quarrel from time to time; to be able to perform their own gentle reconciliations, they must be able to recognize hostility or jealousy as states passed through, rather than true revelations of each other's identity. Although the mistakes of the past cannot be unwritten, they can be "covered over" when recognized as states of mind, separate from individual identities.

This much is lovely, soft-core Blake. Interwoven with it is a vision of history that we might call hard-core Blake. Though associated with a somewhat esoteric notion of ages of history, the idea of individuals representing stages of spiritual development is not difficult but familiar. To speak of Abraham is to speak of a certain stage in religious consciousness represented by the benignant tales of patriarch Abraham. To speak of Moses (when Blake wants to speak nicely of Moses) is to speak of a prophetic will to cast out idolatry; it is Moses the smasher of tablets whom Blake rewards with a place in his *Vision of the Last Judgment*:

It ought to be understood that the persons Moses & Abraham are not here meant but the States Signified by those Names the Individuals being representations or Visions of those States . . . as they are written in the Bible these various states I have seen in my Imagination when distant they appear as One Man but as you approach they appear Multitudes of Nations. (p. 79, E 556)

Though the figure of corporate personality is familiar enough, it takes on a characteristically Blakean tone when understood as a source of divine mercy. Mercy has a human face, and needs to be represented in the imaginative, compassionate, or loving gestures of single, strongly delineated human figures. The passage just quoted goes on, "Abraham hovers above his posterity which appear as Multitudes of Children ascending from

the Earth surrounded by stars." A symbolist could have had the stars themselves represent the children, who are, according to the divine promise in Genesis, to be numerous as stars; but that would lose the human vision that is the essence of Blake's Abraham, *in whom* multitudes will be blessed. Not all states or combinations of individuals are commendable combinations; alas, there are far more political states and organizations of individuals united "in the blood of War / And Sacrifice, & next, in Chains of imprisonment" (E 132). But if and when individuals are combined "in freedom and holy brotherhood," the Divine Humanity gives them a "human form." The poet or painter who recognizes the ideals of freedom and brotherhood in the interaction of individuals participates in the work of the Divine Humanity by representing these multitudes in narratives or pictures as noble, single, human forms.

Commenting on the passage of plate 32 that I have been citing, Harold Bloom notes that the speech about combination into states is introduced as the reply of "Hillel who is Lucifer." Bloom says, "We do not know how much Hebrew Blake had, yet it is clear that his Hillel here has nothing to do with the famous rabbi, but rather has some relation to the *Helel* or day-star of Isaiah 14:12, first translated in the Vulgate as Lucifer."<sup>7</sup> I do not know how much Hebrew Blake had, but I am struck by the question of one or many that is embedded in the two lines introducing the speech about individuals and states: "Then Hillel who is Lucifer replied over the Couch of Death, / And thus the Seven Angels instructed him & thus they converse" (E131). Since there are no words attributed to Hillel, followed by others attributed to the Seven Angels, we can say that the speech of the collective that follows is also the speech of Hillel. If we overrule Bloom's statement that this Hillel has nothing to do with the famous rabbi, we might explain the confusion of one or many by supposing that the House of Hillel replies in the form of the Seven Angels. Since the Talmudic pitting of the House of Hillel against the House of Shamai often emerges as a conflict of mercy vs. rigor, pliancy vs. what Blake calls "mathematic holiness," I do not think it is a mistake to associate Hillel with the speech about combinations and states. Bet Hillel (the House of Hillel) would itself mean those rabbis "combined in freedom and holy brotherhood," and the collective spirit of their views invigorates Milton, now dead on the couch from an overdose of Shamaitic orthodoxy.

But it is not about Blake's Hebrew as regards Hillel that I am concerned; it is with Blake's Hebrew in a curious marginalia on this plate. Beside the lines in which the House of Hillel describe themselves as "combined in freedom and holy brotherhood" is the notation

⌒ as multitudes  
 □' ⌒ ⌒ Vox Populi

In his newly revised *Complete Poetry and Prose*, David Erdman more accurately represents Blake's plate by printing the letter *kaf* on a separate line.<sup>8</sup> Although it is not acceptable Hebrew to hyphenate a word or to have the comparative prefix stand alone, Blake's notation emphasizes the etymological pun. Like Rabbi Abbahu, Blake takes the *kaf* as the particle of similitude; but the remainder of the word he reads as *rabim*, "many, multitudes." To be a cherub, to be an angel of the divine presence is to be "like many" in the sense of standing, synecdochically, for many. In the hard-core reading this means that a representative man substitutes for an age, an era, a constituency. But in the soft-core prophecy, to stand "like many" means to stand in love, in relation to another, so that God is present "among you," within this circle of grace. Underneath his imaginative etymology Blake writes "Vox Populi," which in the hard-core reading stands for the familiar political maxim, "vox populi, vox dei"; the will of the multitude is to be taken as the will of heaven. Those combined in brotherhood worship—and create—the God of love; those combined "by Satan's tyranny" worship—and constitute—the God of possessiveness, of nationalism, of warfare. In the soft-core reading, the maxim takes us back to the cover of the ark in Exodus: "I will be witnessed [or "I will be met"] by you there—I will speak to you from above the forgiveness covering, from between the cherubim." *Vox dei vox putti*: The voice of God is the voice of man and woman facing each other in loving embrace.

In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake depicts the enthroned messiah over whose head there is a circle or moon embedded in a little temple, complete with candelabrum and showbread. Blake's prose description of the drawing explains that the circle is the ark, transformed now from a structure above which the cherubim hover to one coincident with the cherubim and their space: "The Holy Spirit like a Dove is surrounded by a blue Heaven in which are the two Cherubim that bowd over the Ark for here the Temple is open'd in Heaven & the Ark of the Covenant is as a Dove of Peace" (p. 85, E 562). Now the "moony ark" is the heavens, and the dove at its center replaces the old tablets of law. Although the drawing is filled with multitudes, the quintessential population is the arrangement of two semi-circular cherubim between whom the Holy Spirit is revealed.

Blake's "moony ark" makes an appearance in the poetry as well as the drawings. At the end of *Milton*, Ololon, who is both many and maid, nation and emanation, appears in Blake's garden: "Ololon and all its mighty Hosts / Appear'd: a Virgin of twelve years" (36: 16-17, E 137). Renouncing her all too Miltonic virginity for union with Milton, Ololon loses her dark double, who flies away in what becomes, miraculously, a sign of peace: "Away from Ololon she divided & fled into the

depths / Of Miltons Shadow as a Dove upon the stormy Sea. / Then as a Moony Ark Ololon descended" (42:5-7, E 143). The dove going off reminds us of Noah's ark resting on Ararat; but the "moony ark" here is also the ark of the covenant over which, or now *in* which, the cherubim face each other in a circle or arc of love.

Reading Blake's so-called "prophetic works," one confronts several statements of prophetic faith like that of the Bard. "Where hadst thou this terrible song?" he is asked. "The Bard replied. I am Inspired! I know it is Truth! for I Sing / According to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius / Who is the eternal all protective Divine Humanity" (13:51-14:2, E 107-08). Moved by compassion or wrath, Blake's inspired characters are prophets in the truest sense. If their rhetoric of self-proclamation sounds nothing like the "call narrative" of the Biblical prophets, it nonetheless shares with its ancient prototypes a strong distinction from self-aggrandizement. As Los proclaims in *Jerusalem*, "I am inspired: I act not for myself: For Albions sake / I now am what I am" (8:17-18, E 102). He is pointing to the degradation, the state of "horror and astonishment" in which he finds himself. Yet we hear, in this grand rhetoric, not just "I am a horror!" but "I am that I am." That is, we hear both the humility of man and the glory of God, the Eternal "I am." To speak with imagination and strength, with all one's heart and rhetorical power, is to be one of a multitude become the voice of God.

*Kol kenafeihem kikol mayim rabim*: The sound of the wings of the cherubim was like the sound of many waters (Ezekiel 1:24). In Wordsworth, at a crucial junction, these waters *are* the voice of God precisely in that they roar prophetically, *ke-rabim*, as though they were many, but figured into one:

... the roar of waters, torrents, streams  
Innumerable, roaring with one voice!  
Heard over earth and sea, and, in that hour,  
For so it seemed, felt by the starry heavens.<sup>9</sup>

This is a Wordsworthian moment of revelation, a roaring of the lion of inspiration. Such "timely utterance," presented as a voice of nature, may not look much like a Blakean roar of self-proclaimed inspiration. Yet it too evokes from the responsive reader something like an "amen" or prayer for the continued knowledge of such power: May your voice be strong as the voice of many; but, "centering all in love," may your vision be worthy of the mutual regard of the cherubim!

<sup>9</sup>There is a notable "exception" that proves the rule. On Ezekiel 42:3 Rashi writes, ואני לא הייתי לי לא דב ולא עוזר

בכל הבנין הזה אלא כפן שקראני לו

השמים.

[I had no teacher, no helper in all this work—[[I wrote]] as dictated to me from heaven.] Yet this peculiar sentence is not present in some editions, and where it is, the sentence has dots over each word. I am indebted to Marc Brettler of Brandeis University for pointing to this as an interpolated passage.

<sup>2</sup>Talmud Sukkah 5b; Hagigah 13b. The Aramaic translation of Onkelos on Genesis 37:2 has *rivya* for *naar* (youth).

<sup>3</sup>The rabbis, for example, playfully deconstruct *Yom Kippurim* (the awesome Day of Atonement) into *ki-Purim* (like Purim, the holiday when the scriptural reading, the book of Esther, which never mentions God's name, licenses all sorts of mockery and frolic). For an example of similarly improbably eighteenth-century use of the particle of similitude, consider the etymology of *kibul* as *ki-bul*, where *bul* is taken to be (but without any evidence) a word for "nothing." See Julius Bate's *Reply to Dr. Sharp's Review and Defence of his Dissertation on the Scripture Meaning of Aleim and Berith* (London, 1755) and the rejoinder of John Parkhurst in *An Hebrew and English Lexicon, without Points* (London, 1762, 3rd ed., 1792). I am very much indebted to Sheila A. Spector for calling my attention to Bate's work and for pointing out that Parkhurst uses a *kaf* of similitude in deriving *keruv* from *ruv*, which he takes to be a form of *rav*, or greatness in "power, wisdom and glory, or whatever can be termed perfection."

<sup>4</sup>Talmud Yoma 54a (*The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 11, trans. Leo Jung [London: Soncino Press, 1938], p. 557). Parkhurst's *Lexicon* contains a foldout illustration with four-headed cherubim, as benign a version of zoas as four-headed monsters can be. Even the lion and bull faces appear to be smiling, but it is notable that the human heads do not face each other.

A rather conventional set of young male heads top the robed cherubim in the illustration to the annotated Bible of Nicolai de Lyra (1485). Nicolas did read and refer to Rashi, and evidently understood Rashi to mean youths, not putto-faced infants.

<sup>5</sup>I quote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and all passages of Blake, from David V. Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982).

<sup>6</sup>Romans 3:25 calls Christ "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation," but Parkhurst, quoting this, changes *propitiation* to *propitiatory* (the thing, rather than the abstract noun) and adds "or mercy-seat."

<sup>7</sup>Commentary in Erdman, p. 924. The question of Blake's Hebrew has been addressed by Arnold Cheskin in *Blake* 12 (1978-79), 178-83, and by Sheila A. Spector in a forthcoming piece for the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*. Spector's remarkable piece, "Blake as an Eighteenth-Century Hebraist," makes clear just how much of Blake's Hebrew etymologies and calligraphy can be accounted for by recourse to available dictionaries and debates on the part of someone with no training in Hebrew per se.

<sup>8</sup>The new textual note says that Blake wrote כרכים in place of כרבים. The reproductions of C35 (both Erdman's own, in *The Illuminated Blake*, and that of the Eassons in *William Blake: Milton* [Random House, 1978]) clearly show a *kaf* and a *resh* as they should be. Indeed, Blake exaggerates the difference between the *kaf* and the other letters, as well as placing the *kaf* on a separate line, which encourages one to regard the writing as suggestive of a pun: the prepositional *kaf* is written smaller and separate, to suggest that the remainder of the word, *rabim*, means something by itself—in this case, "multitudes; many."

<sup>9</sup>William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd ed. rev. by Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 1850 text, 14.59-62.