

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Sources and Etymologies of Blake's "Tirzah"

Sheila A. Spector

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 23, Issue 4, Spring 1990, pp. 176-183



## Sources and Etymologies of Blake's "Tirzah"

by Sheila A. Spector

Unlike many of the other names in Blake's myth, Tirzah has always been considered relatively straightforward. Found in two different biblical contexts, the name provides critics with their choice of associations by which to measure the development of Blake's personification. As a woman, Tirzah is the fifth of Zelophehad's daughters (Num. 26.33, 27.1, 36.11; Josh. 17.3), who, along with her four sisters and Rahab, is transformed by Blake into Milton's wives and daughters—"Rahab and Tirzah, & Milcah & Malah & Noah & Hoglah."<sup>1</sup> More frequently referred to, though, is the city Tirzah, originally mentioned in Joshua (12.24) as an ancient Canaanite city, though later in Kings (2:14.17-18, 2:15.14,16) as a royal city whose beauty is extolled in the Song of Solomon (6.4). Thus, in *Jerusalem*, "Reuben return'd to his place, in vain he sought beautiful Tirzah" (32.1, E 178). Because of these biblical sources, critics have been fairly confident about their interpretations of the character, especially in the poem "To Tirzah." In *Fearful Symmetry*, Northrop Frye combines the two biblical Tirzahs in his interpretation, to conclude: "The five daughters represent the five senses and imply the passive dependence on sense experience which is symbolized in our being born from a mother. This is the meaning of the little poem 'To Tirzah' which ends the *Songs of Experience*."<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom asserts in *Blake's Apocalypse* that "all we need to know of her for this poem is in her name. . . . By 1801, Jerusalem, for Blake, symbolizes Milton's Christian Liberty, the spiritual freedom of man. Tirzah therefore stands for man's bondage to nature."<sup>3</sup> And in *Innocence*

and *Experience*, E. D. Hirsch describes Blake's Tirzah as

an ingenious and imaginative combination of allusions. . . . In this poem Tirzah represents the natural, physical world and the natural, physical aspect of man belonging to that world.<sup>4</sup>

Influenced by Geoffrey Keynes's explanation that "The mother's name, . . . signifies physical beauty, that is sex,"<sup>5</sup> Thomas F. Berninghausen interprets "To Tirzah" as a poem about "a convergence, a marriage of contrary elements. Though the persona remains ignorant of the need for convergence, the poet is fully aware of this need."<sup>6</sup> Finally, in *Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced*, Stanley Gardner asserts: "Blake used the Biblical Tirzah, a city in Canaan, as a counter-symbol to Jerusalem, associating the name as the degrading labour for bread in the Lambeth Asylum, and with deforming self-depression."<sup>7</sup>

While these interpretations are all good as far as they go, an examination of Blake's attitude towards contemporary linguistics suggests that none goes far enough. It is quite possible that when he developed the personification found in "To Tirzah," *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, Blake coordinated the biblical sources with a series of what he believed to be appropriate Hebraic roots to produce the Tirzah found in his mature work.

Historically, most language studies from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century have fallen into two basic categories: artificial versus natural language.<sup>8</sup> Theorists like Bacon and Locke, who believed language to be artificially constructed and culturally determined, posited an arbitrary relationship between a word and its meaning (signifier and signi-

fied), and consequently, a gap between the sign as a whole and the reality it represented.<sup>9</sup> This distrust of language, commonly referred to as the "cheat of words," became the basis for Bacon's rejection of Aristotelian logic. As he said in the fourteenth statement of the *Novum Organum: Aphorisms Concerning the Interpretation of Nature and the Kingdom of Man*:

The syllogism consists of propositions, propositions of words; words are the signs of notions. If, therefore, the notions (which form the basis of the whole) be confused and carelessly abstracted from things, there is no solidity in the superstructure. Our only hope is in genuine induction.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Locke's epistemology can be said to rest on the theory of artificial language. In "Of Words or Language in General," book 3 of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke says that language is the artificially constructed means by which we express our ideas.<sup>11</sup> Because the ideas signified by words are subjectively produced, and because the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary, man is, according to Locke, two removes from objective reality.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the proponents of natural language based their theories on the two references to language in the Bible: Adam's naming of the animals (Gen. 2.19), and God's confounding of language after the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11.7). A literal reading of the first reference led to the belief that language was not arbitrary but divinely inspired. From this perspective, Adam was not merely assigning arbitrary signifiers, but identifying essences when naming the animals. Thus, in contrast to Locke, who repeatedly asserted that the relationship between the signifier and its signified

was as arbitrary as that between the sign as a whole and the concept it represented, Jacob Boehme felt that words were literally the divine material out of which the natural world was created:

As the first creation of Adam and all kinds of creatures was so brought to pass, the Verbum Fiat coagulated each ens, and the manifested word severed itself in the ens according to its property, and formed the creature according to its astrum and kind; where also, in every ens, the matrix was separated from the limbus, and formed into a male and female. . . .<sup>13</sup>

The second biblical reference accounted for the existence of so many languages in the world. While Locke considered linguistic multiplicity proof of its artificiality and cultural relativism, his opponents asserted that post-Babylonian languages were later derivatives of the Adamic language. As Boehme explains in chapter 36 of the *Mysterium Magnum*, "Of the Antichristian Babylonical Whore of All Nations, Tongues and Speeches; shewing what is contained under the Languages and Tower of Babel":

[The Tower of Babel] denotes and declares the divided tongues, where every property had brought itself forth out of the universal sensual tongue into a selfishness and a peculiar selfly understanding, so that they did not any longer understand one another. . . . (36.6)

Therefore, "when we bring all these images [and several semblances] again into one language and speech, and mortify them, then the only quickening Word of God, which giveth power and life to all things, is again manifest; and strife ceaseth, and God is all in all" (36.40).

Almost all linguists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became interested in the origin of language, the first group as a measure of the development of civilization, and the second as the means of tracing language back to its origins in divine speech.<sup>14</sup> And most theorists postulated some sort of ur-language from which modern tongues developed. In

his mammoth six-volume study *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (Edinburgh, 1772-92), James Burnet, Lord Monboddo asserted that "all the languages spoken in Europe, all Asia, . . . and some part of Africa" were all "dialects of one parent-language," which was "probably invented in Egypt."<sup>15</sup> More germane to a study of Blake, Jacob Bryant explained in his three-volume *New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (London, 1774-76):

There was once but one language among the sons of men. Upon the dispersion of mankind, this was branched out into dialects; and those again were subdivided; all which varied every age; not only in respect to one another; but each language differed from itself more and more continually. It is therefore impossible to reduce the whole of these to the mode, and standard of any one. (1: 54)

In order to trace language back to its origin, some scholars assembled etymological dictionaries predicated on the assumption that cognates found in different languages had to be remnants of the parent tongue. Thus, Bryant compiled "A Mythological, Etymological, and Historical Dictionary," intended to list and define the extant roots of the ur-language. While the dictionary was originally included as part of the *Mythology*, Bryant published it separately in 1793.

There was a fairly broad consensus that the most logical choice for the ur-language was Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup> However, there was less agreement about the nature of the Hebrew spoken by Moses. For a variety of reasons, some Christian Hebraists in the eighteenth century questioned the authenticity of rabbinic Hebrew, the most extreme critics asserting that what was then accepted as the Hebrew scripture was actually a fabrication by the Jews. For example, in *The Integrity of the Hebrew Text* (London, 1754), the radical Julius Bate claimed:

So that the Scriptures, unless we get a better Set of them, by the Help of a Cor-

rupted, interpolated Copy; and a vague, loose, irregular, and in many Places unintelligible Version, are lost; and we have no Scripture at all since the Jews have played such Tricks with it, and made a new Scripture for themselves, not us. . . . who can give us any Security that they have not done unto them [scriptures] whatsoever they listed? and where then will their Credit be? (48)

More neutral was Thomas Sharp who, in his *Discourses Touching the Antiquity of the Hebrew Tongue and Character* (London, 1755), advised objectivity, even though "the Rabbinical Jews" produced grammars "not only without any authority, but, I think, irrationally":

I should rather chuse to judge of [the Hebrew tongue] with impartiality, and to speak of it with caution, according to the best intelligence we can get concerning it, and according to the most rational conclusions, or most probable inferences we can make from thence. (81-82)

At the other extreme were those who asserted that what passes for Hebrew is not really the authentic Hebrew at all. For example, James Parson's *Remnants of Japhet: Being Historical Enquiries into the Affinity and Origin of the European Languages* (1767) explored the thesis that

those who speak the dialects of the *Japhetan* language to this day, which are the *Gomerian* and *Magogian*, or *Scotish* languages; and yet these are the only unmixed remains of the children of *Japhet*, upon the Globe; and the King of *Great Britain*, the only monarch upon the earth who rules the remains of that original people.

Parsons did refer to

a suspicion of its being related to the *Hebrew*, among some ingenious gentlemen, either as a mutilated dialect of it, or as a sister dialect with that of some more ancient antediluvian tongue: . . . However this may be, since we cannot think that *Japhet's* people, or those of *Shem*, were at all concerned in the affair of *Babel*, we must suppose them both to have been languages of the antediluvian world, and both in the house of *Noah*.<sup>17</sup>

While Parson's thesis is extreme, there is a long history of associating



Hebrew and English. In his *Rights of the Kingdom* of 1649, John Sadler traced the etymology of the name Britain back to the Phoenician *Berat Anac*, meaning "the Field of Tyn and Lead" (47); and in *Court of the Gentiles* (London, 1672), Theophilus Gale took the Phoenician back to the Hebrew: "As for the other European Languages, the Italian, Spanish, French, German, English, &c. its evident, that they are, as to their present constitution, made up, for the most part, of the Latin, and so originally from the Hebrew" (84). Closer to Blake, Edward Davies attempted to demonstrate in his *Celtic Researches on the Origin, Traditions & Language, Of the Ancient Britons* (London, 1804), that

the *Irish* names unite with corresponding terms, in *Hebrew*, and *Greek*. This union of the import, conveyed by similar sounds, in the names of the letters, demonstrates to me the original identity of the languages, and of the conceptions entertained by the several nations, respecting their elementary character, or *symbols* of sounds. (334)

In order to establish the antiquity of English, Davies included in the *Celtic Researches* an "Essay on the Celtic Language: in which its radical principles, are appreciated and compared with primitives, and simple terms, in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin" (347-561), showing the commonality of Hebrew and English.<sup>18</sup>

As should be expected, the most popular Hebrew-English dictionary of the period, John Parkhurst's *Hebrew and English Lexicon, without Points* (1762; 4th ed. London 1799), incorporated most of this scholarship. Parkhurst explained in the preface to the second edition, reprinted in the fourth:

It appears evident from the Mosaic account of the original formation of Man, that *Language* was the immediate Gift of God to Adam, or that God himself either taught our first parent to speak, or, which comes to the same thing, inspired him with language. And the language thus communicated to the first man was, notwithstanding the objections of ancient or modern cavillers, no other (I mean as to the main and structure of it) than that *Hebrew* in

which Moses wrote. Else what meaneth the inspired historian when he saith, Gen. ii. 19, *Whatever Adam called every living creature that [was] the name thereof*? (viii)

Therefore, all languages descend from Hebrew:

Indeed I believe that many other languages, not only the *Greek* and *Latin*, but even our own, and the rest which are not spoken in *Europe*, might, notwithstanding their apparent confusion, be, by persons properly qualified, reduced to their *primitive Roots*, and by consequence the *Ideality* (if the term may be allowed) of such languages be recovered. (viii)

In compiling and revising his lexicon, the two practices of which Parkhurst was most proud have the least foundation in what today is considered to be responsible linguistics. First, he relied almost exclusively on orthography for locating roots:

... the Hebrew language is ideal, or that from a certain, and that no great, number of primitive, and apparently arbitrary, words, called Roots, and usually expressive of some idea or notion taken from nature, i.e. from the external objects around us, or from our own constitutions, by our senses or feelings, all the other words of that tongue are derived, or grammatically formed; and that wherever the radical letters are the same, the leading idea or notion runs through all the deflexions of the word, however numerous or diversified. . . . (viii)

Because Parkhurst assumed that words with similar spelling must have derived from a single root, he grouped together sometimes linguistically disparate words and then contrived explanations for their relationship. This would be comparable to explaining how all English words based on the consonants *sng* (e.g., sing, snag, snug, singe) developed from a single root. Also, Parkhurst included with many entries so-called derivatives, words of other languages which he asserted developed from the Hebrew parent, for he felt it "might entertain [the learner] to see so many words still preserved in English, from the common mother of all tongues, and set him upon new enquiries of this kind, both in our own and

other languages." This effort was so well received that in the second edition of the lexicon, Parkhurst "considerably enlarged this etymological part of my Work, by the addition not only of many English, but of many Greek, Latin, and Northern words" (xii).

Blake probably sided with the biblically oriented linguists.<sup>19</sup> Not only did he identify Bacon and Locke, along with Newton, as the infernal trinity, but he repeatedly asserted that his language was divinely inspired, writing to Butts on 25 April 1803, "I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will" (E 728-29); and on 6 July 1803, "I may praise it since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary the Authors are in Eternity" (E 730). Therefore, "Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place" ("To the Public," E 146), for "Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant" (VIJ, E 560). However, while he agreed that there was a single ur-language, Blake apparently questioned the primacy of the language of the Jews:

The antiquities of every Nation under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob Bryant, . . . and all antiquaries have proved. How other antiquities came to be neglected and disbelieved, while those of the Jews are collected and arranged, is an enquiry, worthy of both the Antiquarian and the Divine. All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. (DC, E 543)

Although Blake may seem to have rejected Hebrew as the original language, there are still several reasons for assuming that he used it as the vehicle for deriving the language of "the everlasting Gospel." Historically, regardless of whether or not Hebrew was the original language, its antiquity would have made it closer to Adam, so logically, it would contain more remnants of the pre-Babylonian tongue. On a more practical level, because most scholars of the time did believe

in the primacy of Hebrew, there were more Hebraic resources available, many of them coordinating roots from various languages. Therefore, it is conceivable that Blake culled among the different resources so that Los could "buil[d] the stubborn structure of the Language" (J 36.59, E 183).<sup>20</sup> Finally, similarities between Parkhurst's unique definitions for the Hebraic roots *orand* *razon*, and Blake's Urizen strongly suggest that Blake consulted Parkhurst's *Hebrew and English Lexicon* for the etymology of the name Urizen, so it is reasonable to infer that he used the dictionary for other names as well.<sup>21</sup>

If Blake did seek Hebraic roots for the names of his personifications, then he probably followed the procedure outlined in most Hebrew/English grammars of the time, like Parkhurst's *An Hebrew and Chaldee Grammar, without Points*, published with the *Dictionary*. Specifically, the grammars advised removing any affixes from a word in order to derive its radical. In the case of Tirzah, Blake would have eliminated the prefix *ti* and the suffix *ab* to reveal the root letters *rz* (the second letter of the root, *tsadi*, is often transliterated *z*). He then would have checked the dictionary, where he would have found four different entries. In Parkhurst's alphabetical order, the first is *ratz*:

- I. ... *To run, move or ride swiftly.... To cause to run, put to flight.... To move or cause to move hastily or swiftly.... To carry quickly.... A running, course... Course of action... Incur-sion, invasion... Or, Force, violence.*
- II. ... *To run, to cause to run, to drive, or force one thing against another, to dash, crush.*
- III. As a N. with a formative [*alef, eretz*], sometimes masc....but much more frequently fem.
  1. *The earth or earthy matter, as distinguished from the waters.... Various etymologies have been by learned men proposed of this word; the most probable seems to be that which derives it from [ratz] breaking in pieces, crum-*

*bling.... And it is manifest, that on this remarkable property of earth, it's answering the end of it's creation, or it's usefulness in continually supplying the waste of vegetable and animal bodies, must depend; and it is not improbable that the Greek ... from Heb....to pound, beat to pieces, the Lat. terra, from tero to wear away, and the Eng. ground from grind, all aimed at the same etymological reason.*

2. *The compounded chaotic globe of earth and waters, as distinguished from the heavens....*
3. *A particular part of the earth, a land, or country....*
4. *The ground, in opposition to somewhat elevated above it.... Hence German Erde ... and Eng. Earth,... (700)*

#### Second, *rotzeb*:

- I. ... *To be pleased with, to like, affect.... Will, delight.... Favour, affection.... Desire.... Will, pleasure.... Wilfulness, self-will.*
- II. ... *To be pleased with, enjoy*
- III. ... *To be pleased with, accept kindly or graciously.... To be satisfactorily ex-piated.... To make oneself accepted or acceptable.... Acceptableness, accept-ance.*
- IV. ... *To accept with complacence and patience, as punishment for sin, to acquiesce in.*
- V. ... *To please, conciliate the affections of*
- VI. ... *To agree or consent with.... (701)*

#### Third, *ratzab*:

Denotes *manslaughtier* or *murder*, i.e. either the accidental or wilful taking away of a man's life. *To kill, slay, murder... To be slain, murdered.... A manslayer or murderer.... A murdering instrument, a sword, or the like.*

Der. *Massacre* (702)

#### Fourth, *ratzab*:

*To pierce through, perforate, bore.... A pierc-ing instrument, an awl, a piercer. (702)*

Evidence of all four roots can be found in the characterization of Tirzah. The first, arguably the most significant, is based on one of Parkhurst's linguistic fancies. The Hebrew word *eretz*, "earth," begins with an *aleph*, a letter

frequently used as an affix to indicate grammatical relation, though in this case, part of the root. Parkhurst erroneously considers the letter a servile and removes it to reveal what he considers to be the root, *ratz*, the Hebrew word for "run." Though wrong, he provides Blake with the linguistic basis for associating several properties of materialism in the single name Tirzah. In its most simple sense, the root involves the idea of movement: "To run, move or ride swiftly," "Runners, running attendants," "Course of action," "Force, violence." Thus, in *Milton*, Los's "Twelve Sons successive fled away in that thousand years of sorrow / ... were Generated, because / They left me, wandering with Tirzah" (23.62-24.5, E 199). Similarly, in *Jerusalem*, Reuben wanders, "in vain he sought beautiful Tirzah / ... [Los] sent him forth over Jordan / In the love of Tirzah" (32.1-7, E 178). In contrast, her victim in *The Four Zoas* provokes her complaint, "Why dost thou wander away from Tirzah why me compell to bind thee" (8.105.32, E 378). Transitively, *ratz* becomes "To run, to cause to run, to drive or force one thing against another, to dash, crush," as in "she dashed his skull." Thus, Tirzah operates the looms to "prepare webs of torture / Mantles of despair girdles of bitter compunction shoes of indolence / Veils of ignorance covering from head to feet with a cold web" (FZ 8.113.19-21, E 376-77); and the three classes of men are, in a line deleted from copy CD of *Milton*, "Spun beneath the Spindle of Tirzah" (7.1, E 807).

From the verb "to crush," Parkhurst derives the nouns "Broken pieces, fragments"—rocks: "And the Twelve Daughters of Albion united in Rahab & Tirzah / A Double Female: and they drew out from the Rocky Stones / Fibres of Life to Weave" (67.2-4, E 220). This leads to the key of Tirzah's identity, "The earth or earthy matter," which derives from "breaking in pieces, crumbling." Specifically, the "compounded chaotic globe of earth



and waters" is to be "distinguished from the heavens," as indicated in *Milton* when the sons of Los

were Generated, because  
They left me, wandering with Tirzah:  
Enitharmon wept  
One thousand years, and all the Earth  
was in a watry deluge  
We call'd him Menasseh because of the  
Generations of Tirzah  
(24.3-6, E 119)

(Joseph called his son Manasseh "For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house" [Gen. 41.52]).

The material earth is associated with the material body in "To Tirzah": "What-e'er is Born of Mortal Birth, / Must be consumed with the Earth / To rise from Generation free" (ll. 1-3, E 30). In *The Four Zoas*, Tirzah has her sisters bind the human form down,

Come circumscribe this tongue of sweets  
& with a Screw of iron  
Fasten this Ear into the Rock Milcah the  
task is thine  
Weep not so sisters weep not so our life  
depends on this  
Or mercy & truth are fled away from  
Shechem and Mount Gilead  
Unless my beloved is bound upon the  
Stems of Vegetation  
(8.105.49-53, E 379)

for her own sake, reversing the traditional perspective on the Fall. Instead of viewing mortality as the loss of immortality, Tirzah explains that her existence requires the vegetation of man. Being thus associated with the material body, Tirzah becomes the means through which the incarnation can be achieved. While, as the speaker of "To Tirzah" laments, the "Mother of [his] Mortal part. / . . . Didst close [his] Tongue in senseless clay / And [him] to Mortal Life betray," at the same time, "The Death of Jesus set [him] free" (ll. 9, 13-15, E 30). In *The Four Zoas*, the Lamb comes "first to Give his vegetated body / To be cut off & separated that the Spiritual body may be Reveald," through his encounter with "The false Female . . . / Which christ must

rend & her reveal Her Daughters are Call'd / Tirzah" (8.113.37-38, 105.25-27, E 378); "Then Jesus Came & Died will-ing beneath Tirzah & Rahab" (8.115.50, E 381). At the Last Judgment,

. . . Jesus stood beside them in the Spirit  
Separating  
Their Spirit from their body. Terrified at  
Non Existence  
For such they deem'd the death of the  
body.

their bodies lost they stood  
Trembling & weak a faint embrace a  
fierce desire

Their bodies buried in the ruins of the  
Universe  
Mingled with the confusion. Who shall  
call them from the Grave

Rahab & Tirzah wail aloud in the wild  
flames they give up themselves to  
Consummation  
(9.117.4-6, 118.1-2, 5-7, E 386-87)

The second root, *rotzeb*, seems to reflect Tirzah's association with the Female Will, imposing her will on her victim: "Why dost thou wander away from Tirzah why me compell to bind thee" (FZ 8.32, E 379); and taking pleasure in the fulfillment of her willful desires: "Therefore bright Tirzah triumphs: putting on all beauty. / And all perfection, in her cruel sports among the Victims" (M 19.44-45, E 113).

The third root, thematically related to the first, is *rotsab*, the Hebrew ending with a guttural sound frequently left unvoiced in English transliterations.<sup>22</sup> Denoting "manslaughter or murder," the word is most frequently associated with the seventh commandment, *lo tirtsab*, "thou shalt not kill," as included by Blake in the early version of "Job's Evil Dreams," from the Butts Job series, completed around 1805.<sup>23</sup> The root's association with the name Tirzah is obvious. The "Mother of my Mortal part" who "to Mortal Life

betray" in "To Tirzah" (ll. 9, 14, E 30), is the same figure who, in *Milton*, watched with Rahab as Milton struggled against Urizen: "Rahab and Tirzah trembled to behold / The enormous strife. one giving life, the other giving death" (M 19.28-29, E 113); for "Tirzah & her Sisters / Weave the black Wool of Death upon Entuthon Benyhton" (M 29.55-56, E 128). And in *Jerusalem*, "Tirzah sits weeping to hear the shrieks of the dying: her Knife / Of flint is in her hand: she passes it over the howling Victim" (67.24-25, E 220).

The fourth root, *rotzeb*, closely related to the third, describes the means by which Tirzah commits her murders: "To pierce through, perforate, bore," and as a noun, "A piercing instrument, an awl, a piercer." Thus, in *Jerusalem*, "The Twelve Daughters in Rahab & Tirzah have circumscribd the Brain / Beneath & pierced it thro the midst with a golden pin" (67.41-42, E 220).

Although we cannot derive firm conclusions from a single name, these Hebraic etymologies of Tirzah do yield several inferences for further consideration. First, it is possible that Blake was more proficient in Hebrew than has heretofore been assumed.<sup>24</sup> While virtually any Bible dictionary could have provided Blake with a list of passages containing the name Tirzah, as well as the traditional attribution of beauty, none would have then broken the name down to an Hebraic root. Rather, it would seem that on 30 January 1803, Blake truly was, as he wrote his brother James, "now learning my Hebrew" (E 727). During this same period, he added "To Tirzah" to *The Songs of Experience*, wrote Nights the Eighth and Ninth of *The Four Zoas*, and painted the earlier Job series.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is conceivable that, noting a similarity between the name and the Hebrew word from the commandment, Blake could have applied the lessons learned from contemporary Hebraists and sought a common root.

Second, if Blake did distinguish between source and etymology, then the

names in his myth do mean something. For the past decade or so, several Blake critics, especially those dealing with onomastics, have been exploring various formal patterns found in Blake's work, but without associating those structures with the content in any way. For example, V. A. De Luca bases his exploration of "Proper Names in the Structural Design of Blake's Myth-Making" in part on "the principle of the autonomy of the names, that is, their frequently arbitrary use and the primacy of their status as self-referential and irreducible elements in his poetry."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in "Pictures of Speech: On Blake's Poetic," Aaron Fogle asserts that the names are not descriptive, but "comprise [Blake's] own 'pictures of speech.'"<sup>27</sup> Nelson Hilton's *Literal Imagination: Blake's Vision of Words* explores linguistic patterns from the perspective that "These constructions, of course, do not disclose anything about the narrative, but they do create aspects of the background and frame—. . . the words of the plates have their own plots."<sup>28</sup> And the editors of *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* pointedly reject "this vision of Blake as a poetic Adam naming his creatures . . . of Blake as the founder of a poetry of nouns that must be translated back into their meanings through a process of *definition*" (6). If, as the name Tirzah suggests, Blake did consider the Hebraic etymologies when characterizing the personifications found in his myth, then we must carry these formal studies to their logical conclusions by considering the ways in which structure and meaning, along with pictures in the composite art, all interact with each other.

Finally, if Blake did incorporate Hebraic etymologies into his work, then he was probably using language transformatively as well as descriptively.<sup>29</sup> Had he been concerned simply with describing his vision, Blake would have used language that was familiar to his audience. But by exploiting hid-

den meanings of relatively familiar names or by creating entirely new ones, Blake seems deliberately to have placed obstacles in the path of understanding, wishing "to evoke a change in the attitudes and mechanisms of apprehension" because "words can function either to bind a person to, or release a person from, the world that one is helping to construct" (Streng 166, 160). As Blake explains in the oft-cited passage from *Jerusalem*:

(I call them by their English names:  
English, the rough basement  
Los built the stubborn structure of the  
Language, acting against  
Albions melancholy, who must else have  
been a Dumb despair.)  
(36.58-60, E 183)

The biographical William Blake of South Molton Street had no choice but to use "English, the rough basement" in the Lockean sense, to describe the subjective ideas produced by his senses. But because he had the visionary faculty, named Los, he was able simultaneously to transform English into "the Language, acting against / Albions melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair." Thus, he was able to give Albion the words necessary for release from Tirzah's world, in order to construct the New Jerusalem. Ultimately, Blake's purpose was to transform "the mechanisms of apprehension" so that we no longer need words at all:

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the  
immortal Eyes  
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of  
Thought: into Eternity  
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God.  
the Human Imagination  
(J5.18-20, E 147)

According to Robert F. Gleckner, Blake recognized that after the Fall, language was a means of "giving of form to what otherwise would remain an eternal abstraction (and therefore unredeemable)"; but then,

Words thus become part of the vast machine of the physical world, cogs in a cerebral wheel to turn the adverse wheel

of the reader's mind in a kind of perpetual motion machine producing nothing—which is to say, producing mere images drawn from Nature. From these, laws are abstracted that men impose upon themselves; and gods are invented, as the source of the laws, before which men then prostitute themselves. The viciousness and self-enslavement of the reading process could not be made more graphic.<sup>30</sup>

The name Tirzah seems to have provided Blake with the means of transcending the "viciousness and self-enslavement" of words. In the prophecies written before he incorporated Tirzah into his myth, Blake's apocalyptic visions were "eternal abstractions," vague depictions of conflagration. For example, in *America*, "the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, & round the abodes of men" (16.23, E 58). In *Europe*:

The sun glow'd fiery red!  
The furious terrors flew around!  
On golden chariots raging, with red  
wheels dropping with blood;  
The Lions lash their wrathful tails!  
The Tigers couch upon the prey & suck  
the ruddy tide:  
And Enitharmon groans & cries in  
anguish and dismay.  
Then Los arose his head he reard in  
snaky thunders clad:  
And with a cry that shook all nature to  
the utmost pole,  
Call'd all his sons to the strife of blood.  
(15.3-11, E 66)

In *The Song of Los*, the capitalized "Grave" seems to be an early name for Tirzah:

Forth from the dead dust rattling  
bones to bones  
Join: shaking convuls'd the shivering clay  
breathes  
And all flesh naked stands: Fathers and  
Friends;  
Mothers & Infants; Kings & Warriors:  
The Grave shrieks with delight, & shakes  
Her hollow womb, & clasps the solid  
stem:  
Her bosom swells with wild desire:  
And milk & blood & glandous wine  
In rivers rush & shout & dance,  
On mountain, dale and plain.  
(7.31-40, E 69-70)



Though he apparently believed in St. Paul's mystical assertion of two bodies—"It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15.44)—until Blake discovered the hebraic etymologies of Tirzah, he lacked the vocabulary necessary for translating the abstraction into a concrete image. Thus, the name Tirzah seems both to have confirmed the mystical concept and to have verified the authenticity of Blake's vision. With the introduction of the personification, Blake was then able to create poetry that would give form to this "eternal abstraction." However, because the name could also establish a direct link between words and the Word, Blake was also able to overcome what Gleckner calls the "viciousness and self-enslavement of the reading process" by creating language that would self-destruct. That is, the name Tirzah initially functions like a signifier pointing to specific biblical meanings. But because the sign's underlying reality is so obscure, the name ultimately ceases to function descriptively at all. Instead, those who have no access to Parkhurst's *Lexicon* are forced to contemplate imaginatively the undifferentiated reality reflected by the death of Tirzah. After all, as Blake says in his *Vision of the Last Judgment*,

This world of Imagination is the World of Eternity it is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World <of Imagination> is Infinite & Eternal whereas the World of Generation or Vegetation is Finite & [for a small moment] Temporal There Exist in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature (E 555)

Through Tirzah, Blake sows the natural body "that the Spiritual body may be Reveald."

<sup>1</sup> Milton 17.11, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) 110. All Blake citations are from Erdman, hereafter referred to as E. Individual works will be abbreviated as follows: *The Descriptive Catalogue of 1809, DC*; *The Four Zoas, FZ*; *Jerusalem, J*; *Milton, M*; *A Vision of the Last Judgment, VIJ*.

<sup>2</sup> (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 127.

<sup>3</sup> (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1963) 144.

<sup>4</sup> (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964) 282.

<sup>5</sup> Ed., *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (New York: Orion, 1967) 154.

<sup>6</sup> "The Marriage of Contraries in 'To Tirzah,'" *Colby Library Quarterly* 20 (1984): 195.

<sup>7</sup> (New York: St. Martin's, 1986) 152.

<sup>8</sup> A brief overview of the topic can be found in R. H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1979). Also useful is Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* (1966; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), and his essays collected in the anthology *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982); and Stephen K. Land, *The Philosophy of Language in Britain: Major Theories from Hobbes to Thomas Reid* (New York: AMS Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> While the terminology is that of twentieth-century structuralism, Aarsleff points out in his introduction that Ferdinand de Saussure's theories were preceded by those of Locke in the seventeenth century, and Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth. However, says Aarsleff, "We need not assume that Humboldt had read Locke, though that is possible, or that Saussure had read Locke and Humboldt, which would seem unlikely. But the obvious similarity of the three statements and the crucial position of each in the writer's thought cannot be dismissed as merely fortuitous. We are forced to assume that there is a demonstrable connection, a course of coherence that links Locke, Humboldt, and Saussure" ("Introduction," *From Locke to Saussure* 25).

<sup>10</sup> Published with the *Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952) 107-08.

<sup>11</sup> Peter H. Nidditch, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1975) B2.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the third member of Blake's infernal trinity, Newton, attempted to construct an artificial language (see Ralph W. V. Elliott, "Isaac Newton's 'Of an Universall Language,'" *Modern Language Review* 52 [1957]: 1-18).

<sup>13</sup> *Mysterium Magnum, or An Exposition of the First Book of Moses called Genesis*,

John Sparrow, tr., C. J. Barker, ed., 2 vols. (London: Watkins, 1924) 19.26.

<sup>14</sup> See Aarsleff's essay "An Outline of Language-Origins Theory Since the Renaissance," 278-92; and Gordon W. Hewes, *Language Origins: A Bibliography* 2 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> (Reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1970) 1: 655.

<sup>16</sup> The discussion of Hebrew is based on my article "Blake as an Eighteenth-Century Hebraist," in David V. Erdman, ed., *Blake and His Bibles* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 1990) 179-229. I am currently compiling *Christian Hebraism: A Source Book of English-Language Materials* for Garland Publishing.

<sup>17</sup> (Reprint, Merton, England: Scolar P, 1968) x, xix-xx.

<sup>18</sup> This "Anglo-Israelite" tradition, which became intermixed by the followers of Richard Brothers with eighteenth-century millenarianism, continues into the twentieth century, Anglo-Israelites still compiling dictionaries to demonstrate how English derived from the original Hebrew tongue. On Blake and Richard Brothers, see Morton D. Paley, "William Blake, the Prince of the Hebrews, and the Woman Clothed with the Sun," in *William Blake: Essays in Honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, ed. Paley and Michael Phillips (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1973) 260-93.

<sup>19</sup> In "A Wall of Words," V. A. De Luca asserts the opposite: "Blake understands language not only as having human origin but also as being the quintessence and the glory of our humanity" (Nelson Hilton and Thomas A. Vogler, eds., *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1986] 239).

<sup>20</sup> In the same paragraph of the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake also asserts the need for scholarly objectivity: "Tell me the Acts, O historian, and leave me to reason upon them as I please; away with your reasoning and your rubbish. All that is not action is not . . . worth reading. Tell me the What; I do not want you to tell me the Why, and the How; I can find that out myself, as well as you can, and I will not be fooled by you into opinions, that you please to impose, to disbelieve what you think improbable or impossible" (E 544). It seems reasonable to infer that Blake could have used the "facts" without accepting the premises of his sources.

<sup>21</sup> See my articles "The Reasons for 'Urizen,'" *Blake* 21 (1988): 147-49; and "Hebraic Etymologies of Proper Names in Blake's Myth," *Philological Quarterly* 67 (1988): 345-63.

<sup>22</sup> Much of my discussion of this root was anticipated by Thomas A. Reisner in



"Blake's 'To Tirzah,'" *The Explicator* 33 (1974): item 3.

<sup>23</sup> Regarding the earlier Job series, Martin Butlin says, "The watercolours painted for Thomas Butts have until recently been thought to date from shortly before the Linnell set [1821], but in fact stylistically they are much closer to the biblical watercolours of circa 1805; indeed, it is difficult to see why Blake would have needed to have had the outlines traced when he painted the second set had there not been a considerable lapse of time between them. A further reason for dating the Butts set to about 1805 is that some of the watercolours are signed with the 'WB inv' monogram, a form of signature that Blake seems to have abandoned in 1806" (*William Blake* [London: Tate Gallery, 1978] 98).

<sup>24</sup> Harold Fisch's original judgment that Blake "knew little or no Hebrew" ("William Blake," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* [Jerusalem: Keter, 1971] 4: 1071-72), has been amended

by Arnold Cheskin to "he was not entirely without Hebrew" ("The Echoing Greenhorn: Blake as Hebraist," *Blake* 12 [1978-79]: 183).

<sup>25</sup> Regarding "To Tirzah," Erdman says that "The style of lettering points to a date later than 1803, . . . Actually the first copy of *Songs* that contains 'To Tirzah' and has any firm evidence of date is copy P (on the paper watermarked Buttanshaw 1802), followed by Q (with watermark dates of 1802 and 1804) and E (sold to Butts in 1806)" (E 800). Dating passages from *The Four Zoas* has always been problematical, but Erdman believes that "the date of 1804 or later which has been accepted for Night VIII on the basis of allusions to the renewal of war and of strikingly different symbolism or idiom from the main body of the poem . . . may need correction to 'much later.' The writing of VIII, at least, . . . must have occurred after Blake had begun if not completed *Milton and Jerusalem*" (E 817).

<sup>26</sup> *Blake Studies* 8 (1978): 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982): 220.

<sup>28</sup> (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 4.

<sup>29</sup> The distinction is discussed by Frederick J. Streng in his "Language and Mystical Awareness," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) 141-69.

<sup>30</sup> "Most Holy Forms of Thought: Some Observations on Blake and Language," *ELH* 41 (1974): 569, 574-75. Though with different terminology, Vogler makes virtually the same point in "Re:Naming MIL/TON": "The naming function is associated with the acquisition of an alienating identity whose rigid structure (the Selfhood under the Law of the Name) limits the subject's entire mental and emotional development" (*Unnam'd Forms* 160).