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William Blake and popular religious imagery

IT has long been established that Blake's designs are full of borrowings from earlier art and that traces can be found in particular of the influence of the Italian renaissance and classical antiquity. In his extensive and unveiled use of such sources Blake is at one with contemporary history-painters like James Barry and Henry Fuseli, whom Blake saw as fellow-martyrs in the struggle against the domination of Reynolds. Yet it is equally clear that he had hopes of reaching an audience beyond those with the cultural background to understand the Elevated Style. Reynolds had conceived of history-painting as restricted to the classically educated, to whom 'the great events of Greek and Roman fable and history . . . [were by] early education and the usual course of reading, . . . made familiar and interesting'.[1] Blake on the other hand persistently claimed that all men could find the path to redemption through his art and was 'happy to find a Great Majority of Fellow Mortals who can Elucidate My Visions, & Particularly they have been Elucidated by Children, who have taken a greater delight in contemplating my Pictures than I even hoped'.[2]

This concern to reach a wide and even uncultured audience is evident in the form of many of his productions, particularly the Illuminated Books. Though Blake scholars have rightly tended to emphasise the sophistication of his first works in illuminated printing, they would probably have been taken by Blake's contemporaries to belong to the world of popular publishing. The tracts *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One*, with their irregular printing, indistinct illustrations and small size, would have looked like a kind of chapbook, while the *Songs of Innocence* bear more than a passing resemblance to the moralising children's books published by John Newbury, as has often been noted. In some cases the visual imagery of Blake's early tracts, songs and works specifically directed towards children can be related to children's books earlier than the 'enlightened' moral tales popularised by Newbury. To take one example, the motif of the child reaching out for a creature just beyond its grasp that appears in *There is no Natural Religion*, series a, II and V (Fig.2), and the child killing humanised creatures in the *Gates of Paradise*, No.7 must have their origin in the woodcut to Emblem XXII of *Divine Emblems: or Temporal Things Spiritualised*, which was a version, first illustrated in the early eighteenth century, of John Bunyan's *Book for Boys and Girls*. This work was reprinted endlessly throughout the eighteenth century and the edition illustrated here (Fig.3) is dated 1790. Furthermore, other authors imitated it and Erdman has already cited a plate from John H. Wynne's *Choice Emblems*, 1772[3] as a precedent for the *Gates of Paradise* design, though in fact it clearly depends upon illustrations to Bunyan's book.

This example suggests the attraction for Blake of the emblematic imagery of earlier centuries, which still survived into the late eighteenth century in publications of a more humble kind. This should not be surprising, for there is a sense in which Blake belongs to a religious tradition which had continued to resist theological and philosophical rationalism right up to the end of the eighteenth century.[4] This tradition was essentially a popular one, which remained in opposition to the Natural Religion of more orthodox circles. It is impossible to miss in Blake's prophetic writings the combination of anti-Catholicism and apocalyptic imagery so characteristic of earlier Protestant polemic in northern countries. It is the intention of this article to suggest not only that these elements played an important part in his designs, but also that some of these traditions of Protestant imagery had survived to Blake's own day. Blake would obviously have had access to seventeenth-century Protestant prints in print shops and auction houses;[5] he would also have known of religious and moralising imagery through the survival of earlier designs in a cheaply printed and often very crude form.

The imagery of Protestant anti-Catholicism clearly lies behind the extraordinary papal figure in *Europe*, plate 10 (Fig.4)[6] with its bat wings and ass's ears. This must ultimately derive from Lutheran images of the Pope as one of the Evil powers of the world described in the Book of Revelation; but a more immediate source for Blake's design appears to be the frontispiece to William Prynne's *The Second Tome of an exact Chronological Vindication and Historical Reconstruction of our British, Roman, Saxon, Danish, Norman and English Kings Supream Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction*, 1665 (Fig.6).[7] This was written in support of the restoration of Charles II as Protestant Defender of the Faith, and the frontispiece shows the Pope enthroned with the sword of temporal power and the Keys of St Peter, while two kings prostrate themselves before him. The Pope is depicted as the Beast who receives authority from the Dragon as in Revelation: 'and all the world wondered after the beast. And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast' (*Rev.*14,3-4). This elaborate print was adapted

[1] *Discourse* IV, line 28.
[2] Letter to Dr Trusler, 23rd August 1799, in G.L. KEYNES: *Blake Complete Writings*, Oxford [1957], pp.793-94.
[3] D.V. ERDMAN: *The Notebook of William Blake*, Oxford [1973], p.92.
[4] See M.D. PALEY: 'William Blake, The Prince of the Hebrews, and The Woman Clothed with the Sun', in M.D. PALEY and M. PHILLIPS ed. *William Blake: Essays in honour of Sir Geoffrey Keynes*, Oxford [1973], pp.260-94.
[5] See A. GILCHRIST: *Life of William Blake*, [1863], Vol.I, pp.9-10.
[6] D. BINDMAN: *The Complete Graphic Works of William Blake*, London [1978], pl.178.
[7] *Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum*, Vol.1, No.1029.

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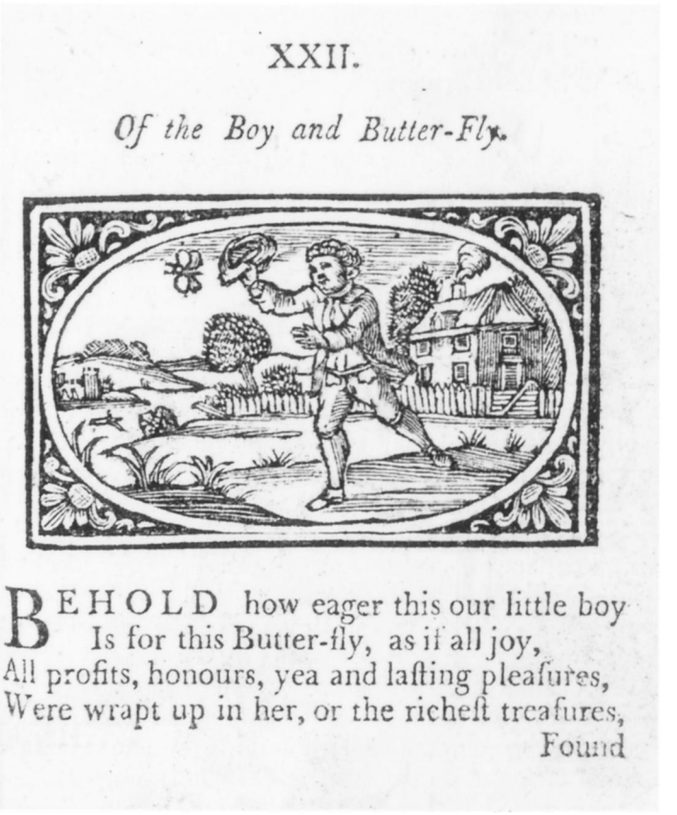
2. *There is no natural religion*, series a, Proposition V, by William Blake. Relief etching with wash. 6 by 4 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum).



3. *Divine Emblems: or Temporal Things spiritualised*, emblem XXII, 1790. (British Library).

at the time of the Popish Plot and issued in 1679 as *Babel and Bethel: or the Pope in his Colours* (Fig.7),[8] now simplified into two contrasting scenes of the Pope and Charles II. In this form it foreshadows not only plate 10 of the *Europe* but also its counterpart, plate 5 in the same book (Fig.5),[9] which shows War supported by spiritual power in the form of a scaly warrior accompanied by praying angels.

The use by Blake of such imagery in the context of *Europe* has implications which go beyond the question of artistic influence: it suggests a sympathy on Blake's part with the fundamentalist Protestant view of the Catholic church as engaged in a diabolical conspiracy to suppress the meaning of the first Incarnation, a rôle Blake supposes to have been inherited in his own age and country by the Church of England. An equally striking borrowing by Blake of seventeenth-century polemical imagery can be found in the engraving, c.1795, of *Lucifer and the Pope in Hell* (Fig.8)[10] which illustrates a passage from Isaiah in which the destruction of the King of Babylon is prophesied: 'Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming' (*Isaiah*, 14,9). Blake's design is evidently indebted to a satire published in 1680 entitled *The Devills Tryumph over Romes Idoll* (Fig.9),[11] which equates the Pope with the King of Babylon as a temporal tyrant who will face destruction in the fires of Hell. Blake's design appears implicitly to associate the state tyranny of his own time with the spiritual tyranny of the Papacy, for the perpetual condition of the Fallen world is the alliance between 'King and Priest'.

Such examples suggest a greater affinity with 'Northern' and Protestant traditions of imagery than previous study of Blake's sources has tended to suggest. Seventeenth-century anti-Papal images, though often executed initially by professional hands, were usually directed at a wide audience and were sometimes disseminated by quite crude copies. Even so, their appeal, like that of most satire, must have been limited by their topicality: there is a notable falling off in the production of such imagery after the Protestant Revolution of 1688. There were, however, more enduring types of religious print dealing with universal themes which can be traced back to the seventeenth century but seem to have retained a genuine popularity almost to the end of the nineteenth century.[12] Called by Pepys 'Penny Godlinesses', many of these were captioned as 'Hieroglyphicks', a name

[8] *Ibid.*, Vol.1, No.1076.
[9] BINDMAN, *op.cit.* at note 6 above, pl.173.
[10] *Ibid.*, pl. 323.
[11] *Loc.cit.* at note 7 above, Vol.1, No.1079.
[12] See T. GRETTON: *Murders and Moralities: English Catchpenny prints*, 1800-60, London [1980].

sometimes attached to political prints which contained complex allegorical imagery. By the eighteenth century this word could be applied to any print containing a visual puzzle, from emblems and Masonic symbols to children's rebuses. Yet it could also invoke the renaissance belief that the Hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians were pre-linguistic emblems of higher spiritual reality, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was still perhaps the hope that they might present spiritual truth to those without 'the knowledge of letters'.[13]

The one certain thing about such Hieroglyphic prints was their ubiquity. The type known as *The Ten* (or sometimes *Twelve*) *Ages of Man*, for example, was popular in mid-seventeenth-century Germany,[14] and appears almost simultaneously in a finely engraved version published by Thomas Jenner c.1650.[15] A similar motif reappears in a Catnach print of c.1800, itself probably deriving from an eighteenth-century example, and a crude woodcut version of it was still being printed at least as late as the 1860s.[16] This type of image was published mainly in London in Aldermary Churchyard and later in Seven Dials, and prints were apparently sold very cheaply by street hawkers. By the end of the eighteenth century they were often published by the same workshops as 'catchpenny' accounts of sensational murders and broadside ballads,[17] or alternatively by such firms as Bowles and Carver which aimed at the popular market.[18]

It is far from clear – given the lack of any attempt to classify such images – how many image types have been totally lost: as the prints would normally have been pasted to walls immense numbers would eventually have been destroyed. Yet there can be no doubt that a study of those that do survive would cast much light on Blake and on other eighteenth-century artists.[19] In the case of the *Ages of Man* one might suggest that the depiction of the final descent of man could lie behind the oft-repeated motif in Blake of the old man on crutches entering the Door of Death,[20] but this would be hard to prove conclusively. However, I would like to put forward one example of such an influence which I believe not only to be reasonably certain but which also clarifies the meaning of a particular Blakean image, namely *Jerusalem*, plate 76 (Fig.10). The print known as *The Tree of Life* (plate 11) first makes its appearance in a print catalogue of 1775[21] with its two companions, entitled *Hieroglyphicks of a Christian* and *Hieroglyphicks of the Natural Man*, and they were also published by Bowles and Carver. Bowles and Carver impressions are to be found in the British Museum and their worn state suggests that a great many were printed.[22] *The Tree of Life* seems to have outlasted its companions and was issued by Catnach in woodcut; copies of this version were current until almost the end of the nineteenth century.[23] Each of the three prints has an allegorical tree, either the Tree of Life or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, its hanging fruits labelled respectively with heavenly virtues and rewards, and with sins and false beliefs.

The Tree of Life in all its versions illustrates part of the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation. The Tree of Life is shown growing in 'the pure river of the water of life' (*Rev.*22,31), within the walls of the city of Jerusalem. The Tree bears 'twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations' (*Rev.*22,2). The foreground illustrates *Matthew*, 7, 13-14, in which the straight gate and narrow way 'which leadeth into life, and few there be that find it', are contrasted with the wide gate and broad way to destruction. According to the caption on the Bowles and Carver version the print is a 'view of the New Jerusalem and the present Evil World', and in the foreground are two preachers identifiable as Wesley and Whitefield, representing 'the Industry of Gospel Ministers in endeavouring to pluck Sinners from the Wrath to come'.

The most striking aspect of the print is that Christ is shown nailed to the Tree of Life. Though this idea can be found in the mystical writings of St Bonaventura and Meister Eckhart,[24] in visual representations of the subject the Tree itself is invariably of cruciform shape even though made up of living branches.[25] This apparent lack of a precise precedent for the motif in earlier depictions makes it virtually certain that Blake's depiction of Christ adored by Albion in plate 76 of *Jerusalem* is dependent on a version of *The Tree of Life* print. Blake's image does not, of course, contain any of the other details of the city of Jerusalem found in *The Tree of Life* print, but the contrast between the sunrise on the right of Christ and the radiance emerging from His head confirms the direct connection between the two images.

One would naturally tend to conclude from this that plate 76 of *Jerusalem* represents Christ nailed to the Tree of Life, adored by Albion who thereby enters into his own redemption. But it has been assumed up to now by all Blake scholars including myself, that the tree upon which Christ is suspended is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and that Albion is depicted still in a fallen state,

[13] F. QUARLES: *Emblemes* [1638], p.v.: 'Before the knowledge of Letters God was known by Hieroglyphics'.

[14] See D. ALEXANDER AND W.L. STRAUSS: *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1600-1700* [1976], pp.67,217,622 and 684. All these examples were printed in Augsburg.

[15] *Loc.cit.* at note 7 above, Vol.1, No.796.

[16] GRETTON, *op.cit.* at note 12 above, No.78.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.11.

[18] There is an album of Bowles and Carver prints in the British Museum which gives some idea of the range of their stock.

[19] There has as yet been no attempt to make a systematic anthology of British popular prints on the lines of MAX GEISBERG's *The German Illustrated Broadsheet, 1500-1550*, and the succeeding volumes edited by W.L. STRAUSS, though it would be of great value.

[20] See BINDMAN, *op.cit.* at note 6 above, Nos.159,408,475.

[21] Sayer and Bennett, 1775. Reprinted by the Holland Press [1970].

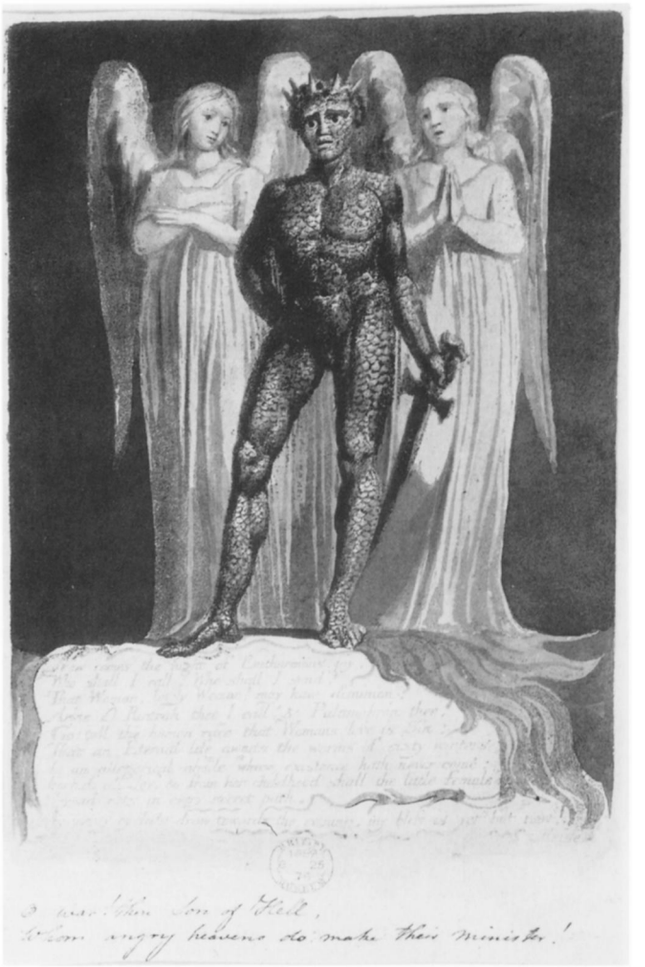
[22] *Loc.cit.* at note 7 above, Vol.IV, Nos.4570-1 are two versions of *The Tree of Life*. Coloured versions of all three prints are to be found in Volume III of the Bowles and Carver album cited in note 18 above. The first two are signed 'J. Bakewell invt.', an artist who is apparently otherwise unknown. Even so he is unlikely to have first conceived the designs.

[23] GRETTON, *op.cit.* at note 12 above, No.82.

[24] See G. SCHILLER: *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, [1968], Band 2 pp.145-46.

[25] SCHILLER, *ibid.*, p.145 discusses the idea that the Cross itself was made of wood from the Tree of Life. See also G. LECHLER: 'The Tree of Life in Indo-European and Islamic Cultures', *Ars Islamica*, IV [1937], pp.369-416.

4.



5.

4. 'Albion's Angel Rose', from *Europe*, by William Blake. 1794. Plate 10. Relief etching, colour-printed with water-colour. 23.5 by 16.8 cm. (Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon).

5. 'Now comes the night', from *Europe*, by William Blake. 1794. Plate 5. Relief etching, colour-printed with water-colour. 22.9 by 17.1 cm. (British Museum).

6. Frontispiece to William Prynne, *The second Tome of an exact Chronological vindication . . .*, 1665. 30.5 by 44 cm. (British Museum).

7. *Babel and Bethel: or the Pope in his Colours*, 1679. Engraving. 17.4 by 29.3 cm. (British Museum).

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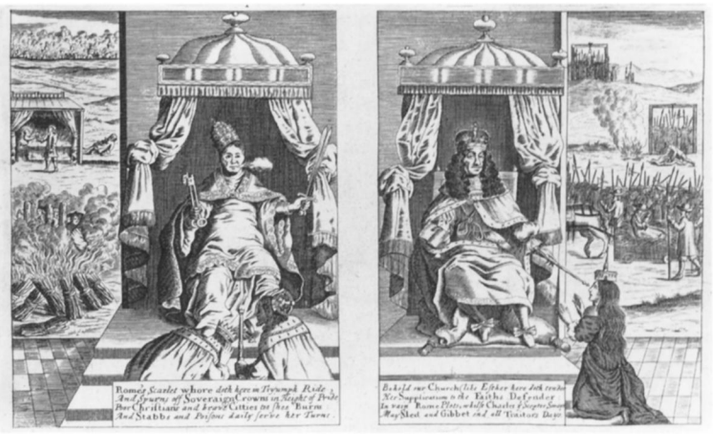


7.

8. *Lucifer and the Pope in Hell*, by William Blake. Line engraving, colour printed with water-colour. 1790-96. 19.8 by 26.7 cm. (Huntington Library, San Marino, California).

9. *The Devills Tryumph over Romes Idoll*, 1680. Engraving, 24 by 26.4 cm. (British Museum).

worshipping not the redemptive Christ but merely His 'vegetated' body.[26] Both trees have a place in the text of *Jerusalem:* 'Albion's Fatal Tree', synonymous with Tyburn's tree, the Tree of Moral Virtue and the Law, and the tree of mystery – all of which provide shelter for Albion in his divided state – can be identified as the Tree of Knowledge. In chapter 2 of *Jerusalem* Albion in his fallen state turns away from the leaves of the Tree of Life which might offer him redemption from Error.[27] The Cross itself, because the Crucifixion is in one sense the culminating act of the Old Dispensation, can be seen as symbolic of the Moral Law which is in turn associated with the Tree of Knowledge. This complex of connections is made explicit in the account of the Crucifixion in *Vala or the Four Zoas:*

> Thus was the lamb of God condemn'd to Death.
> They nail'd him upon the tree of Mystery, weeping over him.
> And then mocking & then worshipping, calling him Lord & King.[28]

This textual evidence would seem to suggest very strongly that the tree upon which Christ is nailed in plate 76 is after all the Tree of Knowledge, but, even without the corroboration offered by the existence of *The Tree of Life* print, it would still be possible to argue that the meaning of the plate is primarily redemptive. Plate 76 essentially acts as the frontispiece to the final chapter of *Jerusalem*, which culminates in the final prophecy of Albion's redemption and his entry into Jerusalem or spiritual existence: by recognising the true meaning of Christ's sacrifice, as he appears to do in plate 76, Albion may be said to enter the domain of the Tree of Life which is the city of Jerusalem. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment* Blake makes a specific association between the Tree of Life and the human imagination: the Tree is embodied in the vision of the true Eden whose inhabitants converse with 'Eternal Realities as they Exist in the Human Imagination'.[29] The glimmer of light in the background of plate 76 would correspond, therefore, to the light emerging from the Lamb within the city of Jerusalem as in *Revelation*, 21,23: 'And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine on it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the lamb is the light thereof'.

The example of *The Tree of Life* makes it clear that the Hieroglyphic image was not dead in Blake's lifetime, and there is now evidence that Blake was not the only artist to find it fruitful. A print described as 'hieroglyphical' was published in 1793 by the mysterious Garnet Terry (1744-1817),[30] like Blake a copy engraver by profession and a fervent millenarian. It is a large fold-out plate measuring approximately 56 by 38 cm, bound with an explanatory pamphlet entitled *A Description accompanying an hieroglyphical print of Daniel's Great Image, or Mystical Man* (Fig.13). Its apocalyptic intention is clear for it reveals 'the approaching Destruction of Antichrist, the Beast, the Whore, and the False Prophet; demonstrated from the Prophecies of Daniel, and confirmed by the Signs of the Times'.[31] 'The Great Image' is to be read as a hieroglyph of Babylon which stands, as it did for Blake, for the degraded material state of man in the present age. The curious form of the work – an emblematic figure with engraved text – seems to foreshadow in some respects Blake's *Laocoön* (Fig.12)[32] of the 1820s, which may also have been intended, therefore, as a hieroglyphic image. It is certainly possible that Blake knew Terry and his work,[33] but this is less important than the fact that someone of such a similar background should also have been drawn to the hieroglyphic tradition in the years around the end of the eighteenth century.

The examples considered in this article confirm that Blake drew from a wide range of popular imagery in addition to more academic sources. These examples do not, of course, suggest that Blake consciously drew from such sources in order to reach a wide audience, but rather that his visual language was not completely at odds with his universal aims. They also show that a consideration of popular sources might have a value in interpreting or enriching our understanding of some of Blake's more puzzling designs. Most importantly, however, such examples suggest that arcane designs of a Christian and moralising tendency were part of the street culture of late eighteenth-century London in a way that has been completely forgotten. Blake, therefore, might have had some reason to suppose that his designs could have had more meaning to the 'Great Majority of Fellow Mortals' than to the artistically educated.

[26] DAVID ERDMAN in *The Illuminated Blake*, London [1975], p.355, associates the Tree with the Druid oak, and Albion is seen as being 'at an acme of Satanic worship of a vegetated Christ'. According to ANNE KOSTELANETZ MELLOR in *Blake's Human Form Divine*, Berkeley [1974], p.321, 'Christ, of course, is nailed to the double-branched tree of mystery'. W.J.T. MITCHELL, in *Blake's Composite Art*, Princeton [1978], pp.209-10, though apparently worried by interpretations of plate 76 that see it as representing 'the typical Christian error, the worship of the dead, vegetated, god rather than living humanity', still identifies the tree as 'the Druidical oak tree (its fruits suggesting the tree of knowledge)'. I had also assumed it to be the Tree of Knowledge in *Blake as an Artist*, London [1977], p.179 and in *William Blake: His Art and Times*, London [1982], p.163.

[27] *Jerusalem*, plate 46. KEYNES, *op.cit.* at note 2 above, p.676.

[28] *Night the Eighth*, lines 325-27; *ibid.*, p.349.

[29] *Ibid.*, p.613.

[30] I am indebted for details of Terry's life to Diana Dethloff who is preparing an article on him.

[31] The only copy of this work known to me is in the collection of Robert Essick, Altadena, California.

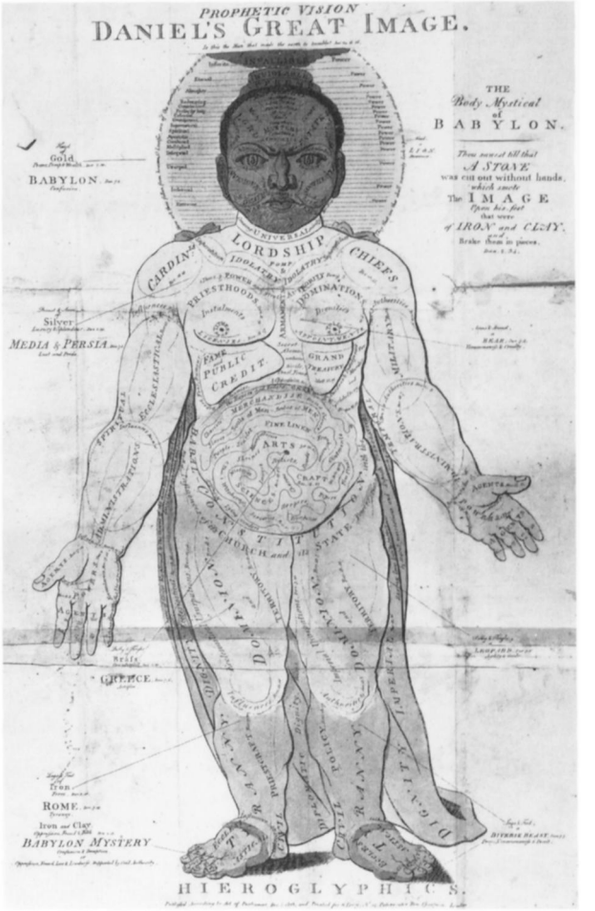
[32] BINDMAN, *op.cit.* at note 6 above, No.623.

[33] The most likely contact might have been Alexander Tilloch the engraver whose device for preventing banknote forgery was the subject of a testimonial which Blake signed with other engravers in 1797 (G.E. BENTLEY, JR., *Blake Records*, Oxford [1969], p.58). Terry did regular engraving work for the Bank of England so it is also likely that he would have known Tilloch.

10. *Jerusalem*, by William Blake. Plate 76. Relief etching with water-colour, touched with pen and wash. 23.1 by 16.5 cm. (Collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon).

11. *The Tree of Life*, c.1775. Engraving. 35 by 24.8 cm. Published by Bowles and Carver. (British Museum).

12. *Laocoon*, by William Blake. c.1882? Line engraving. 52.2 by 21.2 cm. (Collection of R.N. Essick, Altadena, California).



13. *Daniel's Great Image*, by Garnet Terry, 1793. Engraving. 56 by 38 cm. (Collection of R.N. Essick, Altadena, California).