

## **Discuss the representation of Jesus in any English-language poet.** **(Blake)**

### **Introduction.**

To discuss Blake's representation of Jesus, it is necessary to first understand how Blake views religion. In short, Blake entirely rejects orthodox Christianity and the Established Church. An atmosphere of "religious crisis"<sup>1</sup> sits behind his poetry, and, most noticeably, behind his poems on Jesus. Indeed, Blake writes with a sense of apocalyptic urgency, denouncing and identifying the 'Christian God' as an oppressive slave-master, "the Demon of heaven"<sup>2</sup>, and "Satan"<sup>3</sup>, and the Christian Church as a tyrannous instrument for the "Antichrist"<sup>4</sup>, or "False Christ"<sup>5</sup> to establish political and social repression. He refers to state religion as "the Abomination that maketh desolate"<sup>6</sup>, an "idolatrous ecclesiastical establishment"<sup>7</sup>, and that "prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of Religion"<sup>8</sup>. What sits behind Blake's representation of Jesus is a radical rejection of Christian orthodoxy as delusional, destructive, and oppressive.

Because of this, it is surprising that Blake responds, not by rejecting Christianity altogether, but, rather ironically, seeing Jesus himself as the antidote for a disorientated and iniquitous system. Blake violently and comprehensively attacks the Christian God, but it is the same Blake who arrives at a "totally Christocentric"<sup>9</sup> vision of faith. Ultimately, Altizer's assessment that Blake's Jesus "arose out of rebellion against the Christian Christ"<sup>10</sup> is surprisingly accurate. Blake's Jesus is represented as an almost complete inversion of the Church's image of Christ, who rejects conformity and obedience, and champions a radical and revolutionary new religious ideology of passionate and poetic imagination.

### **The disobedient Jesus.**

In *The Everlasting Gospel*, Blake creatively reinterprets the Gospels' presentation of Christ, presenting Jesus as a disobedient and dissonant figure who rejects authority. Jesus is not the "meek and lowly" figure of Blake's clichéd orthodox Christology (*Everlasting Gospel*, 91), but rather liberator who breaks the chains of oppressive dogma. Blake famously argued that Jesus in fact broke

<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Ryan, 'Blake and Religion'. Pg. 151

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Ryan, 'Blake and Religion'. Pg. 157

<sup>3</sup> Michael R. Burch, 'William Blake's Jesus Christ'

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Ryan, 'Blake and Religion'. Pg. 153

<sup>5</sup> Everlasting Gospel line 326

<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Ryan, 'Blake and Religion'. Pg. 153

<sup>7</sup> Robert M. Ryan, 'Blake and Religion'. Pg. 153

<sup>8</sup> Michael R. Burch, 'William Blake's Jesus Christ'

<sup>9</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*. 'Introduction'. xii

<sup>10</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse*: Pg. 128

all the laws of the ten commandments: “did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbath’s God... bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate... covet when he prayed for his disciples... and turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery?”<sup>11</sup>. It is clear that, for Blake, Jesus is a violator of Law who rejects obedience.

Blake articulates this vividly in *The Everlasting Gospel* by firstly presenting Jesus as disobedient to his parents (and thus challenging the fifth commandment). Blake addresses this disobedience three times, rejecting directly the instruction to “Obey your parents” (212) and repeating the line “and he left his parents in dismay” after twice “running away” (*The Everlasting Gospel*, 18, 77). It is worth noting that this is the only line that Blake chooses to repeat in his poem, thus demonstrating that, for Blake, disobedience is of central importance. The most vivid description of Jesus’ disobedience in this poem is his undermining of Moses’ Law. Blake retells the story of the adulterous woman in John 8:2-11, placing Jesus “in Moses’ Chair” of judgement after “Mary was found in Adulterous bed” (235). However, despite the fact that “Moses commands she be stoned to death”, it is Jesus’ forgiveness and love that represents an abandonment of rules. Indeed, as Blake later articulates “Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse: not from rules”<sup>12</sup>. I will discuss impulsiveness later, but for now, it is the abandonment of rules that is of foundational importance to Blake’s reimagined Jesus. Blake interprets Jesus’ actions as revolutionary and earth shattering<sup>13</sup>, firstly through scriptural allusions: the “Earth trembling and naked” (244) is strongly reminiscent of Psalm 68:8<sup>14</sup>, and secondly by his use of language: the “silent awe” of the “ancient Heavens” as the “curses” of the law simply “began to roll” (241, 242, 243) powerfully evokes the revolutionary power of Jesus, breaking the shackles of the ancient curses of Law, or, what Blake calls elsewhere, “the mind-fog’d manacles” of Christian dogma<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, Jesus’ invocation “Cease, finger of God to write!” (252) announces the end of God’s nomian<sup>16</sup> rule, and liberation from submissive legal obedience. Therefore, Rowland’s assessment that Blake presents Jesus’ actions as “not only challenging, but also revolutionizing the hegemony of the religion of law”<sup>17</sup> is precisely accurate.

Blake’s animosity in presenting Jesus as the disobedient lawbreaker is only truly understood in its socio-historical context. Blake writes in a time of intense political and religious agitation. In the wake of the French Revolution and its disestablishment of the Catholic Church, the socially oppressive structures of the Established Church in England became increasingly disputed. This can be

<sup>11</sup> A.D. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton and Blake*. Pg. 2. & Jeanne Moskal, ‘Forgiveness, Love, and Pride in Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel”’. Pg. 23

<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Moskal, ‘Forgiveness, Love, and Pride’. Pg. 23

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Rowland, ‘Blake, Enoch and the Emergence of the Apocalyptic Christ’. Pg. 27

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 68:8 refers to the response of the natural world to the presence of the divine. This insinuates that Blake’s Jesus is the true divine figure.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Rowland, ‘Blake, Enoch and the Emergence of the Apocalyptic Christ’. Pg. 26

<sup>16</sup> Upholding the Law of the Pentateuch, seen to have prophetic authority.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Rowland, ‘Blake, Enoch and the Emergence of the Apocalyptic Christ’. Pg. 27

seen in the “Church and King”<sup>18</sup> riots of 1791, and the growth of the ‘Dissenters’ and ‘Antinomians’. While it is unknown whether Blake joined these revolutionary groups, he shares their rhetorical style in his polemic questioning of the Church-state’s control over public-religious practice, monopoly of religious truth, and repressive sexual morality. Ultimately, it is the interference of the Church in public life as a repressive structure and tool for the State that leads to Blake’s staunch rejection of obedience to orthodoxy. Blake’s art (which often accompanies his poetry) provides visual clarity to the intrusive Christianity of 18<sup>th</sup> Century England.



William Blake, *Elohim Creating Adam*. 1795



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*. 1512

While Michelangelo presents life being bestowed with the single touch of God, for Blake, the true Christian God is more oppressive. A snake-like tentacle is wrapped around Adam’s leg, leaving him trapped and dominated under God’s intrusion. Returning to Blake’s poetry, Blake articulates this same tyrannical Christianity: “None could break the Web, no wings of fire” … from the “Net of Religion”<sup>19</sup> (*The Book of Urizen, Ch.8, V. 7*). Moreover, the lines “Come, said Satan, come away/ I’ll soon see if you obey!” in *The Everlasting Gospel* (29,30), by presenting obedience from the mouth of Satan, Blake rejects submissiveness to orthodoxy as truly submission to Satan. For Blake, Jesus is an exemplary figure for non-conformity and rebelliousness against a deformed, draconian Christianity.

### **Blake’s own disobedience.**

Interestingly, Blake’s own scepticism of dogma leads to a figure of Jesus who is almost completely inverted from orthodox Christology. Indeed, Blake sets out his inversion Christology in the opening stanza of *The Everlasting Gospel*: “the Vision of Christ that thou dost see/ Is my vision’s greatest

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<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Ryan, ‘Blake and Religion’. Pg. 151

<sup>19</sup> Robert M. Ryan, ‘Blake and Religion’. Pg. 155

enemy” … “thine loves the same world mine hates;/ thy heaven doors are my hell gates” … “both read the Bible day and night, / but thou read’st black where I read white” (1,2,7,8,13,14). Blake’s use of imagery here in juxtaposing night and day, heaven and hell, black and white, vividly discloses how his representation of Jesus is radically opposed to orthodox Christology. Indeed, throughout *The Everlasting Gospel*, we are greeted with vivid imagery of inversion. This is done predominantly through Blake’s unconventional answering of questions on Jesus nature. Firstly, the question of Jesus’ gentleness (15) is answered by details of Jesus’ anger: “And, bursting forth, His furious ire/ Became a chariot of fire” (47,48), Jesus “tramples” down hypocrisy (52) and “with wrath He did subdue” (66). Blake’s language of wrath (as one of the seven deadly sins) is an unexpected and unorthodox representation of Jesus. Secondly, the question of Jesus’ divine origin is undermined not only by the presentation of Mary as a “harlot” (187) (and thus, not the Virgin Mother), but by explicit reference to Jesus’ sinfulness: “a body subject to be tempted” (192) (undermining the impeccability of Christ). Furthermore, Jesus’ humility (72) is challenged by descriptions of pride: “he was too proud to take a bribe” (86) and “He acts with honest, triumphant pride” (100). With pride being the greatest of the seven deadly sins, it is shocking for this to be associated with Jesus’ nature. Indeed, Blake not only challenges orthodox Christology, but received morality by associating pride with honesty and integrity; Blake’s presentation of Jesus serves as a mirror of Blake’s own refusal to submit to conventional religious truth. As such, there is sort of structural metaphor: Blake’s rejection of Christian orthodoxy is closely paralleled with Jesus’ refusal to submit to “Jewish Imposture”<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, Blake’s famous saying that “Jesus and his Apostles were all Artists”<sup>21</sup> serves as further conflation between Blake’s own revolutionary mission of disobedience, and Christ’s rebellious Chariot of Fire.

There has been much commentary on Blake’s disobedient Christology. Indeed, Sloss and Wallis remark that “Blake’s vision of Christ differs in almost all respects from the Christ of religious orthodoxy”<sup>22</sup>, and Haggarty, further, stresses Blakes “unorthodoxy”, his “desire to create his own ‘System’ rather than be ‘enslaved by another Man’s’”, and rebellious conviction to “turn conventions upside down”<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, these observations are precisely accurate considering Blake’s self-stated inversion Christology. However, what is too often overlooked is the political origins of Blake’s Jesus. Blake’s obsession with non-conformity by inverting Jesus’ true nature and lauding his disobedience of Jewish Law must be understood as a direct response to what Blake saw as an oppressive and restrictive Christian state.

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<sup>20</sup> A.D. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton and Blake*. Pg.216

<sup>21</sup> Michael R. Burch, ‘William Blake’s Jesus Christ’

<sup>22</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*. Pg. 129

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Haggarty, eds, *William Blake in Context*. Pg. 165

### A new religious ideology.

For Blake, Jesus not only serves as an example of dissent and disobedience, but the embodiment of a new radical form of religious expression<sup>24</sup>. Central to this new ideology, is an ethical paradigm shift away from the prioritisation of laws, and towards what Blake calls the “impulse”<sup>25</sup>, or “Imagination”<sup>26</sup>. This can be seen clearly in *The Everlasting Gospel*. The adulteress, Mary (Magdalene), is saved not by the laws of obligation (Moses’ Law), for these are rolled away. Instead, Mary is saved from the loving impulse of Jesus. Moskal interprets this as “the disposition of forgiving love challenging the ethics of obligation”<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, Blake himself asserts this shift: “Jesus was all virtue and acted from impulse: not from rules”<sup>28</sup>. The distinction between love and law, as well as Jesus’ invocation to God to “cease to write!” marks a rejection of the obligation ethic, and the formation of a new religious principle. This is hardly a matter of divisive interpretation, as Blake defines explicitly this “true” religion of Jesus is one “unconstrained by the imagination”<sup>29</sup>: “I know of no other Gospel than the liberty of both body and mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination”<sup>30</sup>. Blake is often attributed the title of an early Romantic poet for such liberal thinking. Indeed, this radical ideology asserts the primacy of the individual (a typical trope of Romanticism) as passionate imagination and free artistic expression replace blind obedience to dogma.

Blake’s radical transformation of true Christianity into imaginative freedom has often been regarded as ‘humanist’. Indeed, this is claimed by the humanists of today<sup>31</sup>, and is present in his poetry. For example, one of the most quoted and debated couplets of *The Everlasting Gospel* seems to point to both Humanism, and Nietzschean thought: “Thou art a Man: God is no more; / Thy own Humanity learn to adore” (146,147). This appears to be the complete removal of divinity from Jesus. While the claim that Jesus is a man is uncontroversial, it is the assertion that God is “no more” than simply human that is so devastating. However, while “God is no more” in often interpreted (as Altizer does) as an evocation similar to Nietzsche’s “God is dead”, I see this as a misinterpretation of Blake’s focus. Indeed, I side with Moskal’s interpretation that, instead, this is the dissolution a dualistic separation between divinity and humanity, rather than the dissolution of a Christian God. The new God is contained within human religious emotion. As Burch articulates, “God was the Human Imagination”<sup>32</sup> and the “spirit of life” (149). Blake’s Jesus serves as the embodiment of this humanism, or, as Burch argues, a “symbol of being”<sup>33</sup>. It is through Jesus that Blake articulates his

<sup>24</sup> Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*. ‘Introduction’. xi

<sup>25</sup> A.D. Nuttall, ‘Blake: The Son versus the Father’. Pg. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Robert M. Ryan, ‘Blake and Religion’. Pg. 163

<sup>27</sup> Jeanne Moskal, ‘Forgiveness, Love, and Pride in Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel”’. Pg. 27

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Rowland, ‘Blake, Enoch and the Emergence of the Apocalyptic Christ’. Pg. 25

<sup>29</sup> Robert M. Ryan, ‘Blake and Religion’. Pg. 162

<sup>30</sup> Robert M. Ryan, ‘Blake and Religion’. Pg.162

<sup>31</sup> <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/1628/thinkers-william-blake>

<sup>32</sup> Michael R. Burch, ‘William Blake’s Jesus Christ’

<sup>33</sup> Michael R. Burch, ‘William Blake’s Jesus Christ’

radical idea that God resides “in the human breast”; “within your bosoms I reside, and you reside with me”<sup>34</sup>, as Jesus serves as an exemplar for shaking off orthodoxy and authoritarianism in favour of this “holy inner fire of passionate imagination”<sup>35</sup>.

Blake truly is a revolutionary, who building on the poetic tradition of Milton, creates a new form of spiritual expression. I do not see it as unlikely that the emergence of poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are indebted to Blake’s early Romanticism and formation of a human-centred religion, in which passionate imagination is the true deity.

### **Conclusion.**

As Nuttall argues, to attempt to uncover Blake’s doctrine on Jesus is to misunderstand Blake. Indeed, “Blake rejected the very concept of doctrine”<sup>36</sup>, or any monopoly of truth. Thus, it would be erroneous to produce a Christology from Blake’s poetry. However, we can establish the principles from which Blake’s presentation of Jesus emerges. Placing Blake in his context is essential to understanding why Blake presents Jesus as he does. Indeed, Blake’s Jesus is inseparable from, and integrated into the burning social and intellectual tensions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is because of a deep-seated mistrust in the Established Church that Blake forms a dissident, antinominalist Jesus as a new moral exemplar in combat with the meek obedience of Christian morality (condemned famously by Nietzsche as the “slave-morality”). Blake’s Jesus is the actual representation of Blake’s antagonistic rejection of contemporary Christianity, and a voice for a radically transformed religious ideology in which human imagination and poetic expression are the true deities.

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<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Ryan, ‘Blake and Religion’. Pg. 165

<sup>35</sup> Michael R. Burch, ‘William Blake’s Jesus Christ’

<sup>36</sup> A.D. Nuttall, *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton and Blake*. Pg. 262

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