

Deism to Damnation: Forgiveness and Spirit in Blake's Ghost of Abel and "To the Deists"

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William Blake's writings are more than individually conceived works--they contribute to an overall theological, mystical, metaphysical system of beliefs and doctrines. In "To the Deists" and The Ghost of Abel, Blake takes up two separate styles: prose -poetry in "To the Deists," and drama in The Ghost of Abel. More importantly, these two works contribute to an overall picture of Blake's condemnation of Deism. This view of Deism can be ascribed to two of Blake's doctrines: Deism's denial of the spiritual imagination, and Deism's role as promoter and invoker of vengeance as justice. The purpose of this paper, then, is to establish the ways in which these two doctrines are exposed in "To the Deists," and The Ghost of Abel.

Before discussing these doctrines in detail, it would be fruitful to first devote some discussion to the definition of Deism, and its historical context. Essentially, Deism is a belief that the Christian God could be proven to exist through rational means via the natural world and 'natural' reason. David Hume portrays the views of the Deists in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* through his character Cleanthes, who says: "The comparison of the universe to a machine of human contrivance is so obvious and natural, and is justified by so many instances of order and design in nature, that it ... must procure universal approbation" (79). Hume himself was not a Deist, and in fact spends much of *Dialogues* arguing against Deism, as noted by Henry Summerfield in A Guide to the Books of William Blake for Innocent and Experienced Readers (Summerfield 283). From Hume's quotation we can see the mood of the period come to light. At this point in history reason was paramount, and science was beginning to unravel some of the mysteries of the universe. Newton had developed his physics, Locke had published his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and scientific studies had become more sophisticated. This period brought about a shift in world-view to that of the Cartesian idea of the machine: the world was seen to be made up of parts to be discovered, and could be understood completely given time and reason.

In accordance with this view, God's role became that of the grand clockmaker, setting the cogs of the world in motion. Also, human nature had become 'natural.' Perception had been explained to the effect that the world was as it appears, and the physical/external world was real and played a crucial role in the formation of the human being. It was this conception of the world that helped give rise to the Deists, who tried to understand God and His will through investigation and explanation of the natural world through reason. Importantly, as Minna Doskow puts it, "Deism posits reason as its exclusive ruling principle and dismisses whatever cannot be arrived at through logic and empirical demonstration. It propounds a particular view of God, man, and the world, ideas of moral virtue, and the bases for religious and political systems" (108). As we shall see, it is this central tenet of reason that Blake attacks, pitting the 'natural' human being against the imaginative human being, the "God of this World" against the Blakean God of imagination and forgiveness.

"To the Deists" is Blake's indictment of Deism's views. It angrily asserts Deism's spiritual corruption, proclaiming the Deist to be "in the State named Rahab" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). Rahab is "a state of chaos unredeemed by imagination" (Vine 167), which one must "put off before he can be the Friend of Man" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). The Deist, through his or her emphasis and dependence on reason, denies imagination altogether, and in doing so enters the State of Rahab. In order to be free of the State of Rahab, one must move to understand God not through worldly Deistic reason, but through the imagination's contemplation and perception of the spiritual, which is closer to God. Salvation through the imagination emerges here, since to "be the Friend of Man" who is free of the State of Rahab is to be as Christ is, a forgiver and lover of humanity. Further, Blake tells us that "Man is born a Spectre or Satan & is altogether an Evil, & requires a New Selfhood continually & must be changed into his direct Contrary" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). In requiring a 'New Selfhood,' Man is like the one in the State of Rahab, who must "put off" his identity by reaching to imagination for his understanding of God. He desires "new 'States' or forms in which he can live" (Vine 167). Though the connection is made obvious by Blake, it seems he is saying that Man can cast off his inborn evil in the same way that the one in the State of Rahab can-- by moving towards the spiritual in the imagination

and out of the domain of a worldly Satan.

Deism (and consequently the State of Rahab) is aligned with Satan also: "Deism, is the Worship of the God of this World [who is Satan] by the means of what you call Natural Religion and Natural Philosophy" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). So, Satan becomes the embodiment of materialist reasoning through his affiliation to the world that the Deist clings to, and consequently is God's enemy (as well as the enemy of the Christian). A dichotomy can be seen to arise out of this discussion: if Satan is made "the God of this World," and consequently the God of Deistic Reason, then it is likely that God, besides being "the Forgiver of Sin" as Blake explicitly notes, could be seen implicitly as God of the Imagination (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). The strength of the imagination as it specifically relates to the spiritual arises in "To the Deists" in the poetic section of the piece, commonly known as "I saw a Monk of Charlamaine." In it Blake presents the Monk as persecuted by the forces of Deism personified by Voltaire, Gibbon, and Rousseau. He appears to Blake in the manner of a vision:

I saw a Monk of Charlemaine
Arise before my sight
I talked with the Grey Monk as we stood
In beams of infernal light (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52, lns. 1-4)

The Monk is made to suffer by the warlike Deists (a factor that will be considered in discussion of the Blakean doctrine of forgiveness, elaborated on later) but is resilient: "Vain/Your Grecian Mocks & Roman Sword/Against this image of his Lord" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52, lns. 21-24). The manifestation of the spiritual imagination in the Grey Monk, who is importantly a representative of God both in his role as a Monk and in his literal crucifixion ("The blood red ran from the Grey Monk's side/His hands & feet were wounded wide" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52, lns. 13-14)), is able to withstand the blows and injuries of the Deists through to their defeat: "Deism's 'vain' attack falls beneath the weapons of imagination, pity, compassion, self-sacrifice, and true intellect" according to Doskow. The final lines of the poem evidence this:

a Tear is an Intellectual thing;
 And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King
 And the bitter groan of a Martyrs woe
 Is an Arrow from the Almighty's Bow!

(Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl52, lns 25-29)

The imagination is pitted against the corrupting influence of Deism, and Blake's doctrine is made plain: Deism is the enemy of the imagination, and is thus the enemy of God.

A similar idea is expressed in different manner in The Ghost of Abel. In this short drama Blake develops a response to Byron's play Cain. Henry Summerfield summarizes Cain's plot:

The protagonist, who is encouraged by Lucifer to be a reasoner, questions the justice of Jehovah to Adam and Eve and blames Him for accepting Abel's sacrifice despite the suffering it causes to animals. Eve curses the murder, Adam spurns him, and only Adah, his wife, is forgiving. (Summerfield 296).

Northrop Frye says that "Blake's conception of Byron's meaning is, apparently, that imaginative vision has something diabolic attached to it, and that the visionary is ... doomed to be an outcast and an exile" (199). As a result, Blake addresses Byron in a preface to the play: "Can a Poet doubt the Visions of Jehovah? Nature has no Outline: / but Imagination has. Nature has no Tune: but Imagination has! / Nature has no Supernatural & dissolves: Imagination is Eternity" (The Ghost of Abel Pl. 1). Part of Blake's agenda is made obvious in this dedication to Byron, and is expressed in the play itself through the characters of Adam and Eve. The play opens with Eve fainted over the body of Abel, and Adam railing against God for His broken promises. Adam refuses to hear Jehovah's call, declaring: "I will not hear thee more thou Spiritual Voice" (The Ghost of Abel Pl. 1, ln. 2). Eve also expresses her disillusionment over the death of her son: "O it is all a vain delusion/ This Death & this Life & this Jehovah!" (GA Pl. 1, ln. 6). Adam and Eve reject their God and his 'Spiritual Voice' as a delusion, but it is later

in the play that their denial of the spiritual imagination comes out most clearly.

Imagination is rejected when Adam says: "It is all a Vain delusion of all the creative Imagination/ Eve come away & let us not believe these vain delusions" (GA Pl. 1, lns. 17-18). Adam does not believe his vision as supplied by the imagination. He regards his regular sense as revealer of the real, and the imagination as a deceiver. Eve declares, addressing Abel's ghost: "Thou Visionary Phantasm thou art not the real Abel" (GA Pl.1, ln.9). Though Eve recognizes the ghost that appears to her and Adam as a tortured version of her son, it ties in well with Adam's materialism. After all, the 'real' Abel lies dead before her, in flesh and blood. The pair suspects the imagination of fooling and misleading them, when in fact it is through the imagination that true understanding and salvation occur. Jehovah, the God of Forgiveness in the play, speaks through the imagination, and tries to save them from the vengeance that the plagued ghost of Abel calls them to. Eve is first to recognize this. Henry Summerfield says: "Eve suspects that the ghost is not Abel himself, and soon, seeing another Abel inwardly, she urges her spouse to join her in believing vision rather than the unilluminated perceptions of the senses" (Summerfield 296). This is apparent when Eve says: "I see [Abel] plainly with my Minds Eye. I see also Abel living: / Tho terribly afflicted as We also are, yet Jehovah sees him/ Alive & not dead: were it not better to believe Vision/ With all our might & strength tho we are fallen & lost" (GA Pl. 1-2, lns 23-24, 1-2). Adam comes to recognize the truth of Eve's words: "Eve, thou hast spoken truly, let us kneel before [Jehovah's] feet" (GA Pl. 2, ln.3). What occurs here is what Jeanne Moskal calls a "paradigmatic choice" in which Adam and Eve choose spiritual vision and imagination over their own materialist inclinations.¹ (141). To see Abel as Jehovah sees him, Eve must use the spiritual vision of her imagination in order to see her son as he really is. The world in its physical sense does not reveal the truth about Abel, but the spiritual realm of Jehovah does.

¹ It should be noted that Moskal's paradigmatic choice does not concern a choice of spiritual vision over materialism. She refers rather to the choice of forgiveness over vengeance, which will be discussed later in this paper. However, I felt the phrase was illuminating and appropriate to this discussion as well, and so cite her accordingly.

So, we can see similar aspects of anti-materialism arising out of both of "To the Deists" and The Ghost of Abel. Blake rejects materialism and Deism's devotion to it; instead, he asserts the spiritual imagination as the means of salvation, and the best means of knowing and understanding God. The other Blakean doctrine that arises out of these two works is Blake's abhorrence of vengeance as justice. Blake connects Deism to vengeance through its alliance with "The God of this World," Satan.

In "To the Deists" Blake strikes out at vengeance as justice: "Listen! Every religion that Preaches Vengeance for Sin is the Religion of the Enemy & Avenger; and not the Forgiver of Sin, and their God is Satan" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). As noted above, Deism is the "Worship of the God of this World" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52), and so by association it becomes responsible for the promotion of vengeance that Blake here condemns. The opposite is "The Religion of Jesus, Forgiveness of Sins," which can presumably be associated with the imagination (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). Blake relates Deism to the "Religion of the Pharisees who murdered Jesus" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). Judaism, too, becomes a vengeful force, which becomes important in consideration of The Ghost of Abel. Wrapped up with this promotion of vengeance is promotion of war: "The Glory of Christianity is, To Conquer by Forgiveness. All the Destruction therefore, in Christian Europe has arisen from Deism, which is Natural Religion" (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52). Summerfield writes "less fairly, [Blake] accuses [Deism] of preaching revenge for sin, though what may be an oblique allusion to Voltaire's long flirtation with the militarist Frederick the Great gives some small backing to the charge it promotes war" (283). Dostow, on the other hand, connects the charges Blake lays against Deism to its worldly nature:

When Blake claims that "All the Destruction therefore, in Christian Europe has arisen from Deism which is Natural Religion" (pl. 52), he means to accuse that vision and the religion that arises from it which limit man and the universe to material functions, eliminate all but material authority, the tyrannical princes of the world who perpetually struggle with each other for material possession and power, and spread enmity and war. (Dostow 35).

So, the materialism of Deism discussed in the previous section becomes the reasoning for Blake's accusation. Deism (through its materialism) emphasizes the world as it is naturally, physically. In confining his or her world-view to the physical, the Deist comes to understand justice in terms of the physical. Justice is one-for-one retribution: gold for gold, life for life, eye for eye, possession for possession. This view of justice is the view of the vengeful; the avenger is satisfied only when the transgressor is punished in the same way that he or she has transgressed. So Deism, through its materialism, encourages this physical view of justice that supports vengeance.

The connection between Deism and vengeance is evidenced further in the poetic section of "To the Deists," where the warlike Deists attack the Grey Monk of Christ. Satan's designation as avenger is made clear in the poem also:

When Satan first the black bow bent
And the Moral Law from the Gospel rent
He forged the Law into a Sword
And spill'd the blood of mercys Lord.

(Jerusalem Ch.3, Pl.52, lns 12-16)

Doskow comments on this passage, saying: "Satan, the archer God of Albion's Jewish and Deistic error (see illus. 35), attempts to destroy imagination by separating moral law from inspiration (1:18)" (Doskow 37). The Moral law is twisted for war and vengeance's purposes when it is torn from the Gospel, which is God's word. The Deists are allied with Satan, and are so guilty of the same action by association. They are listed by name as they "[arise] with War in iron & gold" (Jerusalem, Ch. 3, Pl. 52, ln. 7). The imagery supports Doskow's analysis: the Deists are steeped in the physical nature of the world-- iron and gold are the materials of war and riches that denote this worldliness. Vengeance depends on the physical for retribution, and so the Deist sustains vengeance by his or her emphasis and dependence on it.

Nearly the exact same sentiments about vengeance are expressed in

The Ghost of Abel. Abel is murdered by his brother Cain, and returns to plead for vengeance from his parents, Adam and Eve. However, Abel is dominated by the Elohim, spirits who "live on Sacrifice of Men" and force Abel to "[cry] for Vengeance: Sacrifice on Sacrifice Blood on Blood" (Ghost of Abel Pl. 2, Ins. 14, 9). Leslie Tannenbaum says: "In *The Ghost of Abel*, the voice of Abel's ghost, the voice of the Elohim, and the voice of Satan are unified in a single figure, the Accuser who is at war with Jehovah, the principle of Mercy" (Tannenbaum 214). The work of the Accuser is unsuccessful in tempting Adam and Eve to vengeance: Adam and Eve instead turn towards Jehovah whose merciful nature is proved, as He asks: "He who shall take Cain's life must also Die O Abel/ And who is he? Adam wilt thou, or Eve thou do this" (Ghost of Abel Pl.1, Ins. 15-16). Frye describes Jehovah's argument: "It is 'bad' to commit a murder: granted, but it does not thereby become 'good' to murder the murderer. That is the monotonous pendulum of revenge which goes on ticking all through history" (199). The only way to break free of this pendulum is to forgive, which is the 'principle of mercy' that Adam and Eve adopt when they kneel before Jehovah in the play. Of course, it is not only the principle of mercy that lies in Jehovah to which Adam and Eve submit-- Jehovah is also the principle of the spiritual imagination. So, forgiveness and imagination are inextricably tied together in the figure of Jehovah. In accepting spiritual vision they also accept forgiveness, and vice versa. Opposed is the Accuser, who arrives in the figure of Satan and demands that the Elohim be satiated. Satan appears "in the form of a royal warrior" (Summerfield 296), "Armed in glittering scales with a Crown & a Spear" (GA Pl. 2). The Accuser is the vengeful, warlike principle, and may also be the principle of reason opposed to Jehovah that tempted Cain to "become a reasoner" in Byron's play (Summerfield 296). The Deist, who is not explicitly named, but is implied in Adam's materialism, must abandon the Accuser in order to achieve forgiveness, and thus move toward Jehovah. The parallel between the warlike image of Satan and that of the Deists who appear "in iron & gold" in "To the Deists" is striking (Jerusalem Ch. 3, Pl. 52, ln. 7). The link between "To the Deists" and The Ghost of Abel becomes more explicit as the characters of the Accuser and of the Deist are compared. The Accuser is the Devil, the materialist, the avenger-- all of these characteristics are the qualities of the Deist, who worships "The God of

Men," the Accuser, who is Satan (GA Pl. 2, ln. 15). So, like "To the Deists", The Ghost of Abel puts materialism (and consequently Deism) in opposition to Jehovah's forgiveness of sins, while the spiritual imagination is placed in accordance with Him and his forgiving principle.

It should be obvious from the above discussion that Blake's view of Deism was a resoundingly negative one. His belief in the spiritual imagination and the forgiveness of sins as sacred doctrines becomes evident through his works, "To the Deists" and The Ghost of Abel. Blake sees Deism as opposing these doctrines, and even promoting their contrary. Thus, he rails against Deism, calling its followers devil worshippers and vengeful killers. Though "To the Deists" and The Ghost of Abel are two separate works, they form a cohesive argument against Deism through Blake's visionary imagination. He builds a system of associations and juxtapositions that results in a clear position that argues against the values of the Deist, and Deism itself. Though it is arguable whether Blake is correct in his criticisms of Deism, the overall force of his argument is plain: the Deist, in Blake's view, is an enemy of God, of Christ, and of humankind.

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