

# **Representations of Jesus Christ in William Blake's art and writings**

LT class, November 28, 2021

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# William Blake (11.28.1757- 8.12.1827)

## Blake's task –

“The Nature of my work is Visionary or Imaginative it is an Endeavour to Restore <what the Ancients calld> the **Golden Age** (VLJ, 1808 E 555) [when] “The Primeval State of Man was Wisdom, Art, and Science.”  
(*Jerusalem*, c.1804-20, E 146)

“I rest not from my great task! 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 O saviour** pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love: **Annihilate the Selfhood in me**, be thou all my life! Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages”  
(*Jerusalem*, E 147)

# Blake's System & Method

- “I must Create a **System**, or be enslaved by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: **my business is to Create**” (Jer., E 153)
- “... *melting apparent surfaces away*, and displaying the infinite which was hid. ... If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” (MHH, 1790, E 39, plate 14)
- “**a method of Printing** which combines the Painter and the Poet...it exceeds in elegance all former methods”
- “I also hope the Reader will be with me, wholly One in **Jesus** our Lord, who is **the God of Fire** and **Lord of Love**... The Spirit of Jesus is **continual forgiveness of Sin**: he who waits to be righteous before he enters into the Saviours kingdom, the Divine Body; will never enter there. ...I pretend not to holiness! Yet I pretend to love, to see, to converse with daily, as man with man”...(Jer., E 145)

# Blake's System & Method

- “Even from the depths of Hell **his voice I hear**,/  
Therefore I print; nor vain my types shall be:/  
Heaven, Earth & Hell, henceforth shall live in  
harmony” (Jer. E 145)
- “I dare not pretend to be any other than **the Secretary** the Authors are in Eternity.” (Letter to Butts, 1803)

# Blake and the Gnostic tradition

## ➤ Characteristics of the Gnostic tradition:

### I. *Mutual direct* God-man relationship:

- “God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is.”  
(Blake, *There Is No Natural Religion*, c.1788, E 3)
- “...We live as One Man; ... and that One Man We call **Jesus the Christ**: and **he in us, and we in him**, Live in perfect harmony in Eden the land of life, Giving, receiving, and forgiving each others trespasses.”  
(*Jerusalem*, E 180)
- “God became man so that man could become God”  
(Athanasius of Alexandria, 4 c. AD)
- The Bogomils (10-15 c. AD) – “God is beloved by me and I am beloved of God”

# Blake and the Gnostic tradition

- “**every man may converse with God & be a King & Priest in his own house**” [Commenting against the Jewish ceremonies in “Annotations to *An Apology for the Bible*”, 1797, E 615)]
- “...God does & always converse with honest Men...” (Annotations to *An Apology for the Bible*, E 615)

# Blake, the Jews, and Christ

“To me, who believe the Bible & profess myself a Christian, a defence of the Wickedness of the Israelites in murdering so many thousands under pretence of a command from God is altogether Abominable & Blasphemous. Wherefore did Christ come was it not **to abolish the Jewish Imposture** Was not Christ murdered because he taught that God loved all Men & was their father & forbad all contention for Worldly prosperity in opposition to the Jewish Scriptures which are only an example of the wickedness & deceit of the Jews & were written as an Example of the possibility of Human Beastliness in all its branches. **Christ died as an Unbeliever.**” (Annotations to *An Apology for the Bible*, E 614)

## Blake, the Jews, and Christ

“The **laws of the Jews** were (both ceremonial & real) the basest & **most oppressive of human codes**. & being like all other codes given under pretence of divine command were what Christ pronounced them The Abomination that maketh desolate. i.e. **State Religion which is the Source of all Cruelty**” (Annotations to *An Apology for the Bible*, E 618)



## Blake, the Jews, and Christ

“Now hear how he [Jesus] has given his sanction to **the law of ten commandments**: did he not mock at the sabbath, and so mock the sabbath’s God? Murder thos who were murder’d because of him? Turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? Steal the labor of others to support him? Bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate? Covet when he pray’d for his disciples, and when he bid them shake off the dust of their feet against such as refused to lodge them? I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments. **Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules.**”  
(MHH, E 43, plate 22-23)

# Blake and the Gnostic tradition

## II. Dualism/duality

God is united and one, but His **manifestation** is **dualistic**, occurs through the interaction of two opposite aspects:

- Heaven (spiritual, invisible) & Earth (material, visible)
- Male (active) & Female (passive)
- Good & Evil
- Truth & Error

Blake states: “**Without Contraries is no Progression**” (MHH, E 34, plate 3)

# Dualities/Contraries

- 1) In the Bogomil-Cathar Creation Myth – the relationship between the **two sons of God**:  
**Satana-il** (Lucifer [bringer of light], Satan) – the elder, a creator-demiurge of the material world. Cooperation between God and Satan.  
  
**Jesus** – the younger, a governor of the divine world as per *The Secret Book of the Bogomils*; or the elder son in some Cathar texts

# Dualities/Contraries

2) Blake - “**Opposition is true friendship**” (MHH, E 42, plate 20)



Blake's illustrations to  
Milton's *Paradise Regained*  
- ***The First Temptation***  
(Composed c. 1816-20)

# Dualities/Contraries

3) Belyova church, Samokov town, Western Bulgaria (the land of Bogomils) – fresco, c. 1868



*Christ's Temptation*

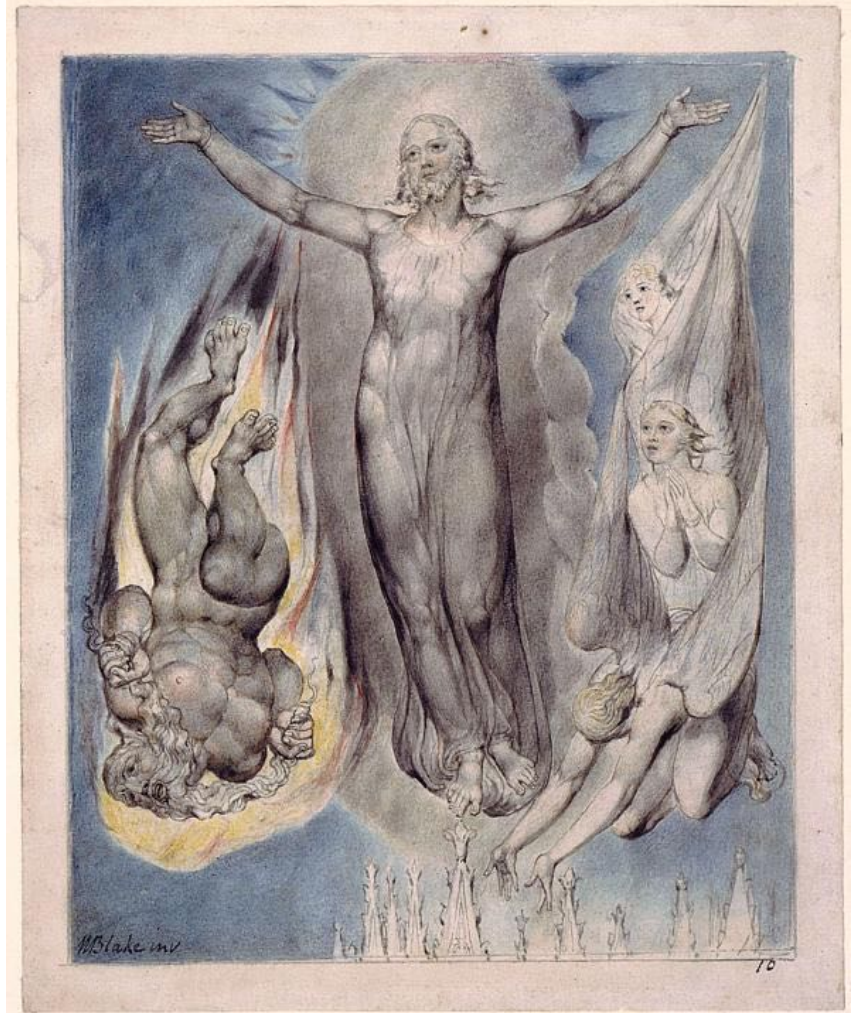


# Dualities/Contraries

## 4) Blake - *The Third Temptation*



Biblical designs, c.1803



Milton's *Paradise Regained*, c.1816

# Dualities/Contraries

5) Blake: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790 (plates 16-17)

“These **two classes of men** are always upon earth [the “Prolific”(creators) & the “Devouring”(consumers)], & they **should be enemies**; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence. Religion is an endeavour to reconcile the two.

Note. Jesus Christ did not wish to unite, but to separate them as in the Parable of sheep and goats! & he says, ‘**I came not to send Peace but a Sword.**’” ... (MHH, E 40, plates 16-17)

# Christ for Bogomils, Cathars & Blake

- Bogomils-Cathars' teachings: mentor & helper in man's spiritual development; an example for people to follow in terms of achieving union with God
- Cathars and Blake equate Christ with God
- A teacher who reveals the truth (by speaking in parables)
- Blake's series of 7 drawings - ***The Good Farmer*** (based on Matthew 13)

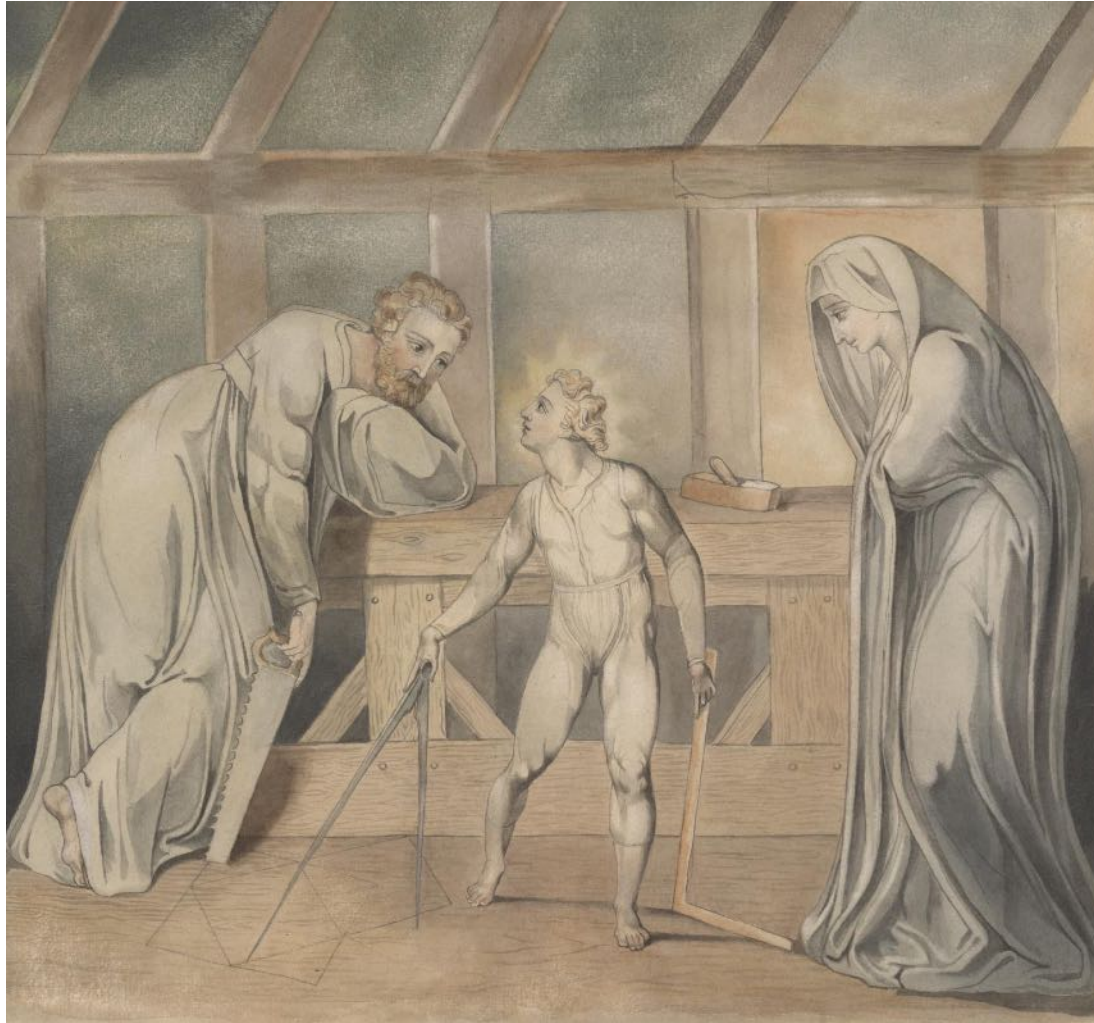


# Christ in Blake's Art: Mentor



*The Good Farmer, c.1780-85*

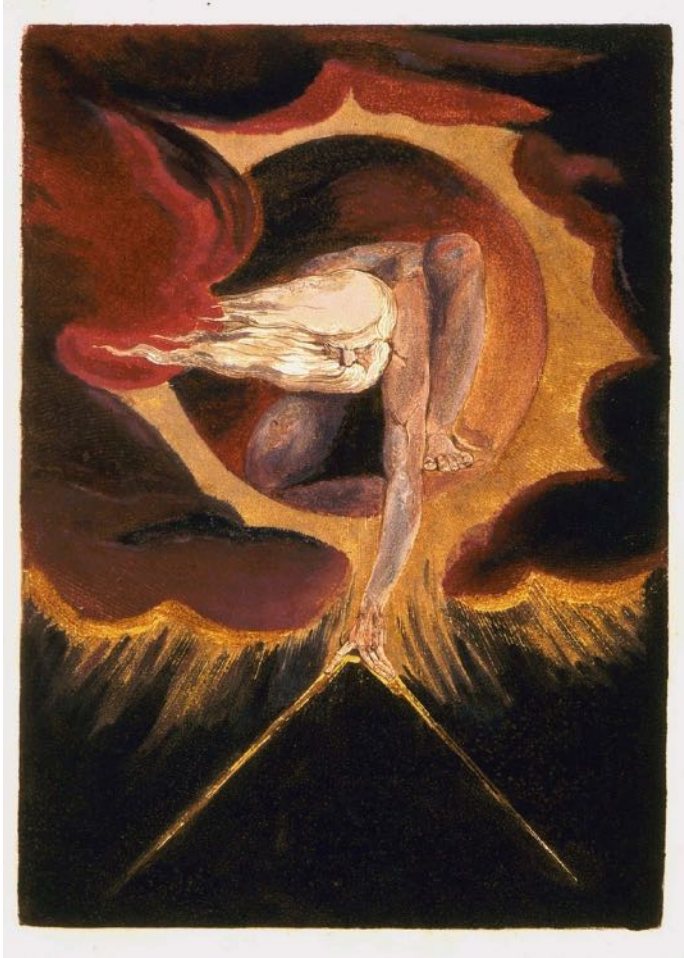
# Christ in Blake's Art: Mentor/Architect



Christ In The Carpenter's Shop: The Humility Of The Saviour, (1803-05),  
Apocryphal scenes of the Infant Jesus



# Christ in Blake's Art: Comparison



The Ancient of Days, *Europe a Prophecy*, 1794



Newton, 1795

# **“The Human Divine” / “The Divine Humanity”**

*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (plates 22-23)

- “The worship of God is:** Honouring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best, those who envy... great men hate God, for there is no other God” [Devil’s statement]
- “...is not God One? & is not he visible in Jesus Christ?”**  
[the Angel asks the Devil]
- “...if Jesus Christ is the greatest man,** you ought to love him in the greatest degree.” [Devil’s reply] (MHH, E 43, plates 22-23)

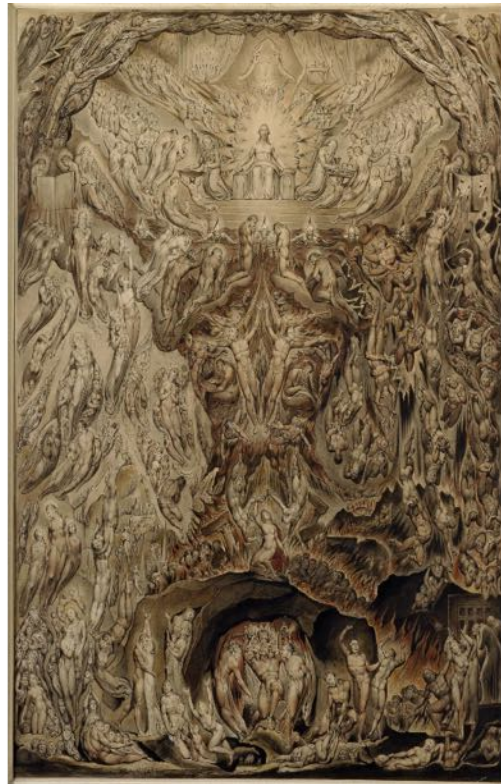
# Christ in Blake's Art: "The Human Divine"



The Infant Jesus Saying His Prayers: "And the grace of God was upon him" (c.1805), Apocryphal scenes of the Infant Jesus

## ***A Vision of the Last Judgment, 1808***

- “...many Infants representing the Eternal Creation flowing from **the Divine Humanity in Jesus** who opens the *Scroll of Judgment* upon his knee before the Living & the Dead” (E 554)
- “... whenever any individual Rejects **Error** & Embraces **Truth** a **Last Judgment** passes upon that Individual” (E 562)





# “The Human Divine”



The Resurrection, c.1805



The Ascension, c.1803-05

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