



“And Was Jerusalem Builded Here?” Agency and Longing in Blake and Biblical Poetry

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At the beginning of the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London, just after Tour de France winner Bradley Wiggins sounded a 22-ton bell to mark the start of the pageantry, a lone child’s voice sang out over the stadium:

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England’s pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

These stanzas constitute the first verse of the beloved British hymn “Jerusalem,” and in its presentation at the Olympics, the song represented both an idyllic pastoralism and English national pride. Children danced around a maypole, adults

The hymn “Jerusalem,” based on the poem by William Blake, is beloved of British people and Anglophiles everywhere. But the vision of this poem, and by extension the hymn, is larger than nationalism, drawing on biblical poetry and a longing for God’s redemption of the world, drawing in all that would work with God to restore its goodness.

played cricket, and even a few animals frolicked on the manufactured green landscape laid out in the center of the stadium. After weaving together snippets of national songs from the United Kingdom's other constituent nations, the performance of "Jerusalem" continued with its second and final verse, before the show went on to present highlights of Great Britain's history and culture:

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Til we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land.¹

"Jerusalem" has provided the soundtrack for many other displays of British patriotism. It was the final, climactic hymn at the wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton on April 29, 2011. The song is regularly sung amid much flag-waving at the Last Night of the Proms, the culmination of a popular annual summer music series at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Shirley Dent has observed that "Jerusalem" has also been deployed more radically as an anthem for the cause of both left-wing and right-wing versions of English nationalism, each side staking out a claim for the identity of England.²

How is it that Jerusalem—the storied capital of the ancient kingdom of Israel and the deeply contested heart of today's Holy Land—has come to be a poetic symbol of the fortunes of Great Britain? To be sure, understanding a piece of music cannot be complete without attention to the tune and arrangement that accompany the lyrics. The tune to "Jerusalem" was composed by Hubert Parry in 1916 and further popularized by Edward Elgar's orchestration, written in 1922. Without such an accessible and dramatic melody, "Jerusalem" would have surely faded from view. At the heart of the hymn, though, are its words: a poem by William Blake, written around 1804, that appeared as part of the preface to Blake's epic work, *Milton*. In this essay I read that poem—titled by the first words of its opening line, "And did those feet"—in light of the development of Jerusalem/Zion traditions in biblical poetry. I propose that reading Blake's poem through the biblical tradition imbues the poem with a sense of longing rather than triumph. Together,

¹ Text and punctuation of the poem follow *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1979), 238–239.

² Shirley Dent, "'Thou Readst White Where I Readst Black': William Blake, the Hymn 'Jerusalem,' and the Far Right," in *Re-envisioning Blake*, ed. Mark Crosby, Troy Patenaude, and Angus Whitehead (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 48–62. For a helpful survey of the use of the hymn across English politics, culture, and sports, see William John Lyons, *Joseph of Arimathea: A Study in Reception History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105–131.

Blake and the Bible’s poets challenge us, their readers, both to imagine and to work for wholeness in a broken and weary world.

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“AND DID THOSE FEET . . .”

William Blake—a mystic prone to visions and dismissed by many of his contemporaries as mad—was a British poet as well as visual artist working in the Romantic era. Many of his paintings and etchings depict biblical scenes, and he was well versed in the particulars of Scripture. In fact, as Christopher Rowland puts it, “Throughout his life the Bible dominated Blake’s imaginative world.”³

Blake’s poem is thick with allusions to the Hebrew Bible, all of which feature moments when particular characters—or even the community as a whole—are called upon to do the Lord’s work: what we might now refer to as “working for the kingdom” or “living a vocation.” The “chariot of fire” refers to 2 Kings 2:11–12, when chariots and horses of fire come between the prophet Elijah and his protégée Elisha, and Elijah ascends into heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha then picks up Elijah’s mantle and uses it to divide the Jordan River, beginning his own prophetic leadership in Elijah’s stead. The idea that the building of Jerusalem might be accomplished with sword in hand recalls the wall-building effort in Nehemiah, wherein, faced with death threats from their enemies, “the burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built” (Neh 4:17–18).⁴ The building of the city wall that would signal Jerusalem’s restoration required the active participation of the whole community. The preceding chapter, Nehemiah 3, underscores this sense of communal participation by listing the gates along the wall and the families who repaired each one.

In the preface to *Milton*, Blake follows the poem with a quotation from the book of Numbers, which is not sung as part of the Parry hymn but is presented as an integral part of Blake’s original work:

Would to God that all the Lord’s people were Prophets. (Num 11:29)

In the Bible, this line ends a story in which Moses complains to God about the burdens of leadership. To relieve some of Moses’s stress, God causes God’s spirit to rest on seventy elders, who begin to prophesy around the tent of meeting. When

³ Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

⁴ All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

two elders prophesy inside the camp instead of out at the tent, Joshua alerts Moses and pleads with him to intervene. Moses responds, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” (Num 11:29). Once again Blake invokes a passage that calls for participation in God’s activity on earth.⁵

Many commentators attribute the central image of the poem’s first two stanzas—that of the holy Lamb of God walking in England—to an obscure tradition branching from the Holy Grail legends, in which Jesus of Nazareth is said to have visited Glastonbury, England, in his youth with Joseph of Arimathea; this is certainly the dominant narrative resulting from any cursory internet search. In this reading the answer to the rhetorical questions in the opening lines—did Jesus’s feet walk on England’s mountains?—is more inclined to be a “yes,” and the hope for the building of a metaphorical Jerusalem is actually a rebuilding: a reaching for an idyllic past. A strident nationalism, while by no means inevitable, is well within the reach of this reading, searching for the imagined purity of the “good old days.”

Other commentators, however, are skeptical that Blake would have known the legend of Jesus’s visit to England, attributing the poem’s image to a more general metaphor that is traceable in Blake’s other work, particularly in his epic poem *Jerusalem*, written after *Milton*.⁶ This reading leans toward the idea that the dream of divine holiness in England has never yet been realized; it remains in front of the “I” who voices the poem, as well as in front of its reader, as something for which to strive. The presence of those “dark Satanic Mills”—probably representing the work of the Industrial Revolution—further inhibits that possibility and compels the participation of the reader in the work.

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Even after accounting for its other biblical references, the symbolism of Jerusalem in the poem remains multivalent. Is Jerusalem simply a utopia: maypoles and games of cricket and lambs in green pastures? Is Jerusalem an anti-industrial, agrarian lifestyle, where towering mills have given way to fertile fields? Or does the poem’s Jerusalem invite other possibilities? Part of what makes poetry so compelling and full of promise—and so easily malleable to multiple, even opposing

⁵ Cf. Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 120, where he argues that the poem “summons people to be prophets, not expecting thereby to predict the future but rather to engage in mental struggle to discern the inadequacies of the present and conceive the way to a more hopeful future.”

⁶ See extended discussion of this debate in Lyons, *Joseph of Arimathea*, 105–131. Lyons points out that the association of the hymn with the legend of Jesus in England (rather than with related stories of Joseph of Arimathea in England, or with a broader metaphorical tone) has fueled the hymn’s nationalistic usages.

interests, as Dent's work shows—is its open-endedness, its ability to resound past its immediate historical context and to speak compellingly to a new era, one that the original poet could scarcely have imagined. If we allow the traditions surrounding Jerusalem in biblical poetry to resound through our reading of Blake's poem, where does our reading lead?

JERUSALEM IN BIBLICAL POETRY

Jerusalem carries significant symbolic weight within the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, beyond the city's historical representation in its prose. King David made Jerusalem his capital after ruling at the more southerly city of Hebron for seven and a half years. The move to Jerusalem was a strategic one, placing David's home base closer to the more northern holdings he took from Saul. According to 2 Samuel 5, David conquered "the stronghold of Zion" from the Jebusites, renamed it the "city of David," and ruled there thirty-three years (2 Sam 5:1–12). Thus, poetic invocations of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible already have a natural resonance with the glory days of David, God's chosen king, and the growing kingdom he oversaw.

Jerusalem takes on even greater significance in biblical poetry with the emergence of the Zion tradition. Particularly prominent in the Psalms and Isaiah, the Zion tradition represents a theological orientation toward Israelite kingship in which Yahweh, Israel's victorious sovereign, has chosen Zion as the location of the temple and the seat of divine rule, and the Israelite king—David and his descendants—as Yahweh's human representative. As Jon Levenson explains, "Zion as a symbol of the people of Israel's national honor derives from the conception of the mountain as the place in which the human king, who is the viceroy of the divine king, sits enthroned, effortlessly subduing rebellious vassals, just as his divine suzerain and adoptive father subdues the kingdoms that assault his sacred mountain (e.g., Psalms 2; 110)."⁷ This thematic center is developed in multiple directions; for example, it can testify to the raw power of God, as in Psalm 76, or reflect the longings of a pilgrim journeying to the temple, as in Psalm 84. Zion is at once the particular mountain of God's rule and synonymous with Jerusalem as a whole, and on occasion—particularly in its Second Temple manifestations—also refers to the people of Israel as a whole.⁸

When the united kingdom of Israel was divided into two in 922 BCE during the rule of Solomon's son Rehoboam, Jerusalem remained the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, while Samaria became the capital of Israel, the northern kingdom. Two hundred years later, Assyria invaded Samaria and Israel fell, but Judah survived for more than another century. Then, in 586 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and sent the city's elites into exile.

⁷ Jon Levenson, "Zion Traditions," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1098–1102.

⁸ Levenson, "Zion Traditions," 1098–1099. See, for example, Isaiah 62:1, where "Zion" and "Jerusalem" are set in poetic parallelism.

This landmark moment in the history of ancient Israel launched many of its poets into diaspora. Zion's triumphs receded, giving way to a profound longing for its restoration. The book of Lamentations personifies Jerusalem as "daughter Zion," chronicling the suffering of its people and wondering whether God has rejected them altogether (Lam 5:22). Psalm 137, which voices the despair of musicians and poets who have been exiled to Babylon, also witnesses to the fall of Jerusalem and its grandeur:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" (Ps 137:1–3)

The psalm not only laments the physical displacement of the Judean captives from their homeland, but also draws attention to the collapse of Zion's esteem. "Zion" is indeed a synonym for Jerusalem here, but it also represents a triumphant past that has disintegrated into a bleak future. When the Babylonian captors request the "songs of Zion," they mock the poetic Zion tradition that gloried in Yahweh's favor toward the people of Israel and their king.

The psalmist continues:

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Ps 137:4–6)

In a time of unparalleled trauma, the psalmist is willing to call curses upon himself rather than allow the memory of his homeland to fade. Jerusalem becomes a focal point for both grief and remembrance.

When Cyrus the Great of Persia defeated Babylon in 539 BCE, he allowed Jews who had been exiled to return to Judah and rebuild the temple there. The longing for the restoration of Jerusalem, like that voiced in Psalm 137, was given a significant jolt of hope. The Zion traditions in Isaiah 40–66, the post-exilic portions of the book, offer words of promise for the restoration of Israel. In one particularly striking passage, the prophets are called to serve as sentinels who will "take no rest, and give [Yahweh] no rest," until the redemption of Zion is complete.

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have posted sentinels;
all day and all night
they shall never be silent.
You who remind the Lord,
take no rest,
and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it renowned throughout the earth. (Isa 62:6–7)

As in pre-exilic manifestations of the Zion tradition, God is the agent of Jerusalem’s victory. In a compelling twist, however, this prophetic articulation of the tradition demands the people’s participation in that victory: keeping God awake, refusing to allow God to relent from God’s promises. One can almost imagine the sentinel asking the prophet, “Bring me my Bow of burning Gold” to set in the clouds, just as God set God’s own bow in the clouds as a reminder of the covenant with all flesh after the flood (Gen 9:8–17).

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This poetic phenomenon of reminding God of God’s own power and past work is also characteristic of many lament psalms, even those outside of what scholars delineate as the “Zion tradition.” Psalm 74, for example, is a lament that mourns the destruction of the temple, though it nonetheless invokes some elements of Zion theology. The psalmist opens by raising the possibility that God has “cast us off forever,” and begs God to “remember Mount Zion, where you came to dwell” (Ps 74:1–2). After detailing the Babylonian assault on the temple and asking why God does not intervene, the psalmist invokes the kingship of God and reminds God of God’s own cosmic power:

Yet God my King is from old,
working salvation in the earth.
You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. (Ps 74:11–14)

The poet’s remembrances of God’s work continue through the rest of the psalm, along with passionate exhortations for Yahweh to stand up, act, and be known in

the world. In this way the poet's prayer, like the activity of Isaiah's prophetic sentinels, is a participation in God's redeeming work, calling God to action.

Isaiah 65:17–25 offers another invocation of the Zion tradition, this time with eschatological overtones. God is "about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isa 65:17). In that new landscape, Yahweh will "create Jerusalem as a joy" (v. 18), where "they shall not hurt or destroy on all [the Lord's] holy mountain" (v. 25). The vision is one of profound wholeness: lives are long, work is fruitful, and even the animals of the field are at peace with each other. This is not a "utopia," in the sense of a glib state of perfection, but rather a new creation, born of deep loss and persistent hope, and imagined with daring by the poet.

The Zion tradition is complex and varied. Scholars debate which passages deserve placement within the category, how the tradition and its texts might be dated, and how it intersects with other related themes such as the theology of the temple and the Davidic covenant. Many biblical notions of the flourishing of Jerusalem can be found outside the traditional Zion texts as well, such as Ezekiel's visions of restoration in Ezekiel 40–48, or the New Jerusalem as imagined in the New Testament book of Revelation. Nevertheless, at the heart of the Zion tradition within biblical poetry is a hope for God's triumphant power to reign in Jerusalem—a hope tempered but not extinguished by the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Especially in its enduring post-exilic forms, the poetry of Zion testifies to the possibilities of a new and different future brought about by the power of God and, as necessary, the participation of God's people in that work.

CONCLUSION

Blake was a profoundly enigmatic thinker, and there are many different ways to understand what is perhaps his most well-known poem, "And did those feet. . . ." In this essay I have attempted to allow both Blake's poem and biblical poetry to echo through one another, listening for what interpretations they amplify in each other. The result is that in both Blake's work and the biblical tradition, the comprehension of the brokenness of the world and a longing for it to be made whole come to the fore. The poems issue a challenge to their readers to participate in the formation of that wholeness. The questions in Blake's opening stanzas testify not simply to a nostalgic query about the past, but rather to a sense of longing for a new and better future.

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Notably, God's own power and agency are not specifically named in Blake's poem, and in this way "And did those feet" is significantly different than the Zion poems. Blake instead offers a passionate plea for human agency in the building of that metaphorical Jerusalem. Rowland aptly summarizes Blake's advocacy for a common purpose in this way: "[Prophecy] is the vocation of all people. The vision of the New Jerusalem is one that is open to all and the task of building belongs to all."⁹ Yet allowing Blake to echo through the biblical poetry also draws attention to the ways that the biblical tradition calls for human participation in the restorative work of God. This participation is particularly important in the prophetic role: prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel draw the people's attention to God, just as Elijah and Moses did. Especially in a post-exilic world, when the possibility has been raised that God has forgotten God's people altogether, poets also draw *God's* attention to God's own promises, forging together divine agency and human work. ⊕

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⁹ Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 121.