

Whose Feet?

By Robert N. Essick

ROBERT N. ESSICK has been collecting and writing about Blake for over fifty years.

- 1 JASON Whittaker's *Jerusalem: Blake, Parry, and the Fight for Englishness* is an important contribution to our understanding of Blake's afterlife in the arts. In his first chapter, titled "And Did Those Feet?," Whittaker considers the text of the lyric now known as "Jerusalem," although Blake never gave it that title. As part of his discussion of the opening two lines of the poem—"And did those feet in ancient time. / Walk upon Englands mountains green:"—he finds that there are no written sources prior to Blake's composition of the lyric to support the contention that the "feet" belong to Jesus. He does find ample textual precedent, however, for the belief that Jesus's disciple Joseph of Arimathea visited Britain (36-39). Further, the inscription that Blake engraved c. 1820-25 on the second state of his separate plate, "JOSEPH / of Arimathea / among The Rocks of Albion," clearly indicates knowledge of this legend. Whittaker concludes:

Turning to the stanzas themselves, as noted above the opening lines are usually interpreted as a reference to Christ in England, but, as we have already seen, it is improbable—if not impossible—that Blake knew of that legend, as it was a later invention. Instead, the feet referred to are those of Joseph of Arimathea (45).

I believe that this interpretation is wrong and that the usual reading of the opening lines is correct.

- 2 Let us turn to Blake's relief-etched text of the lyric in the preface, present in two of the four known copies of *Milton a Poem* (illus. 1). There is only one title to this preface. There is no separate title for the poem, nor even a horizontal rule between the prose and the lyric of the sort that separates the final three lines on the plate from those that precede them. Thus, I believe it is appropriate to consider the preface, composed of an opening prose statement and followed by a poem, as a united textual entity under a single title.
- 3 The third word in the poem's first line, "those," is usually a pronoun. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that

"those" can also be a demonstrative adjective, but Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, from the first edition of 1755 through the ninth of 1806, labels the word solely as a pronoun. Pronouns need antecedents; where might we find one for "those feet"? The concluding three words of the final sentence in the prose section of the preface—indeed, the three words immediately preceding the poem—offer a proximate and grammatically correct answer: "Jesus our Lord."

- 4 Where might we find confirmation that Blake knew of the legend that Jesus visited Britain? Once again, we have not far to seek. The third and fourth lines of the lyric read "And was the holy Lamb of God, / On Englands pleasant pastures seen!" "Lamb of God" could not possibly be a reference to Joseph of Arimathea, for the lamb is one of the more ancient and most frequently invoked metaphors for Christ in Christian art and literature, beginning with John the Baptist calling Jesus "the Lamb of God" in John 1.29. In the first quatrain, Blake is asking the same question twice, using different images (feet, lamb) for two consecutive references to the same figure.
- 5 Whittaker is probably correct in claiming that there are no *written* precedents for Blake's reference to Christ's visit to Britain; the editors of the Blake Trust volume devoted to *Milton a Poem* came to the same conclusion (214). This does not, however, preclude the possibility that the legend was part of *oral* tradition, an adjunct to the Joseph of Arimathea story circulating amongst dissenting Protestant groups in Blake's time. Failing that origin, we may have to credit Blake with inventing the notion that the feet of the "holy Lamb" walked upon "Englands green & pleasant Land."

Works Cited

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PREFACE.

The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid; of Plato & Cicero. which all Men ought to condemn; are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible. but when the New Age is at leisure to pronounce; all will be set right; & those Grand Works of the more ancient & consciously & professedly Inspired Men. will hold their proper rank. & the Daughters of Memory shall become the Daughters of Inspiration. Shakspeare & Milton were both curbed by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword. Rouse up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Fickleness. For we have Fickleness in the Camp, the Court, & the University; who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible Works, or the expensive advertising boasts that they make of such works; believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying. We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations. these Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever; or Jesus our Lord.

And did those Feet in ancient time.
Walk upon Englands mountains green;
And was the Holy Lamb of God.
On Englands pleasant pastures seen!

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

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;
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land

Would to God that all the Lords people
were Prophets Numbers XI. ch 26.

1. William Blake, *Milton a Poem* copy B (composed c. 1804–11, printed c. 1811), plate 2, "PREFACE." Relief etching, 16.0 x 11.2 cm., printed in black ink and hand tinted with watercolor washes. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, call number 54041. Image courtesy of The William Blake Archive.