



The Blind Tiriël Departing from Har and Heva (c. 1789). 18.2 x 27.0 cm. Collection of Robert N. Essick. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

MINUTE PARTICULAR

Construing “Har”: Blake’s Polyglot Roots

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1 **O**F those commentators who try to explain the name of the senescent patriarch Har in Blake’s early (un-

published) illustrated poem *Tiriël* (late 1780s), most offer that “har” is the Hebrew word for “mountain,” as Blake could have learned from any number of etymological discussions of such familiar biblical names as “Ararat” or “Armageddon.”¹ Some scholars note that Har is also the name of an ambiguously identified frame character in Snorri Sturluson’s prose *Edda*, which Blake knew through Paul Henri Mallet’s *Northern Antiquities*, but even these emphasize “mountain” in construing the name, perhaps because there does not seem to be much connection between Blake’s character and his Scandinavian namesake.² In *Tiriël* Har presides feebly (an aged Adam with his equally feeble con-

1. See Harold Bloom, E 946, or G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake’s Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 2: 904, or, more recently, Sheila A. Spector, “Wonders Divine”: *The Development of Blake’s Kabbalistic Myth* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001) 49-53.

2. For example, G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake: Tiriël* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 3-4.

sort Heva) over a paradise that resembles a pickled Garden of Eden, and his territory is bordered by the “mountains of Har” (E 284), but he is much more closely associated with the garden than the mountains. Indeed, Harold Bloom (E 946) has noted that it is ironic that although Har’s name seems to mean “mountain,” it is regularly linked with valleys in the phrase “the vales of Har,” which occurs once in *Tiriel* and four more times in *The Book of Thel* (1789). In the latter poem, which Blake did publish, there is no indication at all of who or what Har might be, but because the heroine is repeatedly described by epithets like “mistress” or “beauty” or “queen” “of the vales of Har,” the name seems potentially important. The character Har (linked again with Heva) also comes up in *The Song of Los* (1795; E 67-70) as the name of a being something like the character in *Tiriel*, and is mentioned in *The Four Zoas* (c. 1796–1807; E 380).

- 2 If Blake ever expected readers of any of his works to associate the name Har with “mountain,” he did little or nothing to confirm or exploit that connection. The character in *Tiriel* doesn’t dwell in the mountains (even if his garden realm is isolated by them) and doesn’t talk about them, and he isn’t notably mountainous himself. In *The Book of Thel* Har is just a name associated with a place, “the vales of Har,” perhaps comparable to “dales of Arcady,” in which case Har is not necessarily a sentient being. We don’t get much even if we push hard on the stray phrases delineating the geography inhabited by Thel and her sheep-herding sisters: Thel, “the youngest” (E 3), leaves the others and mopes “Down by the river of Adona,” which indirectly suggests that the elders are happily battenning their flocks on the high lawns of a mountain while she is down in the vales, sheeplessly wondering what to do with her life. That might mean that her older, higher sisters have learned something that she doesn’t know yet, and thus that there is something high up that Thel is missing, but it isn’t clear what distinguishes the valleys and mountains of Har from those of other regions. *The Song of Los* is similarly tantalizing: many of the prophetic figures in the poem are explicitly assigned a lofty mountain perch (Noah, Mount Ararat; Moses, Mount Sinai; Orc, Mount Atlas; Rousseau and Voltaire, the Alps), but Har has none: he is simply said to flee from somewhere to somewhere else without any mention of altitude.
- 3 We should thus consider what else, if anything, Blake might have hoped careful readers of *Tiriel* and later *Thel* and *The Song of Los* would associate with the name Har. In the *Edda* as presented by Mallet, a king goes in disguise to Asgard, the seat of newly arrived “Asiatic” deities/rulers whose popular appeal, the king suspects, threatens his kingdom. The disguised king catechizes the one called Har, who sits on the lowest of three thrones, although he is the most exalted of three king-like beings; collectively these may or may not be a manifestation of Odin, who, according to Mallet’s

notes, is a magician/king, not really a god.³ The *Edda* suggests that Har’s name means “the lofty one” (3), which might seem to line up with reading “har” as “mountain,” but in context his loftiness is a matter of prestige, intellect, and/or divine pretension rather than altitude, much less mountainousness. Snorri’s wily King Har is definitely not senile, and not at all like simple-hearted unpretentious Adam, innocent or fallen, even if we imagine him grown old and querulous: if Blake remembered the god/king Har when he named the character in *Tiriel*, he must have forgotten what Har was like in the *Edda*.

- 4 It is certainly possible that in imagining Har Blake dredged up an exotic name from somewhere in his consciousness and intended no literary or linguistic allusion at all. But the name might have meant something other than “mountain” to him, and he could have supposed that more perspicacious readers could figure it out as well. Har’s most notable characteristics in *Tiriel* are his ancientness and fadedness, so Blake might have sought a name that could evoke these qualities. “Hoar” and “hoary,” words that come up often in Blake’s descriptions of ancient persons, are more obviously denotative than his meaningful names tend to be, but if he consulted an etymological dictionary⁴ in search of alternative forms of “hoar,” he would have been led immediately to the Anglo-Saxon word “har,” which means gray, old and gray, and pale. In every image of Har in the illustrations to *Tiriel* the character is white haired, white skinned, and white clad. Thel’s clothing is variously colored and her complexion varies, but she is also associated with “pale-ness” (E 3).
- 5 Speculative etymology contributes little to elucidating the word beyond confirming what is established in the pictures and texts associated with it. But even this largely negative result can help us by eliminating a source of obfuscation, one of many stubborn canards in the literature on *The Book of Thel*. Because *Tiriel* and *Thel* represent successive early stages in the development of Blake’s composite art, it may be that by the time he moved from *Tiriel*, which appears to have been conceived as a letterpress text conventionally illustrated with engravings, to *Thel*, a picto-textual illuminated book, he thought of “Har” as just one of many defamiliarized English words in his alternative mythos, rather than a symbolic name that could be traced through conventional references.

3. Paul Henri Mallet, *Northern Antiquities*, 2 vols. (London, 1770) 2: 1-12.

4. Such as John Ash, *The New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1775) 1: s.v. “Hoar.”