

## Blake's Hervey, Thomas Butts, and Methodism

BY DENNIS M. READ

DENNIS M. READ ([read@denison.edu](mailto:read@denison.edu)) is associate professor emeritus at Denison University. His recent publications include "A Good Man for Structure: Autobiographical Dimensions in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Pat Hobby Stories" (*F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, 2020) and "Vladimir Nabokov's Enchanted Summer: Ashland, Oregon, 1953" (*Nabokov Online Journal*, 2023). He lives in Denver, Colorado.

1 WILLIAM Blake's painting *Epitome of James Hervey's "Meditations among the Tombs"* (illus. 1) is not an illustration of the work. In it he veers markedly from the dour tone and sensational emotions used by Hervey during his tour of graves, replacing the emphasis on the uncertainty of life and fear of death with a respectful treatment of Hervey himself. Blake doesn't take liberties with the text so much as he finds a prevailing message of love and forgiveness in Hervey's words. There is agreement in the life-beyond-life visions of Hervey and Blake, but Blake's spin is more mystical and ethereal.<sup>1</sup>

2 This deviation from literal illustration is in accord with Blake's fundamental faith. It also suggests an affiliation of belief with his patron Thomas Butts. Whether Butts commissioned the painting or Blake painted it independently and then offered it to Butts, it is reasonable to assume that Hervey's *Meditations* was a work that Butts esteemed. It was also a work that Blake recast with special care—with an intricate design, numerous figures, and attention to minute particulars. A detailed study of the painting and the work that it illustrates provides a strong suggestion of a common religious belief between Blake and Butts, one that shows their bond of friendship and shared values, specifically allied with Hervey's Methodism, following George White-

1. My approach is guided by S. Foster Damon's extensive entry on Hervey in his *Blake Dictionary* (183-85).

Portions of this essay draw on my article "Blake's 'Tender Stranger': *Thel* and Hervey's *Meditations*," *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 160-67.

field's belief in sanctification rather than John Wesley's doctrine of perfectionism.

3 Blake painted *Epitome* sometime between 1800 and 1820.<sup>2</sup> Executed in watercolor and pen, it is similar in size—43.1 x 29.2 cm.—to the many drawings and paintings that Blake did for Butts.<sup>3</sup> It features numerous figures swirling along its left and right margins and, in its center, walking up and down a spiral staircase. Most of the figures are identified in gold-leaf writing. Jesus is at the center of the painting, with Moses next to him and God above him. Its intricate detail seems to cry out for a larger canvas.<sup>4</sup>

4 Little has been definitively determined about the painting beyond these several particulars. "WBLAKE inv" is written in its lower left-hand corner, establishing its artist. The Foster & Son sale of 29 June 1853, which includes lot 135, "One from Hervey's Meditations," was from the collection of Butts's son, thus establishing the provenance. The title given by William Michael Rossetti in Alexander Gilchrist's biography of Blake is "Hervey's Meditations—a practical epitome" (1880 ed., no. 229). Both descriptions are well after the fact, and the Foster's title teasingly suggests that there could have been more than one Blake rendering of Hervey's *Meditations*.

### I

5 Thomas Butts was Blake's most devoted patron. Over more than twenty years, beginning toward the end of the eighteenth century, Butts purchased from Blake over 200 works, acting as his financial mainstay during his dark first decade of the nineteenth century. In all, he paid Blake more than 400 pounds during that decade.<sup>5</sup>

6 Butts was as much a friend as he was a partisan of Blake's art. Blake's letters to Butts during the first years of the nineteenth century, when Blake and his wife lived in Felpham, are filled with warmth and affection, and after the Blakes

2. Because no receipt from Butts is dated after 1810, a later date of composition is open to question. Blake may have inscribed the year along the lower border, below his name, but the work was unfortunately trimmed sometime in the nineteenth century.

3. Bentley states that Blake's fifty-odd fresco paintings from the Bible created for Butts typically measure 15 x 10 1/2 in. (38.1 x 26.7 cm.) (*Stranger from Paradise* 192).

4. David Bindman asserts that *Epitome* and *An Allegory of the Spiritual Condition of Man* are both illustrations of theological texts: "The text [of *Spiritual Condition*] is unrecorded, but may also be an eighteenth-century devotional work" (170). Blake painted *Spiritual Condition* for Butts and populated it with a number of figures in swirling columns, but on a much larger scale, 151.5 x 121.3 cm.

5. Bentley, *Blake Records* 222.



1. Blake, *Epitome of James Hervey's "Meditations among the Tombs."* 43.1 × 29.2 cm. Tate, presented by George Thomas Saul, 1878. N02231. Photo: Tate.

See the *Blake Archive*, <<https://blakearchive.org/preview/but770?descId=but770.1.1.wc.01>>, for the ability to view the design in great detail.

returned to London they exchanged numerous visits with Butts and his wife, Betsy, for at least several years.

- 7 Hervey was born in 1714 and attended Lincoln College, Oxford, where, as a member of what came to be called the Holy Club, he was strongly influenced by the Oxford Methodists. One of his teachers was John Wesley. Later, however, his theological thinking was more aligned with George Whitefield, a fellow student at Oxford who became the other major figure in Methodism. Hervey remained an Anglican and served as curate of several small churches.<sup>6</sup> Never in robust health, he died in 1758, aged forty-four.
- 8 *Meditations among the Tombs* was published in 1746 and quickly vied in popularity with Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–45) and Blair's *Grave* (1743), the two works, in fact, to which it is most indebted.<sup>7</sup> All three share the same elegiac tone, melancholy perspective, and macabre setting, and all three drew from a common storehouse of graveyard imagery. In 1748 Hervey published *Meditations and Contemplations*, comprising an expanded version of his *Meditations among the Tombs* and three more essays, *Reflections on a Flower-Garden*, *Contemplations on the Night*, and *Contemplations on the Starry Heavens*. In the third edition of *Meditations and Contemplations* (1748), he added *A Winter-Piece* and *A Descant on Creation*.
- 9 In 1755 he published *Theron and Aspasio*, consisting of seventeen dialogues between a rationalist (Theron) and an enthusiast (Aspasio) on central questions of Christian theology. The work was immensely popular and generated a great deal of published discussion. Foremost was Wesley's criticism in his pamphlet *A Preservative against Unsettled*

6. Mary Lynn Johnson points out that "in the 1740s, well before the Methodists broke from the Church of England in 1795, British members of Methodist societies retained membership in the established church" (139). Whitefield Methodists, however, retained membership in the Church of England even after 1795.

7. John W. Draper (*The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* [1929; New York: Octagon, 1967] 290) states that many "congratulatory poems" appeared in *Gentleman's Magazine* following its initial publication, and that a prose imitation "By a Lady" appeared in *Gentleman's Magazine* 20 (1750): 409. In "Nature and Science in the Works of James Hervey," *University of Texas Studies in English* 28 (1949): 124–38, Alan D. McKillop discusses how Hervey, unlike Young and Blair, uses such instruments as the telescope and microscope to show the imprint of God on all forms of life. Hervey's *Meditations*, therefore, in John Foster's words, "have contributed more, it is probable, than any other book, to the valuable object of prompting and guiding serious minds, of not the superior rank in point of taste, to draw materials of devotional thought from the scenery of nature" (*Fosteriana*, ed. H. G. Bohn [London, 1877] 169; quoted by McKillop 138). For a discussion of the backgrounds and contexts of Hervey's works, see Flora McLaughlin Kearney, *James Hervey and Eighteenth-Century Taste* (Muncie, IN: Ball State University, 1969).

*Notions in Religion* (1758) and in his published letter *A Sufficient Answer, to Letters to the Author of "Theron and Aspasio"* (1757). Hervey had differed from Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfectionism, in which an individual is purified through divine deliverance to arrive at a perfect spiritual state. This deliverance, Wesley asserted, can occur by degrees or instantaneously, resulting in "perfect love." In this state, a Christian is exalted:

Love has purified his heart from envy, malice, wrath, and every unkind temper. It has cleansed him from pride, whereof "only cometh contention," and he hath now "put on bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering." And indeed all possible ground for contention, on his part, is cut off. For none can take from him what he desires, seeing he "loves not the world, nor any of the things of the world," but "all his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name." (*A Plain Account* 372)

- 10 Hervey's view, however, was aligned with Whitefield's doctrine of sanctification, in which an individual is always less than spiritually pure and always susceptible of backsliding. Even the most faithful cannot conduct life without sin, and in *Theron and Aspasio* Hervey recognizes this impossibility. Following Whitefield's preachings, he acknowledges that everyone falls short of such perfection and declares that Christian belief consequently rests on unconditional faith. Aspasio states, "That a man is not justified by works, is a position most clearly demonstrated, and a doctrine most zealously inculcated, by St Paul. That faith is a work exerted by the human mind, is equally certain" (1: 310–11). "We are all naturally evil," he tells Theron. "Such we should for ever continue, did not a supernatural power intervene; making some to differ, both from their original selves, and from the generality of their neighbours" (1: 449). He cautions:

"If you expect salvation upon such legal terms [as Wesley's perfectionism], know, that your obedience must be nothing less, than a perfect conformity to the Divine law. Perform all its precepts, in their utmost extent, and with an unremitted perseverance, then."—But alas! such perfection is too high for fallen creatures; they cannot attain unto it. Necessarily, therefore, must they drop all pretensions, and have recourse to some other method of justification. (1: 199)

Hervey died before completing a defense of *Theron and Aspasio*, but a rebuttal was assembled and published posthumously as *Eleven Letters from the Late Rev. Mr. Hervey, to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley* (1765).<sup>8</sup>

8. In subsequent editions, it was titled *Aspasio Vindicated, and the Scripture Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness Defended, against the Objections and Animadversions of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley*. For a particu-

11 While there are numerous engraved illustrations in the many editions of *Meditations and Contemplations*, Blake's painting seems to be unique; no other artist undertook a version of Hervey's work. Blake did not consider making an engraving of his *Epitome*, as he did with his painting of the Canterbury pilgrims; *Epitome* was a single work for a devoted patron. None of Hervey's works has been found among the books that Blake owned, but Michael Phillips notes that the figure on plate b10 of *There is No Natural Religion* (c. 1788) is similar to that on the frontispiece to volume 2 of *Meditations and Contemplations* (1748).<sup>9</sup>

## II

12 Blake seems to have been well acquainted with Hervey's works, and, more importantly, seems to have regarded them favorably. His first explicit mention of them occurs in *An Island in the Moon* (c. 1784):

Steelyard the Lawgiver, sitting at his table taking extracts from Herveys Meditations among the tombs & Youngs Night thoughts. ...

Obtuse Angle enterd the Room. What news M<sup>r</sup> Steelyard—I am reading Theron & Aspasio, said he. Obtuse Angle took up the books one by one I dont find it here said he. Oh no said the other it was the meditations. Obtuse Angle took up the book & read till the other was quite tir'd out (E 456)

Blake's satirical scene is quite at odds with the tedium of Hervey's works. The rollicking antics delightfully deflate the sententiousness of both Hervey and Steelyard.

13 While Hervey's lugubrious writing style may well tire out any reader, his theological stance meets with Blake's approval. Blake's other explicit mention of Hervey occurs in *Jerusalem*, in which he joins Hervey with Whitefield to guard the gate of that holy city that opens to Beulah (E 227). His spiritual kinship with Hervey is allied with his appreciation of Whitefield. In his prose introduction to chapter 3 of *Jerusalem*, "To the Deists," he defends Whitefield: "Foote in calling Whitefield, Hypocrite: was himself one: for Whitefield pretended not to be holier than others: but confessed his Sins before all the World" (E 201).<sup>10</sup>

lar aspect of the differences between Hervey and Wesley, see Jonathan Yeager, "John Wesley's Conflict with James Hervey and Its Effects in Scotland," *Journal of Religious History* 34.4 (2010): 398-413.

9. See G. E. Bentley, Jr., ed., *William Blake's Writings*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 1: 13n, referring to the 1971 Blake Trust/Trianon Press facsimile of *There is No Natural Religion*. Blake owned *Hymns for the National Fast*, Feb. 8, 1782 by John and Charles Wesley (*Blake Books* #750).

10. The reference is to Samuel Foote's play *The Minor* (1760), a comedy satirizing Whitefield as a theatrical performer impersonating a religious leader, thus a hypocrite. Foote says of Methodist preachers in the

14 Possible allusions to Hervey's works (or borrowings from them) in "The Tyger," *The French Revolution*, *The Four Zoas*, *The Book of Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *The Book of Los*, and *Milton* have been noted by several scholars.<sup>11</sup> It would seem, if these allusions are compelling, that Blake absorbed Hervey's writings so thoroughly that their phrasing and imagery permeate his own works. The painting, however, is Blake's major visual involvement with Hervey. He seems to have done no more than two sketches related to it; at least no others survive.<sup>12</sup> He appears also to have had no interest in showing the work publicly.<sup>13</sup> If anyone ever saw this work, it was in the Butts home.

15 Modern scholars have endeavored to uncover biographical information on Butts, starting with G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s groundbreaking study "Thomas Butts, White Collar Maecenas," published in 1956.<sup>14</sup> Joseph Viscomi's three articles in *Blake*—"The Phoenix / to Mrs Butts' Redux"; "Blake in the Marketplace 1852"; and "A 'Green House' for Butts?"—provide much new information in granular detail, but they also indicate the vast amount that remains unknown about Butts and his relationship with Blake. They certainly substantiate Blake's words to Butts that "I look upon you as the Chief of my Friends, whom I would endeavour to please, because you, among all men, have enabled me to produce these things [Drawings & Pictures]."<sup>15</sup> More relevant to this article, Mary Lynn Johnson has added a thoroughly re-

prelude, "I consider these gentlemen in the light of public performers, like myself; and whether we exhibit at Tottenham-court, or the Hay-market, our purpose is the same, and the place is immaterial." See Misty G. Anderson, "'Our Purpose is the Same': Whitefield, Foote, and the Theatricality of Methodism," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 34 (2005): 125-49.

11. See Rodney M. Baine, "Blake's 'Tyger': The Nature of the Beast," *Philological Quarterly* 46 (1967): 489; Read, "Blake's 'Tender Stranger'" (see note 1); Paul Miner, "James Hervey's Influence on Blake's 'Tyger' of Experience," *Notes and Queries* 55 (2008): 414-16; Miner, "New Implications: Blake and James Hervey's *Meditations*" and "Blake: The Birth of Los, Echoes from Hervey and Ovid," *Notes and Queries* 58 (2011): 523-26.

12. Butlin lists two joined sheets, with the watermark GATER 1805, containing spiraling figures on one side and a seated figure, possibly God, on the other (#771, plates 997 and 998).

13. Blake wrote to Butts on 10 January 1803, "But whatever becomes of my labours, I would rather that they should be preserv'd in your Green House (not, as you mistakenly call it, dung hill) than in the cold gallery of fashion" (Keynes 47-48). Blake's painting *Jacob's Dream* (c. 1805) was included in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1808 and in Blake's public exhibition of 1809, along with *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan* (c. 1805-09), *The Soldiers Casting Lots for Christ's Garment* (1800), *Christ in the Sepulchre, Guarded by Angels* (c. 1805), *Ruth the Dutiful Daughter-in-Law* (or *Ruth Departing from Naomi*) (1803), and *Sir Jeffery Chaucer and the Nine and Twenty Pilgrims on Their Journey to Canterbury* (c. 1808), all from Butts's collection.

14. See also Bentley, *Stranger from Paradise* 185-95.

15. 22 November 1802 (Keynes 41).

searched study establishing the Wesleyan connections of Butts's family. Johnson points out that Butts's mother "came from a family well acquainted with John and Charles Wesley" and that her sister Sarah was married by Charles Wesley (138). Sarah's husband, Thomas Hardwick, had traveled with John Wesley during a preaching tour a year before their marriage, in 1747. Butts's grandfather, Thomas Witham, gave a deathbed confession of faith to Charles Wesley in 1743 (140-41). Based on these biographical details, Johnson offers a guarded speculation: "The family's Wesleyan connection was so pronounced in the 1740s that its residual effects may have reached Butts through his aunt Sarah Witham Hardwick (1728-87) and his uncle Thomas Witham (1724-1809)" (144).

- 16 That possibility offers a reason for Butts's wanting Blake to paint *Meditations*. A reading of *Meditations*, however, may make one wonder where its attraction lies.<sup>16</sup> Addressed to an anonymous lady, it records Hervey's solitary afternoon reading the ledger stones in a Cornish country church and speculating about the deceased individuals. Later, he explores the catacombs of the church—"Yonder Entrance leads, I suppose, to the *Vault*":

Let me turn aside, and take one View of the Habitation, and its Tenants.—The sullen *Door* grates upon its Hinges: Not used to receive many Visitants, it admits me with Reluctance and Murmurs. ...

Good Heavens! what a solemn Scene!—How dismal the *Gloom*! Here is perpetual Darkness, and Night even at Noon-day.—How doleful the *Solitude*! Not one Trace of cheerful Society; but Sorrow and Terror seem to have made This their united Abode.—Hark! how the hollow Dome resounds at every Tread. The *Echoes*, that long have slept, are awakened, and whisper along the Walls. (1: 68-69)<sup>17</sup>

16. Samuel Johnson composed an impromptu parody, "Meditation on a Pudding," a collection of lumbering effusions (*Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964] 5: 351). Coleridge cited Hervey's *Meditations* in claiming that the popular reading public could not "distinguish the counterfeit from the genuine. The vulgar love the Bible and also Hervey's 'Meditations'" (*Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler [London: Macmillan, 1869] 1: 268n). Elsewhere Coleridge marked the "bloated style and peculiar rhythm" of the writing. He called the characteristics "Herveyisms" (*Biographia Literaria* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983] 2: 211). However, Hervey's *Meditations* is often cited among graveyard school works as a source of Gothic literature, particularly Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). See, for instance, Carol Margaret Davison, *Gothic Literature 1764-1824* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009) 61-62.

17. All references to *Meditations among the Tombs* are to *Meditations and Contemplations*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: John and James Rivington, 1748). Italics are in the original.

- 17 This macabre description complements his pious pronouncements on death as a release from a troubled life.<sup>18</sup> Although Hervey seems to relish his depictions of the horrors of dying, he states that his intention is didactic: "The Grave is the most *faithful Master*, and these Instances of Mortality the most *instructive Lessons*" (1: 11-12). The most important lesson concerns the imminence of death in life:

"O! ye Sons of Men, in the Midst of Life you are in Death. No State, no Circumstances, can ascertain your Preservation a single Moment. So *strong* is the Tyrant's Arm, that nothing can resist its Force; so *unerring* his Aim, that nothing can elude the Blow: *Sudden* as Lightning sometimes is his Arrow launched, and wounds and kills in the Twinkling of an Eye. Never promise yourselves Safety in any Expedient, but constant Preparation. The fatal Shafts fly so promiscuously, that none can guess the next Victim. Therefore, *be ye always ready; for in such an Hour as ye think not*, the final Summons cometh." (1: 25-26)

- 18 Death is Hervey's constant teacher, and the relics of death, the tombstones and their inscriptions, the faded flowers, and especially the worm-eaten flesh and bleached bones of the dead, teach him that everything of this world is transitory; they "are the most invincible Proofs of the *Nothingness* of created Things." Thus he resolves "to *moderate* my *Expectations* from Mortals;—to stand *disengaged* from every *undue Attachment* to the little Interests of Time;—to get above the delusive *Amusements* of Honour, the gaudy *Tinsels* of Wealth, and all the empty *Shadows* of a perishing World" (1: 72).

- 19 All these aspects of the material world, according to Hervey, are not simply distractions from humanity's more permanent state; they are, in fact, persistent dangers to the soul, for they tempt the individual to leave off a proper conduct of life and take up the wages of sin. Each person must constantly be watchful, he warns, and must learn how to practice restraint and employ denial in order to keep his or her virtue intact. The reward for keeping one's soul pure is everlasting salvation in the afterlife; the punishment for allowing one's soul to become defiled is everlasting damnation. This doctrine, reduced to its simplest terms, becomes a paradox: the proper conduct of life is a denial of life itself. Conversely, a love of life suggests a love of sin and a consequent fear of death.

18. Eric Parisot points out that "the meditation does not merely rely on an imagined topography as a literary device to spur metaphysical contemplations of death and salvation, but is instead embedded within and inseparable from its physical surroundings" (124).

- 20 Eric Parisot identifies “three affective strategies central to *Meditations*: eliciting fear and trembling in response to a grave consideration of death; evoking grief and mourning as a way to direct the reader towards the consolations of heaven; and prompting love and compassion for living relations as a way both to encourage faith as an assurance for their ultimate spiritual wellbeing, and to circumvent the horrors of the tomb” (125-26). He asserts that the work “does not aim to promote self-pity” over the loss of loved ones, “but aims to provoke the reader to move beyond self-obsession and towards sociable religious action” (135). A general recognition of humanity’s common fate and final reward ought to provide strong faith in the redemption beyond life.
- 21 While Blake seems not to have been concerned with inducing fear and grief—the first two strategies that Parisot lists—his belief in unconditional love and forgiveness is in accord with the third. Elsewhere in “To the Deists” he states, “Friendship cannot exist without Forgiveness of Sins continually.” Indeed, for Blake, “The Glory of Christianity is, To Conquer by Forgiveness” (E 201). This resounding statement forms the basis for spiritual brotherhood between Blake and Hervey.

### III

- 22 This spiritual brotherhood is forcefully expressed in *Epitome of James Hervey’s “Meditations among the Tombs.”* In the painting Hervey is an imaginatively transformed figure, not the melancholic writer of *Meditations and Contemplations*. Just as Blake removes the doctrinal shackles from Milton to make him a fully visionary poet in *Milton*, he eradicates Hervey’s emphasis on physical dissolution and mutability to clarify his elevated state of spirituality.<sup>19</sup> While a rough-hewn chamber forms the setting, Blake has populated that setting with spiritual beings, not the remains of mortal bodies. The amount of detail in *Epitome* is remarkable, especially considering its relatively small size. It shows an attention to Hervey’s work and a considered enlargement of his musing. And it calls for the extensive attention of any viewer. The painting is, in fact, not as much an epitome of Hervey’s *Meditations* as it is Blake’s own vision of death and resurrection generously applied to Hervey. Like Blake’s Last Judgment designs, *Epitome* is a stupendous vision—albeit a more domestic version.<sup>20</sup>

19. The frequent quotations of Milton in *Theron and Aspasio* indicate that the poet was also a favorite of Hervey’s.

20. In *A Blake Dictionary* (184), Damon points out that “Blake depicted no tombs” and that all the figures “ascend and unite in perfect bliss”; he concludes that “Hervey’s tragic anecdotes have become ecstasies.”

- 23 *Epitome* is also structurally similar to the Last Judgment, with figures ascending in sinuous patterns.<sup>21</sup> In the central portion, they move along a spiral stair. Blake applies Gothic “Living Form” with a huge arch hewn out of stone and a series of arches in the railing before the altar. Within these structural elements, three figures are arranged along a central vertical axis. Hervey stands at the bottom, with his back to the viewer. Directly above him is Jesus, his head surrounded by a large nimbus. Above him, at the apex of the arch, is God, sitting in a circular shape somewhat larger than Jesus’s nimbus and reading the scroll he holds in his lap. Arranged on the spiral stairway on the central vertical axis between God and Jesus are: Adam, on his knees and looking upward, and Eve, sprawled across Adam’s lap with her head lowered; Noah, rising out of the waters, his ark and two doves behind him, the one on the left holding an olive branch in its beak; and Abraham, kneeling and looking up, his left arm enfolding his son Isaac, whom he has offered in sacrifice to God. Finally, between Jesus and Hervey on this axis are the bread and wine of the Eucharist on a table.
- 24 The names of these figures are written in gold next to them.<sup>22</sup> Others in this thickly populated stream are also identified. An Angel of Providence and a Guardian Angel float on either side of Hervey. Jesus, in turn, is flanked by a pious Moses with hands clasped in prayer (rather than Moses the Urizenic lawgiver) and Elias, or Elijah, engulfed in the flames of prophecy. This tableau signifies Jesus at the moment of his transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-3). In the upper left-hand and right-hand corners are two figures in clouds of smoke, with the words “MERCY” and “WRATH” written above them. Like “SHEEP” and “GOATS” inscribed on plate 3 of *Jerusalem*, the words suggest God’s Last Judgment and recall Los’s pronouncement that the Generations of the Giant Albion “have divided themselves by Wrath. they must be united by / Pity” (*Jerusalem* 7.57-58; E 150).
- 25 The other figures on the spiral stairway are, in descending order: Cain and Abel, depicted as babes; the prophet Enoch, who carries a scroll; the “Mother of Leah & Rachel” and the “Mother of Rebecca”; Aaron, wreathed with angels and carrying a censer; David with a harp and Solomon

21. Blake painted *A Vision of the Last Judgment* for Butts in 1806 (Butlin #639). At 49.5 x 39.0 cm., it is slightly larger than *Epitome*.

22. In his *Blake Dictionary*, Damon reproduces Blake’s *Epitome* (plate XI) with a key containing several inaccuracies: “Mother of Leah” (10) should be “Mother of Leah & Rachel”; “She Died on Her Wedding Day” (30) should be “She died on the Wedding Day”; “Sage” (39) should be “Old Age”; “Baby” (42) should be “Babe”; “The Lost Child” and “orphans” are omitted from the key. Erdman (E 691) also has inaccurately transcribed several of Blake’s inscriptions. There is no “Child” (third line) and “Orphans” should be between “Recording Angels” and “Protecting Angel” (the “O” should be lower case).

with a compass; an Angel of Death; and finally, at the bottom, a “Father.” Hervey mentions Adam, Solomon, and Abraham and Isaac only in passing; he does not mention these other biblical figures in his *Meditations*.

- 26 Of the streams of twenty-three figures along the left-hand and right-hand sides of the painting, only seven can be found in *Meditations*. While Hervey employs many proper names in his litany of the dead (among them Fidelio, Lucinda, and Florella), Blake uses only one, “Sophronia Died in Childbed,” a truncation of Hervey’s “The Marble, which graces yonder Pillar, informs me, that near it, are deposited the Remains of my valuable Friend *Sophronia*; who *died in Child-bed*” (1: 31-32). For the others Blake uses more general nouns, perhaps so that the figures would conform more closely to his concept of “States.” Two phrases sound like Hervey’s but are not: “She died on the Wedding Day” and “These died for Love.” The general names that Blake takes from Hervey are:

<i>Epitome</i>	<i>Meditations</i>
Infancy	“The peaceful <i>Infant</i> , without so much as knowing what Labour and Vexation mean, ‘lies still and is quiet; it sleeps and is at Rest’”
Father	“A <i>religious Father</i> ; snatched from his growing Offspring, before they were settled in the World, or so much as their Principles fixed by a thorough Education”
Husband	“There lies the affectionate Husband, the indulgent Parent, the faithful Friend, and the generous Master” “How happy the Husband, in such a Sharer of his Bed, and Partner of his Fortunes!”
Wife	“These separate Streams are all united in the distressed <i>Spouse</i> , and overwhelms her Breast with a Tide of Sorrows. In Her, the <i>Lover</i> weeps; the <i>Wife</i> mourns; and all the <i>Mother</i> yearns”
Orphan	“The <i>Sufferer</i> ... is ... pierced with an anxious Concern, ... for the Children, who will soon be <i>fatherless Orphans</i> ”
Old Age	“Some, I perceive, arrived at <i>Threescore Years and ten</i> , before they made their Exit; nay, some few resigned not their Breath, till they had numbered <i>Fourscore</i> revolving Harvests”

These figures indeed epitomize *Meditations*. Their bodies, however, are vitally muscular and their expressions are serene. Unlike Hervey’s descriptions, there is not a single skull or skeleton anywhere.

- 27 All the other figures in the painting are Blake’s own. Most, especially those along the left and right sides, are generally similar in appearance, posture, and arrangement to those in the Last Judgment designs. “Mother” (on the lower right-hand side), with a crown of stars above her head, also appears in his Last Judgments. In his Notebook essay known as “A Vision of the Last Judgment,” Blake allegorizes her as “the Church Universal” (E 559).<sup>23</sup> The phrase next to the figure of God, “God out of Christ is a Consuming Fire,”<sup>24</sup> recalls the opening sentence of the same essay: “When all those are Cast away who trouble Religion with Questions concerning Good & Evil or Eating of the Tree of those Knowledges or Reasonings which hinder the Vision of God turning all into a Consuming fire ... then the Last Judgment begins” (E 554). This “Consuming Fire,” a fire of mercy for the just and of wrath for the wicked (or, in Blake’s words, those “who trouble Religion with Questions concerning Good & Evil”) elevates Hervey’s meditations to a vision of revelatory dimensions. Unlike Blake’s Last Judgments, however, this vision contains no wicked figures, for all those on the left and right are ascending to the realm of God, suggesting that Blake believed that Hervey’s “gentle Soul” (*Jerusalem* 72.51; E 227) could not conceive any such negative state.
- 28 The spiral arrangement of *Epitome* compares with the swirling stairs of Blake’s *Jacob’s Dream* (c. 1805) (illus. 2), a painting of similar size (39.8 x 30.6 cm.), also sold to Butts. The contrast between the two is striking: instead of Hervey’s standing on tiptoe and looking up in the dark, rough-hewn Gothic arch, Jacob lies sleeping on the ground and dreaming of paired mortal figures climbing into the starry sky and the bright rays of the sun. *Jacob’s Dream* is much less populous, and the diminishing size of the figures indicates considerable distance from the bottom to the top of the stairs, but the exalting effect of both works is similar. It is tempting to wonder if Blake intended them to be companion pieces.

23. His source for this figure is perhaps Revelation 12:1-2: “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailing birth, and pained to be delivered.”

24. Damon states that this phrase “used to be much quoted by Calvinists as a proof of the reality of Hell; but it is not to be found in the Bible, as they supposed” (*Philosophy and Symbols* 277n1).



2. Blake, *Jacob's Ladder*. 39.8 x 30.6 cm. British Museum. 1949,1112.2. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

- 29 Elsewhere in his *Meditations* Hervey writes, “Why do we not, in every Place, *reverence ourselves*; as Persons dedicated to the Divinity, as *living Temples* of the Godhead? For, if we are *real*, and not *merely nominal* Christians, the God of Glory, according to his own Promise, *dwells in us, and walks in us*” (1: 9). One can imagine Blake writing “pure gold” in the margin next to these words, as he did next to those aphorisms of Lavater that he liked. In fact, another of the Lavater marginalia fits well with Hervey’s declaration: “God who loves all honest men. will lead the poor enthusiast in the paths of holiness” (E 598). In his painting, Blake has taken this aspect of Hervey to produce an inspired vision of eternity. Hervey looks at tombstone inscriptions and sees spiritual life rising out of material dissolution; Blake reads Hervey’s words and imagines angels.

#### IV

- 30 Hervey gave the nuances of Methodist doctrines careful consideration in *Theron and Aspasio*, provoking a sharp and sustained response from Wesley. Blake was not one to parse theological differences; rather, he took the patina of love and forgiveness—major components of the Methodism of both Wesley and Whitefield—as a message. He called out for humility and understanding to fight against self-righteousness and pride. He did agree with Whitefield and Hervey, however, that what even the most devout can achieve is a diminished or less impure state and that backsliding is almost inevitable.
- 31 Christopher Z. Hobson argues convincingly that Blake valorized Whitefield over Wesley because “Blake’s sense of sin was close to Whitefield’s, though distinct, and also . . . he rejected claims of perfectibility, such as Wesley’s, on the basis of this sense and because they provided justification for self-appointed elites” (par. 1). Hobson suggests that Blake’s acquaintance with Hervey’s works made him aware of both Wesley’s perfectionism and Hervey’s rejection of it (par. 12). He also points out more references to Whitefield than to Wesley in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, noting that “Whitefield more than Wesley fires [Blake’s] imagination,” and concludes that Blake “is with Whitefield, Hervey, and the Calvinists against Wesley” in his belief that “the cooperative commonwealth can exist only through conscious love, awareness of our sinfulness, and forgiveness” (pars. 14, 42).
- 32 We do not know where Butts fell on the question of sanctification versus perfectionism, or even if he entertained a distinction. But it is not unreasonable to presume that there was a meeting of the minds between Butts and Blake about human waywardness and the need to practice love and forgiveness continually. That presumption is strengthened by a shared inclination toward Methodist thought, whether Wesley’s or Whitefield’s. In his letter of September 1800 to

Blake, the only surviving one, Butts included lines of verse that seem to complement Blake’s *Epitome*:

may your faithful Spirit upward bear  
Your gentle Souls to Him whose care  
Is ever sure and ever nigh  
Those who on Providence rely,  
And in his Paradise above  
Where all is Beauty, Truth & Love,  
O May ye be allowed to chuse  
For your firm Friend a Heaven-born Muse,  
From purest Fountains sip delight,  
Be cloathed in Glory burning bright,  
For ever blest, for ever free,  
The loveliest Blossoms on Life’s Tree. (Keynes 26-27)

In these lines Butts is very much in accord with Hervey’s modulated Gothic visions: “gentle Souls” rising to a heaven “where all is Beauty, Truth & Love.” In his *Epitome*, Blake found a way to express his agreement and to share it meaningfully with his friend. In that signal gesture lies a feeling of personal communion unusual in Blake’s life.

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