Chapter III
Blake and the East

A prolific critic and an authority on the Western reception of The Arabian Nights, Robert Irwin, in one of the chapters of The Arabian Nights: A Companion (1994), observed that the influence of the Nights upon European literature is so pervasive that “it might have been an easier, shorter chapter if I had discussed those writers who were not influenced by the Nights. A discussion of the lack of influence on, say, William Blake, Evelyn Waugh and Vladimir Nabokov might have been just as rewarding” (291). Later Irwin changed his opinion, when he found that Nabokov’s family library had a copy of the Nights, and wrote in the preface to The Arabian Nights and Orientalism: Perspectives from East & West (2006): “perhaps it is now time to reconsider the possible influence of the Arabian Nights on the poetry of William Blake and the fiction of Evelyn Waugh. . .” (ix-x). The statements make us aware of the fact that Blake is the most elusive among the Romantics in his relation to the East. It is indeed very surprising that though there are evidences that the other Romantic poets had familiarity with the Nights, no such evidence has been discovered in the case of Blake, although Blake began his poetic career during the heyday of the Nights.

However, Blake’s familiarity with the East in general has remained in critical vogue since the 1920s. Efforts to trace Eastern elements in Blake had begun as early as 1924, with the attempt made by S. Foster Damon, who claimed that Blake was in accord with Eastern mysticism. He pointed to some interesting parallels between Blake and Indian theological tradition: Urthona is Dharma; Urizen is Karma; while both Tharmas and Luvah are included in Maya (William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols 145). In 1929 Denis Saurat explored certain parallelisms between Blakean myth and Indian Hindu mythology arguing that
essential elements of the Blakean myth [are] common also to Indian religion: the primitive hermaphrodite, or giant containing all the world, his separation into beings and especially his separation into Male and Female, the refusal of the female, her flight, the pursuit by the male, his conquest of the female, and the origin of all species from their union” (109). Similarly, Charu Sheel Singh made an attempt to show how Blake benefitted from the Indian mythological and philosophical sources available to him in translations made by the eighteenth century Indologists—Sir William Jones, Charles Wilkins, N.B. Halhed, J.H. Holwell, A J Arberry and others. Northrop Frye observes that “Blake was among the first of European idealists to link his own tradition of thought with Bhagavadgita” (173).

In recent times there had been a plethora of critical writings on Blake’s relation to the East. In William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s (2003), Saree Makdisi appreciates Blake’s ability to remain outside the dominant ideological constructions by remaining free of the Orientalising tendency of his time: “Blake was basically the only major poet of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who categorically refused to dabble in the recognizably oriental themes and motifs” (209). David Weir in Brahma in the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance (2003), however, contends that Blake’s thought and philosophy was steeped in Oriental elements, though he might not have the tendency to exoticism. Weir divides his book into three parts for the convenience of reading Blake’s relation to the East: “Politics,” “Mythography” and “Theology,” respectively. To use Weir’s own words, the chapters show “first how Blake would have been drawn to Hinduism for political reasons; second, how the parallels between the poet’s myth and the Hindu system provide evidence of actual influence; and, third, how this influence played out in theological terms, as certain Christian interpretations of Hinduism found their way into Blake’s composite mythology” (17). Although he concedes that it is extremely difficult to determine
sources that were available to Blake, he identifies certain possible sources “that can be connected to Blake using the double criteria of personal affiliation and textual comparison” (52). The list of the sources given by him is worth quoting here:

*The Ruins; or, a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (1791), by Comte de Volney; “On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India” (1788), by Sir William Jones; *The History of Hindostan* (1796–98), by Thomas Maurice; “Enquiry into the Religious Tenets and Philosophy of the Brahmins” (3d ed., 1798), by William Julius Mickle; *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with those of the Hindoos and other Ancient Nations* (1799), by Joseph Priestley; and, finally, *The Hindu Pantheon* (1810), by Edward Moor. Of these texts, the only one that cannot be connected to Blake either directly or through one of his associates is Thomas Maurice’s *The History of Hindostan*. But this book was so widely known that the probability of Blake’s familiarity with it may be reasonably assumed. . . .(52)

Weir suggests that Blake could have conceivably met Wilkins, who moved in the same circle as Blake’s friend and publisher Joseph Johnson (21–22). Johnson was also the main publisher of the periodical *The Analytical Review*, which was one of the most important sources of information about the new scholarship on Indian culture produced by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The Asiatic Society “founded and led by Jones” provided Blake “an extraordinary profusion of mythic material” “in the form of various mythographic representations of Hinduism as he formed and reformed his own mythic system” (36). Davies Keri’s article “Rebekah Bliss: Collector of William Blake and Oriental Books” in *The Reception of Blake in the Orient* (2006) takes Weir’s attempt forward. Keri tries to trace the influences on Blake through his reading, particularly of the collection of books by Rebekah Bliss. He shows the
distinct influences and assimilations of Eastern images, mythology, art forms in Blake’s poetry and designs. The Reception of Blake in the Orient is divided into two parts. The essays in the first part are studies on how Blake was influenced by the Orientalism of his day and how he assimilated Oriental elements in the total design of his poetic archetype. Most of the essays highlight the engravings made by Blake that accompany the poems. The focus, in other words, is on the poet- engraver Blake rather than on the poet Blake alone. The second part of the book concentrates, as the title indicates, on the reception of Blake in the Orient.

The recent spate of critical views on Blake’s relationship with the Orient, and its influence upon him has chiefly concentrated on three issues: firstly, Blake’s relationship with India and Hinduism; secondly, Blake’s representation of Egypt and Africa, together with his treatment of the slave-issue; and thirdly, Blake’s conception of Islam and its representation. A small amount of criticism has shown Blake in relation to China. “Blake and the Chinamen,” an essay by Mei-Ying Sung, for example, has in focus Britain’s Chinese fashion in the mid-eighteenth century—the popularity of the ceramics and its relation to print making. Mei-Ying Sung’s focus is on the “complexity of the diverse cultural routes which influenced the history of British engraving” (65). Blake, Sung argues, failed to follow the commercial routes though some of his designs were influenced by commercial ceramic paintings (71).

In Orientalism Said identifies four distinct developments in the late eighteenth century that according to him had helped in the formation of what he calls “modern Orientalism.” The four phases are: expansion, historical confrontation, sympathy and classification. The century saw the expansion of the Orient further East than the traditional Islamic Orient. There was a widening of horizon, but Said observes that “such widening of horizon had Europe firmly in the privileged center.” The capacity to deal with non-European and non-Judeo-Christian culture was strengthened, as there was new conception of human
history; “the notions of human association and human possibility acquired a very wide
genernal—as opposed to the parochial—legitimacy” (117-18). There was a change in
technique in dealing with the Orient. Said observes: “Whereas the renaissance Historians
judged the Orient inflexibly as an enemy, those of the eighteenth century confronted the
Orient’s peculiarities with some detachment and with some attempt at dealing directly with
Oriental source material, perhaps because such technique helped a European to know himself
better” (117). The eighteenth century mind, according to Said, “could breach the doctrinal
walls erected between the West and Islam and see the hidden elements of kinship between
himself and the Orient.” “There was a tendency among the thinkers to exceed comparative
study, and its judicious survey of mankind from ‘China to Peru,’ by sympathetic
identification” (118). The fourth element preparing the way for the modern Orientalism was
the “impulse to classify man and nature into types,” and there was a systematic classification
of man according to race, colour, origin, character, types (118-19). Some of these tendencies
identified by Said are visible in William Blake’s representation of the East.

The first explicit reference to Hinduism in Blake is in the Song of Los: Africa: “Adam
shudderd! Noah faded! black grew the sunny African/When Rintrah gave Abstract
Philosophy to Brama in the East.” In the context of his criticism of institutionalised religion,
Blake mentions Brahma as the begetter of the most ancient form of this. With the inception of
Hinduism evil breaks upon humanity: “Adam shudderd! Noah faded! black grew the sunny
African;” human ‘hypocrisy’ was born and so were other forms of social evils like slavery
and war: “(Night spoke to the Cloud!/Lo these Human form’d spirits in smiling hypocrisy.
War Against one another; so let them War on; slaves to the eternal Elements).” Blake goes on
criticising other forms of ‘abstract philosophy”: “Palamabron gave an abstract Law:/To
Pythagoras Socrates & Plato,” [a]nd to Mahomet a loose Bible gave. . . .Till a Philosophy of
Five Senses was complete/ Urizen wept & gave it into the hands of Newton & Locke.” With this proliferation of the institution of religion social institutions are born. “These were the Churches: Hospitals: Castles: Palaces” (plate 3, 4, 5, E 67-68).  

One of the four elements identified by Said as an important component of eighteenth century Orientalism is “historical confrontation.” Most shocking of these historical confrontations was the revelation of the Indian antiquity. The European mind was baffled confronted with the ancientness of Hinduism because it challenged the primacy of Christianity, among other things. Blake devised his own method in dealing with this. He saw the world through the prism of his own spiritualism, developed his own ‘mythography’ and Hinduism became a part of his mythological world. Blake’s approach fits into Said’s definition that “the major part of the spiritual and intellectual project of the late eighteenth century was a reconstituted theology” (114).

The reference to Hinduism in The Song of Los (1795) proves that Blake was familiar with the writings of William Jones and his fellow scholars. Cathleen Raine commenting on the Brahma’s connection to the rationally philosophical refers to the 1794 edition of the Asiatick Researches, where Jones attributes a “technical system of logick” to Brahma (351). The transactions of the Asiatic Society were first published in 1788 in the Asiatick Researches and the subsequent four volumes came out in 1790, 1793, 1795 and 1797, respectively. The translation of the Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon was published in 1785 and Blake made a painting on Wilkins translating it. Hikari Sato in his essay “Blake, Hayley and India: On Designs to a Series of Ballads (1802)” argues that Blake’s familiarity with Indian scholarship grew during his Felpham years. He argues that “Hayley used Indian motifs in the Designs to commemorate his son who had died in 1800 and that Blake became familiar with India through the collaboration with his erudite patron”
(135). However, it is a more acceptable idea that Blake had knowledge of the Hindu mythology prior to this. Blake might have been familiar with The Analytical Review that was published by Blake’s friend Joseph Johnson, as suggested by David Weir. The periodical was established in 1788 and was the most important source of information on the new scholarship on India (Weir 21-22). Another suggestion is that Blake might have had access to Jones before 1800 through his friend the sculptor John Flaxman who had links with Jones (Johnson, A.K 93).

Apart from the reference to Brahma, Blake’s familiarity with Wilkins’ translation is further evidenced by his reference to “the darkness of Asia” in The Song of Los II: Asia. Asia celebrates the coming of revolution and the Kings of Asia respond to its coming; the journey of the revolution is from West to East having begun in America. The kings of Asia are terrified:

The Kings of Asia heard
The howl rise up from Europe!
And each ran out from his Web;
From his ancient woven Den;
For the darkness of Asia was startled
At the thick-flaming, thought-creating fires of Orc. (Plate 6, E 68)

The ‘darkness’ described by Blake seems to echo the preface to Wilkins’ translation by Hastings where he describes the ‘dark rules’ of the Mughal emperors in contrast to the enlightening British to whom the Brahmins opens up their secret. It is also noteworthy that in the eighteenth century Indian scholarship there had been two opposed perspectives on Hinduism. Whereas Hinduism, as it was practised then, was conceived as evil, priest-ridden and ritualistic, the philosophical Hinduism (evidenced by such text as the Gita) was idealized.
Wilkins’ translation gives us a view of the philosophical esoteric Hinduism but also shows the then degenerated priest ridden condition of the Hindus (Bhagvat-Geeta 24). Therefore, it was not unusual for Blake to present Hinduism as the first Urezenic religion. Blake produced the *Song of Los* in 1795 and he must have known about the dramatic trial of Hastings (1788-95). The event was so popular that it was impossible for a Londoner to miss it. The trial highlighted the corrupt ways of Hastings but it also shed some light on the evil aspects of the Indian society that were described in lurid details. The trial led to the victory of the Anglicists who wanted to spread Christianity and English education among Indians in place of the policy that Indians should be governed by their own law and according to their own custom and religion. Missionaries like Charles Grant saw Indian society as heathen, corrupt and uncivilised. He was appalled by such native customs as exposing the sick, burning lepers, and the sati. He believed that Britain's duty was not simply to expand its rule in India and exploit the subcontinent for its commercial interests, but to civilise and Christianise it. In 1792 Grant wrote the tract “Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain.” He pleaded for English education and argued that Christian missions should be allowed in India, alongside the East India Company's traditional commercial activity. India to Grant became the classic example of a despotic country and the “‘cruel genius’ pervading Indian despotism was the ethos of Hinduism” (Butler, “Orientalism” 409). Thus the reference to Brahma in the context of fallen humanity is understandable.

Blake condemns Hinduism as the most ancient form of organised religion. However, for that purpose it may be said he condemns all religions. Hinduism is given the first place in this list of the religions he condemns, because during his time the discoveries of the members of the Asiatic Society made this theory acceptable among the Europeans. Ezekiel in “The Marriage of Heaven and hell” speaks on the subject:
the philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception: some nations held one principle for the origin & some another, we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophecying that all Gods would at last be proved. (plate 12 and 13, E 39)

Here an illustration is given as to how the principles of institutionalised religion create a divisive tendency leading to evils like war and slavery. All religions are manifestation of the same “Poetic Genius,” “the tributaries,” but as the priests and kings institutionalise them the conflict of interest arises. In his ‘religio-mythological radicalism’ (Johnson, A.K., 94) Blake attempts to condemn all the religions in the manner of Volney, whose book *The Ruins* was one of his favourites. In Chapter XXIII of *The Ruins* Volney condemned all religions as being equally responsible for the moral and social evils: “Thus by mutual reproaches the doctors [the religious leaders] of the different sects began to reveal all the crimes of their ministry -- all the vices of their craft; and it was found that among all nations the spirit of the priesthood, their system of conduct, their actions, their morals, were absolutely the same” (269). The chapter is significantly entitled “ALL RELIGIONS HAVE THE SAME OBJECT.” Blake’s “All Religions are One” undoubtedly echoes Volney.

Volney’s *Les Ruins* (1791) is scathingly critical of all religions. There is a passage in Volney where the members of other religions accuse the Christians of using religious disguise to conquer nations,

‘Yes’ cried they, ‘these men are robbers and hypocrites, who preach simplicity, to surprise confidence; humility, to enslave with more ease; poverty, to appropriate all riches to themselves. They promise another world,
the better to usurp the present; and while they speak to you of tolerance and
charity, they burn, in the name of God, the men who do not worship him in
their manner.’ (267)

Marilyn Butler identifies Tom Paine, Alexander Geddes and Volney as the “mediators
through whom [Blake] locked up the vision of a world history that inspires his two great
series of epics of the French revolutionary years.” In the series of prophecies—America,
Europe and the Song of Los (Asia and Africa) Blake celebrates the coming of revolution to all
the four continents of the world. “The old world is conceived in Volneyan lines as an evil
empire maintained by ‘priest-craft’” (“Orientalism” 407-08). By the time Blake was writing
his prophecies, the idea of Hinduism as the ‘sunny’ religion of the East gave way to a
conception that deemed Hinduism and the state of India as “priest-ridden, cruel and
despotick” and thus asking for Western conquest (“Orientalism” 411). However, Blake seems
to have had a powerful desire for the syncretism of Jones and in the face of a strong change in
opinion, he stuck to it. The comparative mode of thought suited him best since he was
thinking in universal terms where “All religions are One.”

Blake’s syncretism, however, has its own problems, because despite his syncretism
Christianity remains the privileged centre. Tristanne J. Connolly precisely takes up this
question while analysing Blake’s now lost painting The Bramins (“The Authority” 145-60).
The painting is described by Blake in the catalogue to his exhibition of paintings in 1809:

The subject is, Mr. Wilkin, translating the Geeta; an ideal design, suggested by
the first publication of that part of the Hindoo Scriptures, translated by Mr.
Wilkin. I understand that my Costume is incorrect, but in this I plead the
authority of the ancients, who often deviated from the Habits, to preserve the
Manners, as in the instance of Laocoon, who, though a priest, is represented naked. (E 548, NUMBER X., The Bramins.--A Drawing.)

The painting, therefore, shows Wilkins as the ‘Bramin’ translating the ‘Geeta’ not the Hindu ‘Pundits’ as we expect from the title. The first question that has been raised about the work is why Blake depicted Wilkins translating the Hindu scripture at a time when Hinduism was no longer held in respect or why should he paint Wilkins at all. After Willkins’ return to England in 1786, he moved in a circle very close to Blake. Men like Fuseli and Moses Haughton were members of this circle and as Weir points out, they would later ask for Wilkins’ assistance with the Devnagari script for Sanskrit text while engraving Edward Moor’s the Hindu Pantheon (1810). Wilkins was the first person to discover in 1778 and to use the methods of engraving, casting and setting Bengali characters. He was also the first man to produce Sanskrit letters for type printing, “making it possible to print Sanskrit for a wider audience” (Schwab 37). This similarity between Wilkins’s tradesman skill and Blake’s, according to A.K. Johnson, suggests one reason for Blake’s preference of Wilkins over Jones. His conjecture is that Jones was already the sculptural subject of John Flaxman with whom Blake’s relationship soured by 1809 and he chose Wilkins, the translator memorializing him (117-25). However, it seems more a plausible explanation that Blake was rather inspired by the sculpture of Jones to portray another figure from the same group who was equally inspiring as Jones. Connolly finds in Blake’s representation of Wilkins an attempt to deny complicity in any imperialistic relationship between knowledge, power and profit. Blake, in his opinion tried to create his distance from the Evangelical and intolerant Orientalism of 1809 by the syncretism of the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, he could not escape from the colonial discourse of knowledge construction (“The Authority” 146- 48).
While recommending the translation of the *Bhagvat-Geeta* to Nathaniel Smith, Hastings wrote the Chairman of the East India Company in 1784: “Every accumulation of knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state (qtd. in Kejariwal 24).” By painting Wilkins in the task of deciphering knowledge with the help of the Brahmins (Knowledge “obtained by social communication” with them), Blake ends up celebrating that knowledge construction in the aid of imperialism.

Another point made by Connolly is that though Blake equates all religions, Christianity remains central to his vision of a regenerated world. Poetic Genius, Imagination—the Divine Vision—in Blake’s writings becomes synonymous with Jesus Christ. This association of the creative inspiration with Jesus shows that Blake places the origin of art and mythology inside the Judeo-Christian tradition (“The Authority” 154). In the Descriptive Catalogue Blake wrote:

> The antiquities of every Nation Under Heaven, is no less sacred than that of the Jews. They are the same thing as Jacob Bryant, [Descriptive Catalogue P 44] and all antiquaries have proved. How other antiquities came to be neglected and disbelieved, while those of the Jews are collected and arranged, is an enquiry, worthy of both the Antiquarian and the Divine. All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel. Antiquity preaches the Gospel of Jesus. The reasoning historian, turner and twister of causes and consequences, such as Hume, Gibbon and Voltaire; cannot with all their artifice, turn or twist one fact or disarrange self evident action. (E 543)
Connolly argues that though Blake begins by asserting the equal sacredness of all cultural traditions, he ultimately asserts: “Their sacredness relies on their similarity not to each other but to Christianity.” “If it is worthy of enquiry why the Jewish antiquities are collected and others neglected, it is also worth enquiring why Blake neglects them here by not naming them” (“The Authority”153-54). Blake rejects the classical to court the Biblical. In the Preface to *Milton* Blake strongly criticises the Grecio-Roman tradition, but he does so comparing it to the ‘sublime’ Bible: “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero which all Men ought to contemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible” (E. 95).

In describing the picture of Nelson and Pitt in the “Descriptive Catalogue” Blake compares the figures, “to those Apotheoses of Persian, Hindoo, and Egyptian Antiquity, which are still preserved on rude monuments, being copies from some stupendous originals now lost or perhaps buried till some happier age.” The visionary poet envisions the “stupendous originals”:

The Artist having been taken in vision into the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia, has seen those wonderful originals called in the Sacred Scriptures the Cherubim, which were sculptured and painted on walls of Temples, Towers, Cities, Palaces, and erected in the highly cultivated states of Egypt, Moab, Edom, Aram, among the Rivers of Paradise, being originals from which the Greeks and Hetrurians copied Hercules, Farnese, Venus of Medicis, Apollo Belvidere, and all the grand works of ancient art.

(DC, plate 6, E 531)
Blake imitates these grand ‘originals’ seen in his vision in his own paintings. After this, Blake makes his intriguing statement that the classical Greek artists were imitators of the “Asiatic Patriarchs”:

No man can believe that either Homer's Mythology, or Ovid's, were the production of Greece, or of Latium; neither will any believe, that the Greek statues, as they are called, were the invention of Greek Artists; perhaps the Torso is the only original work remaining; all the rest are evidently copies, though fine ones, from greater works of the Asiatic Patriarchs. The Greek Muses are daughters of Mnemosyne, or Memory, and not of Inspiration or Imagination, therefore not authors of such sublime conceptions.

(De la Côte, 6, E 531)

The statement apparently “stress [es] the Afro-Asiatic origins of European culture,” but Blake places them in the Biblical Near East: “they are done by ‘Patriarchs,’ they are called ‘Cherubim,’ and they are ‘erected in’ Biblical lands connected to Eden. The origin of art and mythology is placed inside Judeo-Christian tradition” (Connolly, “The Authority” 154).

Two different aspects of Blake’s approach to India and Hinduism become obvious: firstly, his approach to India and Hinduism follows syncretism; secondly, his syncretism leads him to anachronism. In other words, Blake, it can be assumed, ignores the temporal dimension while equating all religions to give priority to Christianity; he becomes deliberately anachronistic. Connolly points to the anachronism in Blake as well as to the syncretism but he does not explain as to why Blake became anachronistic in dealing with a civilization and a religion far more ancient than Christianity or Christian civilization. The clue to the answer is there in E.S. Shaffer who ‘Kubla Khan’ and the Fall of Jerusalem shows how in the eighteenth century the view that Bible is mythological rather than historical was
acknowledged. This was very crucial for writers like Blake who used it to defend the Bible and make it equal to other ancient religious texts by considering them mythological as well. The discovery of the Indian antiquity created an anxiety for Christianity if not a crisis, where the authenticity of the Bible was in danger. Jones expressed this fear in the following terms: “Either the first eleven chapters of the Genesis, all due allowance made to the figurative, Eastern style, are true or the whole fabric of our national religion is false; a conclusion, none of us, I trust, would wish to be drawn” (Pachori 189-92). Mythological syncretism was, therefore, a refuge for writers like Blake from where they could safely protect their Christ from ‘falseness.’ Even a dissenter like William Blake had to use this defence mechanism because even when he was a dissenter his world was centred on Christ.

There are other references to India and Hinduism in Blake. India is referred to by alternate names like ‘Hindu’ or ‘Hindustan’ and in one of these places India is described by plural ‘nations’ rather than by singular ‘nation’. Most of these references are one item in a list of nations where India serves to represent the East, or the whole world in its vast extent. There is not much illustration but India is mentioned just as a place name that is part of the ‘Generation’ awaiting regeneration, the coming of the New Jerusalem. Blake mentions India or Hinduism six times in Jerusalem: The Emanation of Giant Albion and thrice in Milton. In plate 14, Blake’s ‘Hindostan’ is part of the world of ‘Generation’ and it is a part of the confused world: “Albion trembled to Italy Greece & Egypt/To Tartary & Hindostan & China & to Great America (Milton, plate.14, E. 108). In plate 31 we find India weeping with other nations at the vision of the “Lord coming in the clouds”: “India rose up from his golden bed:/As one awakenend in the night (E 130). These personified portrayal of India “draws on the Oriental stereotypes of indolence and opulence” (Connolly, “The Authority” 158). The third
reference in Milton is to ‘Hindu’ (he uses it to signify place not religion) in plate 35 where Blake refers to ‘Hindu’ as one of the places bound by Milcah: 9

Loud roll the Weights & Spindles over the whole Earth let down
On all sides round to the Four Quarters of the World, eastward on
Europe to Euphrates & Hindu, to Nile & back in Clouds
Of Death across the Atlantic to America North & South. (E 135)

The first reference to India in Jerusalem is in the context of the description of the world of ‘Generation,’ “a depraved world of single unimaginative vision” (Stevenson747) made by Urizen: “China & India & Siberia are his [Urizen’s] temples for entertainment” (Jerusalem, plate 58, 39). In plate 67 India is shown as the part of the geographical locations that is being enclosed by polypus’s fibre. Polypus in Blake is a “colonial” organism that symbolises human society in this world and its religion (Damon 332-33). In plate 72 ‘Hindustan’ is mentioned as one among “thirty-two nations,” eight each from the four continents looking up “for the Bride” Jerusalem. In plate 80 India is one of those countries through which the ‘daughters of Albion’ move: “Against Jerusalem they rage thro all the Nations of Europe/ Thro Italy & Grecia, to Lebanon & Persia & India.” Then in plate 82 the “Hindustan” is once again shown as part of the Generation: “the Furnaces of Los/Create Jerusalem, & Babylon & Egypt & Moab & Amalek./ And Helle & Hesperia & Hindostan & China & Japan (E 239).

These limited creations are part of Los’s effort to save Albion from disintegration and death (Stevenson 805). In plate 84 “nations of India” are shown as flying away from Los. India in Blake, therefore, becomes a symbol for an “ancient woven den” and Brahma is the weaver.

Like Hinduism Blake was also interested in another Eastern religion, Islam, and the prophetic tradition represented by Muhammad. Blake’s first reference to Islam is in the Song of Los: Africa:
The human race began to wither. for the healthy built
Secluded places, fearing the joys of Love
And the disease'd only propagated;
So Antamon call'd up Leutha from her valleys of delight:
And to Mahomet a loose Bible gave.
But in the North, to Odin, Sotha gave a Code of War.
Because of Diralada thinking to reclaim his joy. (plate 3, E 67)
The phrase “loose bible” has been interpreted by the editors of Blake’s poems as referring to the fact that the Koran has been traditionally seen as “loose sheets.” In *Blake’s Poetry and Designs* John E. Grant and Mary Lynn Johnson observe that one etymology of the Koran is “a collection of loose sheets” (136). Similarly, W. H. Stevenson provides the following note to explain ‘loose bible’: “The Koran; the name has been supposed to mean “a collection of loose sheets” (Stevenson 244).

The explanation of “loose bible” as referring to “a collection of loose sheets” fails to give an insight into the text and the context of its occurrence. S. Foster Damon provides a different interpretation of the adjective ‘loose.’ According to Damon, Blake believed that Muhammad’s attitude to sex was a reaction against the Christian ideal of celibacy, which threatened the continuation of the human race and for this: “Antamon (the male seed) call’d up Leutha (sex as sin) from her valleys of delight:/And to Mahomet a loose Bible gave” (*Blake Dictionary* 259). In the Western imagination Islam from the time of its inception had been conceived as a religion associated with licentiousness and sexual profligacy. Read in the context, it seems proper to interpret the term ‘loose’ as having something to do with the sexual behaviour, and this interpretation also makes the context meaningful. As the human race begun “to wither,” there was a necessity of procreation and consequently, of the “loose
bible” (i.e. the Koran) propagating the licentious religion. Harold Bloom had a different interpretation of the word: the adjective ‘loose’ for him suggested that the Koran is “a poor reflection of the Bible” (qtd. in Whitehead 28).

The interpretation of Blake’s reference to the Koran by linking it to the popular tradition that held Islam to be the religion that preaches sex and Bloom’s interpretation of the “loose Bible” apparently mark Blake’s prejudice against Islam. However, from the beginning of the twentieth century there had been a critical tone that indicated that the Song of Los is perhaps a ‘eulogy’ of Islam. Angus Whitehead in “‘A Wise Tale of the Mahometans’: Blake and Islam 1819-26” quotes Percy H. Osmond, who in The Mystical Poet of The English Church (1919) condemned the poem as “a eulogy of Mohammedanism at the expense of Christianity” (281). Saree Makdisi in Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s suggests that the text of plate 3 of The Song of Los, in which “Los compares and demonstrates interactions of Eastern and Western cultures, reflects Blake’s reversal of a pervasive Heliocentric model of Western European identity emerging in the 1790s, which involved the repudiation and denial (as ‘other’) of the Afro-Asiatic sources of the earliest European cultures” (qtd. in Whitehead 28). The corroborative evidence cited by Makdisi is from the song “The Divine Image”:

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk or Jew
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.” (E 13)

Makdisi’s perspective, however, came to be questioned in Edward Larrissy’s article “Blake’s Orient.” Larrissy argues that Blake was familiar with the scholarly knowledge of the Orient and fell prey to the prejudices of the Orientalists. He interprets the word ‘loose’ as
‘licentious.’ Through the Orientalist notion of the “licentiousness of Islam,” according to Larrissy, Blake conceives of “a particular aspect of fallen humanity.” He quotes from Gibbon and James Bruce to show that the idea that Islam is a religion of carnality and sacrilege was still prevailing during Blake’s time (9-10). According to Larrissy, the concept of fallen sexuality is also there in “The Laocoön.” He cites the authority of Connolly who notes that the uncomfortable contortion of the body in the figures could represent diseased sexuality (10). Larrissy concludes that “‘loose’ is not a word that one would associate with Blake’s ‘unironic utterances,’ and this usage does contain an element of irony, for the concept of looseness only comes into existence as a result of sex under law, or Leutha, with whose name it offers an approximate rhyme” (10). Angus Whitehead finds this interpretation “traditional and textually based approach to the poem.” Whitehead compares Blake’s representation of Islam with other eighteenth century writings and the general attitude to the presence of the Muslim community in London and concludes that Blake’s engagement with Islam was positive, during a “period in which the religious faith [Islam] was still regarded by many in Britain as the “Devil’s Methodism” (30-32).

Notwithstanding Whitehead’s observations it is to be noted that Blake is certainly using one of the popular Orientalist tropes about Islam, but he is giving it a new twist. He is using it to criticise the Urizenic law that Christianity imposes on humanity. Islam in this sense becomes the religion that in some sense frees humankind from the bondage of Christian monasticism. Twisting an image and giving it a new meaning is quite common in Blake, as for example, the traditional symbol of the rose is endowed with a new significance in his poem “The Sick Rose.” Blake always tried to create his own system and own meaning as he wrote: “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man /I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create” (E 153). Larrissy rightly points to the fact that
‘licentiousness’ is the indicated meaning of ‘loose’ but he fails to appreciate the positive twist of the application of ‘looseness’ in the context of the poem.

Humberto Garcia in his recent book *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670–1840* argues that although the typical enlightenment attitude to Islam is exemplified by such text as Voltaire’s *Mahomet the Impostor*, there were also certain subversive writings that portrayed Islam in a different perspective. According to Garcia, this subversive tradition began with Henry Stubbe’s *The Rise and Progress of Mahometanism* (1674). This work portrays Mohammad as a wise legislator who reinstated primitive Christianity’s republican order. According to Garcia, the subversive thinking made a strong ground during the 1790s and this phenomenon is defined as “Islamic republicanism” by him. The term is explained as descriptive of how radical Protestants in the eighteenth century England self-consciously recast Islam in a constitutionally nationalist term. Blake, according to Garcia, belongs to this subversive tradition. To make his point he refers to the essay, “The Prophetic Tradition” by Norman O. Brown. Brown’s argument holds that Blake needs to be resituated within a larger prophetic tradition in which Islam is integral to Judeo-Christian history rather than a backward, derivative religion: “We will not get ‘Blake and Tradition’ right until we see the tradition as the Prophetic Tradition, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and heresies in Judaism, Christianity and Islam” (367). There is a necessity to analyse the other references to Islam in Blake to understand the nature of the author’s engagement with Islam.

*The Song of Los* presents an early engagement of Blake with Islam. Another allusion to Islam at the early stage of his career to Islam is found in his “Additions” to *The Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809. According to Erdman, Blake “contemplated holding another exhibition like the one of 1809, with another printed catalogue; he may have written these ‘Additions’ . . . before convinced of the failure of the first exhibition” (E 554). In his description of the
painting *A Vision of the Last Judgement* Blake mentions Mohammad. To understand the kind of position assigned to Muhammad it is necessary to understand Blake’s design. Blake wrote about the design of the painting to Ozias Humphry Esquire on February 18, 1808: “Christ seated on the Throne of judgment [*The Heavens in Clouds rolling before him & around him*] before his feet & around him the heavens in clouds are rolling like a scroll ready to be consumed in the fires of the Angels who descend [*before his feet*] with the [ir] Four Trumpets sounding to the Four Winds” (E 553). The design is further illustrated: “The right hand of the Design is appropriated to the Resurrection of the Just the left hand of the Design is appropriated to the Resurrection & Fall of the Wicked” (E 553). Muhammad in the painting is placed just beneath Ishmael on the right side: “Beneath the Cloud on which Abel kneels is Abraham with Sarah & Isaac [&] also Hagar & Ishmael” and “[Beneath] <Ishmael is Mahomet>” (E 556).11 Whitehead observes that Blake appears to be “alluding not only to the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic idea that the Arabs descended from the patriarch/prophet Abraham through his eldest son Ishmael, but also to the Muslim belief that the Qur’an received by Ishmael’s descendant Muhammad derives from the same divine source as the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David and the Gospel of Jesus” (30).

This inclusion of Muhammad in the painting and placing him beneath Ishmael among the ‘Just’ is very significant. In placing Mohammad among the ‘Just’ Blake is making a statement breaking away from the popular misconceptions about Muhammad that go back to the Crusades. He was writing against the typical tendency of the period exemplified by works like Voltaire’s *Mahomet the Impostor* which had been frequently staged and reprinted during the period (Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment* 5). But seen in the light of the argument by Brown that Blake should be placed within the larger prophetic tradition that includes Islam, Blake’s placement of Mohammad is not surprising. It is also in harmony with
Garcia’s configuration that “Islamic republicanism” made a strong ground during the 1790s. However, even this cannot be hailed as Blake’s revolutionary statement, since the question is if Mohammad is a Prophet like Jesus why he needs be judged by Jesus. Moreover, placing of Mohammad among the ‘Just,’ in A Vision of the Last Judgement stands in stark contrast to the illustration “The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mohammed.” Blake follows Dante and places Mohammad among the infernal spirits: his body cleft in two, the entrails coming out (see fig. 1).

![Image](image.png)

**Fig.1.** William Blake, "The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mohammed," *Illustrations to Dante's "Divine Comedy"*(1824-27), rpt. in Butlin, Martin, *The Paintings and drawings of William Blake* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre BA, 1981. Print; 812.56)

A history of the inception of the painting is given in the Blake Archive. According to the information provided in the archive, Blake began to compose 102 water colour illustrations to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in the fall of 1824 for his patron John Linnell. From
these Blake selected 7 designs to engrave. “The choice of subjects, all from the “Inferno,” may have been recommended, or at least approved, by Linnell. There may have been plans to engrave more designs, but even these 7 plates were left incomplete at Blake's death in 1827.”

Dante depicted both Mohammed and his son-in-law Ali as propagators of religious divisiveness and they are shown in the ninth gulf of hell punished for their schism.

Mohammed's body is split from groin to chin: “His guts hung between his legs and displayed/His vital organs, including that wretched sack/ Down the gullet” and Ali’s face is “cleft from chin to crown grief stricken” (Inf. 28.22-33). Blake seems to have stuck to the original description of Dante while depicting Mohammad in this illustration and it has puzzled critics for generations (Fuller, “Blake and Dante” 358). Angus Whitehead, however points to some certain deviations that Blake has from the Dante. The deviations according to him are: Firstly, in the positioning of Dante and Virgil: Whereas in Inferno Virgil and Dante are place on a rock “having a privileged panoramic view as they look down on Mohammad and Ali,” in Blake Dante are Virgil are placed alongside Mohammad on the ground.

Whitehead asserts that this positioning “suggests an intimacy and sympathy between the pagan and Christian poets and the Muslim prophet and first Shia Imam” (40). Secondly, in the detailing of the illustration: Dante’s description according to Whitehead is vague and indistinct. Blake gives Mohammad a distinct appearance and the bearded man in the middle of the portrait suggest ‘dignity’ compared to the rudimentarily drawn fellow suffers surrounding him. The design here resembles “Blake’s representations of a suffering Job or the figure of the old man led by a child in ‘London’ of Songs of Experience, and Jerusalem, plate 84” (40). Thirdly, in the Depiction of Ali: Whitehead notes Blake’s deviation from Dante in the depiction of Ali. Unlike Dante’s weeping figure, Ali is depicted here as if making a gesture: “Ali’s folded left arm and partially raised right hand may indicate a
teaching posture.” Whitehead suggests Blake may have known Ali’s piety and his revered position in Islam from reading Sale’s translation of the Koran (40). Fourthly, in the portrayal of the punishing fiend: In Dante when Mohammad is questioned about his punishment he is made to say that “a fiend/ hacks us thus cruelly” (Inferno 191). In Blake’s illustration here, there is no sign of cruelty and the fiend in question seems to be unwilling in his act. Whitehead compares Blake’s illustration to that of his friend John Flaxman’s illustration of the same to point out the difference. He concludes with reference to Robinson, to whom Blake supposedly said, “Dante saw devils where I see none—I see only good” (Robinson 6), that “[T]he angel-demon, punisher and punished, are represented by Blake as nobly suffering figures enslaved by Dante’s system of cruel vengeance” (41-42).

Whitehead, however, seems to miss a point: the melancholy tragic air that hangs around the painting. It becomes apparent when we put it by the next painting of Blake in this series “The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mosca De' Lamberti and Bertrand De Born.” The ‘demon’ here is projected with his back to the sinners. One of the sinners stands with his chopped off head; the other has his hands chopped off. The bold and muscular nature of the figures suggests no sense of melancholy. The chopped head has a very confused look. The fiend though with his back before us seems to be an avenging figure with one hand on his hips and a raised sword in another hand (see fig. 2).

However, the question is as to why Blake did not make drastic changes to Dante’s portrayal, as twisting traditional images to tell a different tale is quite common in his poetry. Was he following Dante because he was commissioned by Linnell to do so? There seems to be no obvious answer to the question. However, an interesting analysis is provided by Humberto Garcia in his lecture entitled “Holy Entrails and Schismatic Bodies: Esoteric Embodiments of Islam in William Blake’s Art.” Garcia suggests that “William Blake’s image
of the split and porous body offers a productive site for investigating radical Protestant and mystical depictions of the Orient and Islam in particular.” For him Blake’s “anatomical portrayal of the Prophet presents the intestinally exposed body as a microcosm of the universe.” However, the portrait cannot be straightforwardly praised because it is double edged –“the Prophet’s dangling entrails and Ali’s cleft head literally confirm their heretical crimes only to figuratively exalt their prophetic-messianic mission.”13 The conflict of the residual and the emergent content in the picture becomes evident.

Fig. 2. William Blake, "The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mosca De' Lamberti and Bertrand De Born," Illustrations to Dante's "Divine Comedy (1824-27), rpt. in Butlin, Martin, The Paintings and drawings of William Blake (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre BA, 1981. Print; 812.57).
Garcia’s focus in this lecture is another representation of Mohammad in Blake, namely ‘The Visionary Head of ‘Mahomet’’ (see fig. 3). The painting belongs to a series that Blake executed between 1819 and 1825, “in the presence, and probably at the behest of astrologer John Varley” (Whitehead 35). Martin Butlin finds the portrait of “strong forthright character but with no specific sign of approval or disapproval” (720). David Fuller defines it as “open face which implies no criticism” (358). Whitehead refers to Morton Paley’s suggestion that the painting resembles the traditional Muslim description of Mohammad only to reject it (Paley, Traveller 303). Blake depicts Mohammad at a younger age – a clean-shaven youthful man. Blake, according to Whitehead, may have been influenced by the following account in Sale’s “Preliminary Discourse”: “[the] inhabitants of Paradise will enjoy a perpetual youth; that in whatever age they happen to die, they will be raised in their prime and vigour, that is, of about thirty years of age, which age they will never exceed” (qtd. in Whitehead 36). By referring to Blake’s interest in phrenology, Whitehead concludes, “Blake, possibly informed by Sale and probably by early nineteenth-century British phrenological theory, appears, in his visionary portrait of ‘Mahomet,’ to have created an atypical, positive representation of the Prophet of Islam” (Whitehead 38).

Garcia interprets this image via Brown’s interpretation of the ‘prophetic tradition’ and eighteenth century ‘Islamic Republicanism.’ He argues that Blake represented himself through the portrait of Muhammad to assert his ‘poet-prophet’ identity. He points to the similarity of Blake’s 1807 oil portrait by Thomas Phillips to the “Visionary Head of Mahomet” by citing the authority of George Bentley (xx-xxvii). For Garcia Blake’s ‘Mahomet’ is not only an “incarnation of the ‘Poetic Genius’ dormant in all religions but his reincarnation in the ‘White’ English poet.” And this ‘white washing’ is explained as an example of what Srinivas Aravamudan describes as “tropological” revision of the imperial
and the racial ideologies.\textsuperscript{14} It is an “anti-imperial gesture” where the reader is compelled to imagine “Islamicizing of a ‘White’ English individual, a disruption of the English national imaginary.” Blake, he concludes, “refuses to orientalise Islam: Mahomet does not resemble the dark-skinned, turban-wearing despot traditionally depicted in Western writings, on the contrary he is “Blakean poet against empire” (Islam and the English Enlightenment 18).

Fig.3. William Blake, \textit{Visionary Head of Mahomet} (c. 1819), rpt. in Butlin, Martin, \textit{The Paintings and drawings of William Blake} (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre BA, 1981. Print; 720)

The most well-known and most discussed comment on Islam by Blake is his supposed reference to a “wise tale of Mahometans” in a table talk with Crabbe Robinson: “Perhaps the best thing he said was his comparison of moral with natural evil. ‘Who shall say what God thinks evil? That is a wise tale of the Mahometans—of the Angel of the Lord that murdered the infant’ [alluding to the Hermit of Parnell, I suppose]. 'Is not every infant that dies of disease in effect murdered by an angel’?”\textsuperscript{(7)}. Blake’s ‘wise tale’ is identified by Robinson to be the tale of \textit{The Hermit} by Thomas Parnell. In Parnell’s tale a Hermit sets forth to visit the
world; he meets with a young companion and in the course of their journey they meet various types of people and the young man commits certain acts incomprehensible to the hermit. The hermit is most horrified when the young man murders a child ruthlessly. To the stupefied hermit the young man explains each of his actions revealing himself an angel. Basically, it is a moral tale where there is no reference to Islam. Whitehead refers to a comment by Goldsmith referring to the origin of the tale to indicate its possible connection to Islam. Goldsmith remarked, “I have been informed by some, that it is originally of Arabian invention” (143-44). Another possible Islamic source that may have been available to Blake was Sale’s translation of the Koran where in surah al-khaf there is indeed a tale similar to Parnell’s The Hermit. Here Moses like the hermit is amazed at the apparently inexplicable behaviour of al- Khedr, who like the angel of Parnell’s poem kills a youth. Moses provides an explanation for each of his actions. The relevant portions are quoted in Whitehead: “[they] [. . .] proceeded: until they met with a youth; and [al Khedr] slew him. MOSES said, Hast thou Slain an innocent person, without his having killed another? Now hast thou committed an unjust action?” The explanation of this action is provided: “As to the youth, his parents were true believers; and we feared lest he, being an unbeliever, would oblige them to suffer his perverseness and ingratitude: wherefore we desired that their LORD might give them a more righteous child in exchange for him, and one more affectionate towards them” (Sale 246).

The explanation provided by the angel in The Hermit for killing the child is not completely the same:

Long had our pious Friend in Virtue trod,
But now the Child half-wean’d his Heart from God;
(Child of his Age) for him he liv’d in Pain,
And measur’d back his Steps to Earth again.
To what Excesses had his Dotage run?

But God, to save the Father, took the Son. *(Select Poets 256)*

Here there is no issue of the son being ‘perverse’ but the father is punished for being too eager in his love for the child, the indication being that the father would compromise his piety for the son. The Koranic tale and the tale told in *The Hermit* are similar in the death of the child/son. The important and relevant idea for Blake is that an angel or God’s representative kills the child: “Is not every infant that dies of disease in effect murdered by an angel?” Whitehead concludes that “Robinson’s account is intriguing, because it shows Blake supplementing Christian beliefs with a Muslim insight into the esoteric spiritual realities that lay behind ‘natural evil’” (35). However, it can be concluded that Blake’s reference to Muslim beliefs to explain “natural evil” conforms to the syncretism of the English speaking Orientalists of the eighteenth century, though he was making this statement deep into the nineteenth century on 10 December 1825.

Another important aspect of Blake’s representation of the East can be seen in his portrayal of the fallen state of Africa and Egypt and his use of Gothic elements in representing the fallenness. Africa/Egypt in Blake is a claustrophobic space where the Urizenic forces unleash their reign of terror. Blake’s Urizen is almost like the Gothic figure of oppression. Jennifer Randonis has analysed the *Book of Urizen* as incorporating many Gothic elements in their transformed form. Blake, according to Randonis, incorporates the Gothic motifs of narcissism or self isolation, the Dopple-ganger, and the quest in the *Book of Urizen*. The Gothic motif of wandering, according to Randonis, is transformed in the poem: Instead of depicting a hero embarking on the journey through the ‘chaos’ in “insane pursuit” of the Absolute, Blake transmutes the Gothic tradition by having Urizen formulate ‘chaos,’ the "eternal Abyss” itself.
In Blake, as pointed out by Punter, “the traditionalist features of the Gothic are
pressed into the service of an all embracing vision of the horror of the fallen world”
(Literature of Terror 104). The fallen world is like the Gothic dungeons defined by darkness
as opposed to the enlightened world defined by light and open air. In America: A Prophecy,
Blake uses such contrasting images: on the one hand he refers to the “inchaind (sic) soul shut
up in darkness” of the ‘dungeon’ on the other hand he urges “the slave grinding at the mill” to
“[R]ise & look out” as the “dungeon doors are open”: “The Sun has left his blackness, & has
found a fresher morning” (plate 6, E 53). The contrasting images of darkness and light, of
bondage and freedom, of confinement and open air are descriptive of the two contrary
worlds—the fallen and the regenerated.

The darkness described by Blake is not merely physical but spiritual; the open air and
light are symbolical of the spiritual light. The images describing the fall or the ‘fallen’ man in
The Song of Los: Africa are noteworthy in this regard. As noted earlier in this chapter the
“abstract philosophy” of Brahma is shown to initiate the beginning of the fall of man and this
fall is complete with the “philosophy of the five senses.” As the result of this all pervading
Urizenic law, there looms the shadow of darkness over the “mountains of Lebanon round the
deceased Gods/ of Asia; and the deserts of Africa.” In The Song of Los: Asia, the Asian kings
have created a web of network for oppression and hearing the revolutionary cry each of them
“ran out from his Web . . . / For the darkness of Asia was startled” by the “thought creating
fires of Orc.” The tyrannical laws have turned Asia and Africa into a Gothic castle where
forces of darkness rule. In the context of the contrast of brightness and darkness it should be
kept in mind that Blake associates light of the sun with spiritual regeneration, however, the
sun is also associated with blackness as the expression, “black grew the sunny African,”
shows. Blake might have two conceptions of the sun as the Swedenborgians believed: the
true sun gives both light and heat but the fallen sun is a sun of heat alone (Beer, *Blake’s Visionary Universe* 28-29). The blackness of the African, therefore, is the result of fall and the fall is of the sun itself. The fallen sun is regenerated as it overcomes its blackness.

The images repression of man in Blake’s poetry is also linked to the ravages of industrialization: “The terrible ball: the wedge: the loud sounding hammer of destruction (*Jerusalem*, plate 73, E 228). According to Punter, “Blake builds, with the help of Gothic tools, a universe of man/machine chimeras, of dehumanized men and women and of machines with a curious and malevolent mode of life. In this universe all is threat and violence . . .” (*Literature of Terror* 104). The enactment of the violence and repression produces distortion as following passage from the *Book of Ahania* (Chapter IV) reveals:

> The shapes screaming flutter’d vain
> Some combin’d into muscles & glands
> Some organs for craving and lust
> Most remain’d on the tormented void:

Urizen’s army of horrors. (E 88)

Oppression in Blake is thus related to deformity as repression by the Urizenic forces produces the tormented body.

Another hovering figure of Gothic terror in Blake is Polypus: “a mighty Polypus growing/ From Albion over the whole Earth: such is my awful vision” (*Jerusalem*, plate 15, E 159). According to Miner, “The polyp is perhaps Blake’s most terrifying symbolic creation, and it becomes in his mythology a proliferating monster of fearful asymmetry. . .” (198). Polypus is associated with Urizen. In *The Book of Ahania* Urizen metamorphoses into a Giant Polypus of the heaven: its origin is in England and from there it extends towards the whole world. The figure of polypus in Blake often represents “the dangerous force of a
homogenizing imperialism” (Ford 529) as described by Los in Jerusalem (plate 15, E 159, 1-5). As Talisa J. Ford observes, the mighty polypus, “a serpentine embodiment of imperial desire originates from Albion and assimilates to Albion, as Albion roots itself in every nation. But if the polypus can be said to be distinctly British, it nevertheless exceeds Britain in import, length, and width, as global ambition of Albion-as-Polypus magnify to fill the globe” (529).

According to Morton Paley, like the “science-fiction films which enlarge a lizard to a dinosaur Blake’s polypus is a creature whose body extends along the circumference of the planet, entwining itself from west to east” (The Continuing City 214):

In Verulam the Polypus’s Head, winding around his bulk
Thro Rochester, and Chichester, & Exeter & Salisbury.
To Bristol: & his Heart beat strong on Salisbury Plain
Shooting out Fibres round the Earth. thro Gaul & Italy
And Greece, & along the Sea of Rephaim into Judea
To Sodom & Gomorrha: thence to India, China & Japan.

(Jerusalem, plate 67, E 220)

Talissa J. Ford observes that Blake uses the image of the Polypus to mock the imperial ambitions of England. The vision of the mighty polypus may indeed be interpreted as evidence of Blake’s criticism of empire, but the vision is double-edged since it enacts the colonial vision of the British imperialism. Blake was writing the poem when Britain practically occupied and dominated the world. Moreover, if Blake was concerned with the evil of empire, it was empire as a sickness—the polypus spreading out from England also comes back to its origin. In this respect, Blake’s concern was similar to Burke’s. Even if he is critical of empire building, he is Anglo-centric.
The Anglo-centric and Christo-centric attitude of Blake is evident in Jerusalem. Blake wrote Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion between 1804 and 1820. Its prolonged period of composition makes Blake’s statements and views expressed in the poem more trustworthy. The poem has the theme of the fall and resurrection of Albion, Blake's embodiment of ‘man-Britain.’ Blake projects London as the centre of the origin of the civilization and man:

**All these Center in London** & in Golgonooza, from whence

**They are Created continually** East & West & North & South

**And from them are Created** all the Nations of the Earth

**Europe & Asia & Africa &** America, in fury Fourfold. (plate72, E 227)

As pointed out by Talissa J. Ford, the centring “in London & in Golgonooza” not only locates Golgonooza—Blake's term for the earthly city of Jerusalem—in London, but situates both London and Jerusalem as the centre and origin of all the other “Nations of the Earth” (531-32). Though this call to return to Jerusalem is to “dwell together as of old” Blake wants to return to a time when one nation encompassed all: ”O Albion let Jerusalem overspread all Nations / As in the times of Old.” The particular nations in question are then named in an impressive catalogue:

- France
- Spain
- Italy
- Germany
- Poland
- Russia
- Sweden
- Turkey
- Arabia
- Palestine
- Persia
- Hindostan
- China
- Tartary
- Siberia
- Egypt
- Lybia
- Ethiopia
- Guinea
- Caffraria
- Negroland
- Morocco
- Congo
- Zaara
- Canada
- Greenland
- Carolina
- Mexico
- Peru
- Patagonia
- Amazonia
- Brazil
- Thirty-two Nations
- And under these Thirty-two Classes of Islands in the Ocean
- All the Nations Peoples & Tongues throughout all the Earth. (plate72, E 227)
During the Enlightenment period, there was a development of an imperialist “history” in England that located the origins of culture and Christianity squarely in England and an extreme version of this belief was that England was Jerusalem, or the British were “true” Israelites. This is known as the Anglo-Israel movement. Barbara Tuchman has shown that how by “tortured interpretation of stray passages from the Bible,” the enthusiasts of the movement “convinced themselves that the English are the true descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel” (82). Blake’s engagement with the Anglo-Israelites is evident in the subtitle of the poem “The Emanation of the Giant Albion and his treatment of the subtitle in Jerusalem’s address “To the Jews”:

Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion! Can it be? Is it a Truth that the Learned have explored? Was Britain the Primitive Seat of the Patriarchal Religion? If it is true: my title-page is also True, that Jerusalem was & is the Emanation of the Giant Albion. It is True. And cannot be controverted. Ye are united O ye Inhabitants of Earth in One Religion. The Religion of Jesus: the most Ancient, the Eternal: & the Everlasting Gospel. (E 171)

Julia Wright's *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* rightly observes that *Jerusalem*, “perhaps precisely because it is Blake’s most ‘consolidated’ work, is also his most tyrannical, plotting the assimilation of the globe into his own political and religious vision.” She concludes: “Despite Blake’s early opposition to imperialism, Jerusalem envisions a kind of imaginative colonization, and religious proselytization, in which Albion’s and Jerusalem’s prior universality is reinstated over the national and cultural divisions of the present” (155). In Blake, therefore, the radical subversions get contained within the Christo-centric and Anglo-centric mode of thinking.
Notes

1 Keri made an earlier attempt to establish that Blake had a connection with Mrs. Bliss in his article “Mrs Bliss: a Blake Collector of 1794” in Clark Steve and David Worrall edited Blake in the Nineties (212–30).

2 Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Blake’s poetry and prose are from The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake (Ed. Erdman, David V. Electronic Edition. Virginia: Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, 2001). The copy of this edition available in Blake Archive is used here. The archive web address is: <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/erdman.html>. In the parenthesis reference is given to page numbers (e.g. E 12) and when possible to the plate numbers as well.

3 There are two prefaces to Wilkins’s translation of the Bhagvat-Geeta: one is written by Hastings in the form of a letter to Nathaniel Smith (5-16); the second is the translator’s preface written by Wilkins (23-26). The 1785 edition of the Bhagvat-Geeta is used here for the references.

4 Burke on the one hand projected an image of the Indian society with its pre-lapsarian innocence and beauty; on the other hand he depicted the despotic cruelty of the Indians supported by their company masters. He quoted from Holwell’s “Interesting Historical Events” to show the Edenic beauty of the Indian society: “‘In truth says this author, ‘it would almost be cruelty to molest this happy people; for in this district are only vestiges of the beauty, purity, piety, regularity, equity and strictness of the ancient Hindostan Government. Here the property as well as the liberty of the people inviolate. Here no robberies are heard of either public or private’” (Writings and Speeches of Burke 6: 306). On the contrary,
description of Devi Sing’s seraglio contains detailed description of tortures: crushed fingers and virgins raped in front of their fathers (Writings and Speeches of Burke 6: 420-21). Such descriptions, Franklin suggests, sounded new depths of Oriental Gothic. “[This] rehearsal of atrocities only serves to reinforce stereotypes of the Oriental capacity for the capricious and diabolically inventive cruelty” (“Accessing India” 54).

5 According to Butler, apart from Volney Thomas Paine’s The Age of Reason and The Rights of Man and Alexander Geddes’s Prospects of a New Translation of the Holy Bible (1786) were important influences on Blake. Geddes regarded Hebraism of the Old Testament as the religion of “stupid and carnal” people (407).

6 It should be mentioned here that Kejariwal uses the passage to show that it reveals two aspects of Hastings’ personality: a shrewd and down-to-earth administrator and empire builder and a liberal exponent for the study of literature.

7 The third chapter of the book entitled “The oriental idyll” is particularly relevant in this connection (96-144).

8 In Blake’s cosmology as developed in Milton and Jerusalem Eden is the place for the eternal, infinite, truly human. Around Eden is Beulah, a place for rest for the weaker spirits from the fiery exhilaration of Eden. Beyond Beulah is ‘abyss.’ Furthest from Eden is Ulro, the chaos, the place for the formlessness and non-entity. Los in Ulro is constantly building and rebuilding the beautiful city of Golgonooza which guards against chaos and is a refuge for souls escaping from chaos. Generation is between Ulro and Beulah. The fourfold pattern Eden-Beulah-Generation-Ulro fully emerges in Jerusalem.
In the *Vala or The Four Zoas* Milcah is “the fourth daughter of Zelophehad. When man is being subjugated, Milcah is allotted the task of fastening his ear into the rock” (*A Blake Dictionary* 273)

10 See Connolly’s *William Blake and Body* (60)

11 The punctuation marks or capitalizations in this quotation or other quotations of Blake are reproduced here as it is in Erdman.


13 For the abstract of the paper one may visit the following website:
http://williamblakeandenlightenmentmedia.wordpress.com/category/the-flames-of-orc-316/

14 Srinivas Aravamudan in *Tropicopolitan: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* speaks of “tropical revision of discourses of colonial domination.” Such a revision is contestation of European rule by ‘tropicopolitans,’ inhabitants of torrid zones that were the objects of Europe’s colonial ambition.

15 The images are repeated subsequently in *The Four Zoas* (E402, 18-24).

16 Beer shows that Blake had a dual conception of the sun. He contends that in this respect Blake was influenced by Swedenborg’s presumption that the true sun is divided into heat and light and was also influenced by the Egyptian mythology of Osiris, the lost sun and Typhon the fallen sun.