Disbelief in Disbelief

William Blake and the Moravian Brethren ÁGNES PÉTER

Abstract: This essay is focused on some temperamental and conceptual relations between Blake's vision and Ludwig Zinzendorf's theology and practice, and hopes to contribute, however modestly, to the clarification of the question of how much Blake's hypothetical contacts with the Moravian Church may alter his position among artists and thinkers concerned with the "limits" of the Enlightenment.

The question of how much William Blake's hypothetical contact with the Moravian Church would call into question his definition as a religious sympathizer with the dissenters of his time has recently presented perhaps the greatest challenge to Blake scholarship. In the last decade or so, the scholarly interest in European patterns of thought in Blake's work has received a new impetus from the very sparsely documented assumption that Blake was influenced by the theology and religious practice of the Moravian Church. Although there had been an oral tradition about contact between Blake's family and the Moravians, it was only in 2001–2004 that some documents were eventually found in the Moravian Archives in London which reveal that Blake's mother, her first husband and probably Blake's uncle on his father's side belonged to the congregation of the Moravian Church at Fetter Lane, London.

When publishing the documents, the scholars who found them, Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard, foretold that this discovery "opens up a new frontier in Blake studies" (Davies, Schuchard 42) since, in light of the new biographical data, "the scholarship of Blake needs to be repositioned within a very different cultural and religious background" (Davies 1316).

A number of critical responses have appeared since then. Schuchard published an entire book in 2006 in which she outlines an esoteric, mystical subculture with

clandestine brotherhoods across Europe whose sexualized spirituality was infused into revolutionary politics. She defines Blake based on that background. Her essay, "Young William Blake and the Moravian Tradition of Visual Art," shows how Zinzendorf's "struggle to move beyond speculative abstraction to imaginative visualization" and his "fleischliche Spiritualität" (fleshly spirituality) may have re-emerged in the early work of Blake (87). In 2006 Keri Davies published a convincing contrastive analysis of Moravian hymnody, iconography and Blake's Songs, Robert Rix, in his survey of Blake's indebtedness to the cultures of radical Christianity, detects all the points of intersection between Moravian sensibility and Blake's (mainly) later poetry with laudable respect for supporting evidence. Most recently, Alexander Regier has opened a new avenue to the research into the Moravian components in Blake's work by pointing out the importance of the polyglot milieu in which the Moravian congregations practised their faith in London and with which Johann Georg Hamann probably had some contact during his spiritual crisis and conversion in 1758. I assume that the theses of Alexander Regier suggest that as soon as more evidence is found regarding Blake's indebtedness to the Moravian tradition, a new source shared by Hamann and Blake will give new impetus to the research into the spiritual and linguistic kinship between them.1

In the present essay, I would like to suggest some further areas in which Moravian theology and religious practice can be a useful point of reference in the clarification of Blake's work, especially his later prophecies. My argument will be that there are a number of interconnected points which seem to suggest an extraordinary affinity between the charismatic leader of the Moravian Church in the first half of the 18th century, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) and Blake, a close kinship of vision which—in light of the scarcity of data at our disposal at the moment—will be attributed not so much to influence but rather to a shared source of inspiration, mainly the Christian mysticism of Boehme. The influence of Boehme on Blake has been discussed by a number of critics, though "precisely how much Boehme contributed to Blake's thinking has not been settled with certainty" (Rix 14). The focus of my present discussion, however, will be restricted to parallelisms between Zinzendorf and Blake, and the larger context of the influence of the theosophy of Boehme and the English Behmenists on Blake's work will be ignored.

Of this kinship see my "Second Essay in Romantic Typology: Lord Byron in the Wilderness" (Péter 39-54).

Luckily, Blake himself provided us with the basic facts concerning the influences that, in his view, had contributed to his spiritual and intellectual growth. He described his own mental history ("his lot in the Heavens") to John Flaxman in a letter dated 12 September 1800:

- Now my lot in the Heavens is this; Milton lovd me in childhood & shewd me his face
- Ezra came with Isaiah the Prophet, but Shakespeare in riper years gave me his hand
- Paracelsus & Behmen appeard to me. terrors appeard in the Heavens above

And the Hell beneath & a mighty & awful change threatend the Earth The American War began All its dark horrors passed before my face Across the Atlantic to France. (Erdman 707)²

Apart from the Bible and Renaissance poetry (and besides events in Hell: the political crises), he identifies alchemy and Christian mysticism as the most important stimuli in his development. Blake is not the only one to have found inspiration in these sources, indeed a number of the major figures of the 18th century embraced the same traditions in their desperate search to solve one of the major problems of the age: how to preserve the unity (and sanity) of the Western mind against the threat of a split between scientific investigation and artistic representation, or science and religion. How would it be possible to preserve some of the values of the Enlightenment while redressing at the same time the balance between reason and sensation, spirit and nature? An interesting and often unexpected kinship can be detected among people without any direct contact with one another which is due to the fact that a new interest emerged in Britain as well as in continental Europe in hermetic and mystical writings that chronologically date back to the Renaissance and even before. I am going to chart this family resemblance by concentrating on Blake's kinship with some basic aspects of the religious and visionary dimensions of the "spirituality" (Davies 1311) associated with the Moravian Brethren.

To bring into view the wider implications of the spiritual condition of Europe, I would like to quote a witness close to Moravianism, who had a shaping impact

² This passage is quoted by Rix as well (14).

on Modernism in criticism and theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher defined himself as "a Moravian of a higher order." His self-assessment was emphatically corrected by Karl Barth in his *History of Protestant Thought* in which he characterized Schleiermacher's course of thought as a search for a synthesis of the most pronounced opposites. In Barth's view Schleiermacher found inspiration in the synthesising tendency of the Moravian tradition in his search for harmony. What he bequeathed to the 19th century was, Barth claims, "a Moravianism of the highest order" (Barth 332).

In a 1830 public letter to his friend, the evangelical theologian Friedrich Lücke, Schleiermacher expressed his anxiety about the disintegration of the mind of Europe due to the conflict of scientific progress and the religious understanding of the human situation. Frustrated by the conflicting aspirations of the three main contemporary trends in the Evangelical Church of his country, the Pietists, the rationalists and the liberals, he wrote:

If the Reformation, from whose first beginnings our Church took its life, has not the aim of establishing an eternal covenant between the living faith and scientific research, which is free to explore upon all sides and works for itself independently, so that faith does not hinder research, and research does not preclude faith: if it has not this aim then it is not adequate for the needs of our age and we require another Reformation... Should history's verdict mean that Christianity would be identified with [the Pietists'] barbarism and scientific inquiry with [the rationalists'] disbelief. (qtd. in Barth 321, Bigler 169)

Zinzendorf's interpretation of the Biblical traditions in the first half of the 18th century and Blake's art at the turn of the 19th century can be seen as attempts to halt the advent of barbarism and disbelief.

In his youth Schleiermacher had close contacts with the famous group of young theology students in the Tübingen Stift, Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin, and we may assume that he shared their concepts of religion and poetry. Their joint statement, *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* [The Oldest System Program of German Idealism, 1796] articulated the need to overcome Kantian dualism in

the form of a new religion expressed in a new mythology, a mythology of reason as they called it in the document:

First I shall speak here of an idea that, so far as I know, has not before entered anyone's mind—we must have a new mythology, but this mythology must stand in the service of ideas, it must become the mythology of *reason*.

Before we make ideas aesthetic, that is, mythological, they are of no interest to the *people*, and conversely, before mythology is rational the philosopher must be ashamed of it. In the end, therefore, enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands, mythology must become philosophical and the people rational, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make philosophers sensuous. Then eternal unity will reign among us... Only then will the *equal* development of all powers await us, those of the particular person, as well as all individuals. (Halmi 172)

The aim, the "equal development of all faculties" emphasized in this system program was an aim which stimulated the minds of the major figures of contemporary poetry and philosophy/theology everywhere. Obsession with systems and search for a *new religion* are characteristic aspirations in the British literature of the Romantic Age as well. Though Blake was cut off from the major trends in British as well as Continental criticism,³ he responded most creatively to the situation diagnosed by the critics and poets of German *Frühromantik*: his mythology is an expression of a new religious vision of the world, and when his alter ego, the prophet Los, is building Golgonooza, the city of the arts, i.e. a spatial image of this new mythology, he famously says: "I must Create a System or be enslavid by another Mans" (Erdman 153).

The Moravian Brethren identified themselves as the descendants of the 15th century Hussites who had been savagely persecuted, many of them destroyed or scattered by the turbulent events of the Thirty-Years' War. In 1722 a great number of them, who still maintained some memory of their ancestors' creed, fled to Lutheran Saxony from Catholic Moravia and Bohemia to escape harassment. They

³ It has been suggested that Henry Fuseli, who was an ordained Zwinglian minister with a life-long interest in theology, as well as Lavater, who had close ties with Pietism as well as the Moravian Church (Erle 6), could have served as sources of information for him about the German scene.

were offered asylum by Count Zinzendorf who permitted them to build a village on his estate later known as Herrnhut. Thanks to his charismatic personality and ardent personal experience of Jesus, Zinzendorf, who had had no systematic theological education, developed a set of values acceptable for the different denominations that made up the community at Herrnhut, which has been described as an amalgam of Lutheran and Calvinist elements mixed with elements of Christian and Jewish mysticism, Gnosticism, and alchemy (Schuchard, Mrs. Blake 14). He had no interest in dogmatic rigour: creedal orthodoxy in his teaching is replaced by intense devotion to Christ. He was inspired by the Philadelphian ideal, an ideal of a Church which embraces all, even Catholics, in the name of the love of Christ: the Herrnhut congregation "implemented the idea of a free connection between all the churches, based on their common 'love of the Savior.' This notion was the all absorbing interest of Count Zinzendorf (Barth 44).⁴ Soon the Herrnhut Brüdergemeine (Unitas Fratrum) became synonymous with religious freedom. Its importance in the history of the religious landscape of Europe becomes quite evident as soon as one remembers that, on the one hand, Goethe in Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795-96)—which Friedrich Schlegel defined as one of the three greatest tendencies of the age-devoted a separate book, Book 6 entitled "Bekenntnisse einer Schönen Seele" ("Confessions of a Fair Saint" in Carlyle's 1825 translation) to the analysis of the religious sensibility that was associated with Herrnhut. On the other hand, Coleridge's Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit opens with a reference to this Book in Wilhelm Meisler. Herrnhut represents a typical form of religious quest in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

We have many eye witness reports of life at Herrnhut, one of them comes from Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782), who himself—along with Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788)—was a significant and characteristic representative of the spiritual undercurrent of the German Enlightenment. He was a Lutheran theologian

⁴ Blake's own Philadelphian ideal announced in the later prophecies of the unity of all who can recognize their potential divinity in Jesus through compassion and self-annihilation has been already pointed out by Robert Rix (9). In *Milton* (23[25]: 45–50) Blake subverts some of the basic dogmas of Protestantism, e.g. predestination, atonement as well as asceticism and repentance in the name of universal brotherhood: "O when shall we tread our Winepresses in heaven; and Reap / Our wheat with shoutings of joy, and leave the Earth in peace Remember how Calvin and Luther in fury premature / Sow'd War and stern division between Papists & Protestants / Let it not be so now! O go not forth in Martyrdoms & War / We are plac'd here for Universal Brotherhood & Mercy" (Erdman 119).

deeply affected by Pietism. To rehabilitate the contact between senses, perception and abstract reason, Oetinger produced a Christocentric alchemical eschatology drawing heavily on Boehme, Swedenborg (whom he translated into German) and alchemy. Parallelisms with his theosophical speculations had been detected in the works of Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, Hegel, Schelling, or perhaps it is better to say that 'he can be placed within a tradition of hermetic and theosophical thought to which many intellectuals in the second half of the eighteenth centuryturned to find a corrective to the rationalistic Wolffian philosophy of the German Enlightenment' (Heyden, Roy 68). In 1730, Oetinger went to visit Herrnhut and stayed there for several months as a teacher of Latin and Greek. He was deeply impressed by the search of Zinzendorf for the correct understanding of religious truths. It is very interesting how he was sympathetic and critical at the same time in his assessment of the state of affairs there: "O you dear people, I induce from everything you say that you insist not upon Holy Scripture but the Count's hymns." He criticized Zinzendorf's utilitarianism that held that the growth of his "community" was more important than the question of truth. Zinzendorf would make "a little treasure chest of savings" of the Bible with Jesus at the centre, thereby forgetting God the Creator. He also would disregard judgment and the Law, and thereby "open the door to arbitrariness and pious totalitarianism" (qtd. in Lindberg 244). Indeed disregard of judgment and the Law, arbitrariness and pious totalitarianism eventually led to a clash with the leading circles of Pietism and he was banished from Saxony on suspicion of heresy in 1736.

Zinzendorf laid a great emphasis on missionary work, and he sent out his disciples in all directions on the continent as well as overseas to preach their creed and convert people. Moravian type congregations emerged in Denmark, the Netherlands, America even as far away as Russia. A few of his followers soon appeared in London as well where in 1738 they established a Moravian Church in a former Presbyterian chapel at Fetter Lane. Zinzendorf himself arrived in London and stayed there for six years after his banishment. Whether Blake's mother's Moravian sympathies influenced Blake's mind to any degree is probably very hard to say, but it might be worth remembering that religious thinkers he followed with a great deal of interest, John Wesley as well as Swedenborg, also participated in the services of the Fetter Lane Congregation for a time. John Wesley actually experienced his evangelical conversion when under the impact of the Moravians' faith; he learned German

and went to visit the Brethren at Herrnhut to study their way of life and theology. For a time, the Moravian Church and Methodism were very closely knit together. Later on, however, John Wesley turned away from the Moravians partly because he could not accept their disregard for the ordinances of the church and their passive reliance on grace.

The Moravians placed an emphasis on "stillness." Those who did not yet have faith should "be still," and await God's grace. That is, they should abstain from Communion and even from excessive prayer, Bible reading, and attendance at church, regarding such as supererogatory. (Davies 1302)

If Blake had any knowledge about the "stillness" practised by the Moravians he probably would have been in full sympathy: he never attended church and in his later prophecies, patience is a quasi-religious virtue that Los inculcates as a condition that precedes vision.⁵

What seems to be the most conspicuous aspect of the similarity between the respective answers Blake and Zinzendorf gave to the challenge of their times is the intense dynamism of their vision maintained by the dialectical contraries which in their view are to be reconciled by imagination or faith so that we could arrive at a true vision of the inner and external man. Contemplation and prophetic enthusiasm, wrath and pity, the Law and Mercy, Elohim/Yahweh and Jesus, the masculine and the feminine are some of these contraries. The reconciliation of the antithesis between Elohim/Yahweh and Jesus is a central problem of their systems. Zinzendorf believed as much as Blake in the unity of the Old and the New Testaments and claimed that the God of the two Testaments is the same though His person undergoes some modification. Zinzendorf actually read the New Testament as a hermeneutic to the Old one, an exegesis of, and initiation to the Old Testament (Deghaye 178). In this dialectical view, Yahweh/Elohim and Christ mutually define each other and the antithesis between the Law and Mercy is reconciled. The narrative constituted by the 21 plates of Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job can be read as the story of Job's spiritual growth until he understands this mystery. (Incidentally, both Zinzendorf and Blake hated the word "mystery.") The error of the traditional view

⁵ See e.g. Los's long speech addressed to his Sons in Milton 23[25]: 32-61 (Erdman 119).

of the Old Testament God as Creator and Judge is disclosed in Plate 13, "And then the Lord answered Job from the Whirlwind" (Fig. 1.). In this moment of revelation, Job and his wife are granted a vision of the identity of the Judge and the Redeemer. The Lord answering from the whirlwind in the crucified position of Christ is a disclosure of the organically connected Creator and Savior aspects of the divinity.

In *Jerusalem* (16: 61-69) the same identity of the Law and the Gospels is symbolically represented by the sculptures in the halls of Los:

All things acted on Earth are seen in the bright Sculptures of Los's Halls & every Age renews its powers from these Works With every pathetic story possible to happen from Hate or Wayward Love & every sorrow & distress is carved here Every Affinity of Parents Marriages & Friendships are here In all their various combinations wrought with wondrous Art All that can happen to Man in his pilgrimage of seventy years Such is the Divine Written Law of Horeb & Sinai: And such the Holy Gospel of Mount Olivet & Calvary... (Erdman 161)

The Yahweh/Elohim of the Old Testament is identical to Christ: this is the gnosis that the truly initiated will be able to recognize. The idea alters the traditional concept of Christ in a radical way. In Karl Barth's judgment, Zinzendorf was the greatest and probably the only genuinely Christocentric religious thinker in modern times (qtd Beyreuther 9).⁶ In his great study of Zinzendorf's theology, Erich Beureuther quotes the Count's graphic definition of Christ's position in Creation:

The importance of precision: the Redeemer is to be represented as the circle around all things, which goes round and round, in which the universe is closed and which cannot be transcended by anything in all Eternity: all things are from him, through him and for him so that he could for ever control and reign over the whole Creation. From him:

⁶ The central role of Christ in the Moravian Church has been traced back to the theology of Jan Hus. Hus and his followers emphasised the sovereignty of Christ instead of that of God; Christ in the teachings of Hus was Creator, Saviour, Redeemer, the most active force from creation through redemption to the end of time: "the Father and the Holy Ghost are merely supporting characters" (Font 27).

he has created all. Through him: nothing, neither anything spiritual, nor anything material can ever emerge on the earth and in the heavens but through his hands, mediante illo. (qtd. in Beyreuther 10)⁷

In one of his London sermons, nine of which were published in English in 1757, Zinzendorf admitted that "the Father and the Holy Spirit are Co-Creators (Mitschöpfer)," but all the activity emanates from Christ alone:

He had invented the creation of all things before the beginning, before the foundation of the world was laid. Then had the Son, who played on the Father's lap and refreshed the Father forever, created all (mark my words!) [...] The Holy Divinity is pleased to see that the beloved Son has created hundreds of worlds or stars. (qtd. in Beyreuther 13)⁸

In Zinzendorf's mythological narrative of the creation, Christ represents the limit: he is defined as Creator since he contains the archetypes of all things (Deghaye 471).

In a way that is reminiscent of Zinzendorf's Christocentrism, in the late prophecies Blake moves his mythological Christ centre stage, where he seems to overshadow the Father and the Holy Spirit, implying a radically unorthodox concept of the Holy Trinity. Blake arrived at this position after much deliberation and along a difficult path. As is fairly well known, after the publication of *The First Book of Urizen* in 1795, Blake underwent a deep spiritual and artistic crisis: there is a lengthy hiatus in the history of his public performances; his private writings, however, directly reflect his sense of disorientation. And then, in 1802, all of a sudden, his melancholy was replaced by extreme elation and high energy. In his letter to Thomas Butts

⁷ The original: "Die Wichtigkeit der Präzision, den Heiland vorzustellen als den Zirkel aller Dinge, der um und um geht, in dem das Universum eingeschlossen ist und über den es nicht hinauskommen wird in alle Ewigkeiten: das ist der große Punkt der Religion, von ihm, durch ihm und zu ihm sind alle Dinge, daß er die ganze Kreatur ewig beherrsche und regiere. Von ihm: er hat alles geschaffen. Durch ihn, es kann nichts vorkommen im Himmel und auf Erden, nichts geistlichs, nichts leiblichs, es geht allemal durch seine Hand, mediante illo."

⁸ The original: Zinzendorf räumt ein, daß "auch der Vater und der Heilige Geist Mitschöpfer sind. "Doch alle *Aktivität* bei der Schöpfung geht allein von Christus aus. Der hat erfunden die Schöpfung aller Dinge, vor dem Anfang, ehe der Grund zu der Welt gelegt war. Da hat der Sohn, der auf des Vaters Schoß spielte und seinen Vater ewig erquickte, erfunden (merke, was ich sage) [...] Es freuet sich die heilige Gottheit, daß der liebe Sohn so viel hundert Welten oder Gestirne geschaffen."

(22 Nov. 1802), he reports on his emergence from darkness to light, and closes his report in the following way:

And now let me finish with assuring you that Tho I have been very unhappy I am so no longer I am again Emerged into the light of Day I still & shall to Eternity Embrace Christianity and Adore him who is the Express image of God but I have traveld thro Perils & Darkness not unlike a Champion I have Conquerd and shall still Go on Conquering Nothing can withstand the fury of my Course among the Stars of God & in the Abysses of the Accuser My Enthusiasm is still what it was only Enlarged and confirmd. (Erdman 720)

There is a tradition to reading the above and similar statements from roughly the same period as indicative of Blake's return to a more or less Anglican form of Christianity. That would have been a very typical story, the usual path of the early Romantics from free thought, from "unchartered freedom"⁹ to the security of orthodox Christian faith. Blake, however, in my reading of this crucial turning point in his life, is using the religious terminology of the evangelical experience of conversion or second birth, but he is actually speaking about his most pressing artistic problem. He recognized that he could incorporate Jesus into his mythology to give it a focus and a central symbol. Thus he could reconcile his spiritual aspirations with the sensuous image, the only effective tool of his craft. From this time on, Jesus becomes a central figure in his myth, and whereas previously, e.g. in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell he relies on the synoptic gospels and the historicity of Jesus to define the Jesus of his early works, who was a revolutionary hero subverting the Law, now the background is increasingly the Gospel according to St John, and Jesus is the Word made flesh, Logos incarnated, Jesus is a symbol of the potential identity of the divine and the human. Blake's mythology becomes Christocentric.

Blake's most radical statement concerning the aesthetic implication of his emblematic Jesus can be found in his commentary, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, composed in 1810. He describes his own representation of the Last Judgment and explains one of the motives: "Jesus is surrounded by Beams of Glory in which are seen all around him infants emanating from him; these represent the Eternal Births of

⁹ See Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty," l. 37.

Intellect from the Divine Humanity" (Erdman 562). The infants in the halo around the head of Christ are symbolic of the eternal creativity of the divine/human mind. In Blake's fully developed mythology, Jesus is the archetypal source of all the forms which constitute visionary art: "All things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the Divine body of the Saviour [sic!] the True Vine of Eternity" (Erdman 555).

Zinzendorf's God is transcendent, inaccessible, ineffable and unknowable. Very early on, Zinzendorf realized that for him there was only one alternative, either to be an atheist or to believe in Jesus: there is no direct access for man to the divinity (Deghaye 453). Without Christ's compassion, the divinity is a dark frightening force, sometimes identified by Zinzendorf with hell or with aspects of the gnostic or cabbalistic Devil. This image of the primordial God, which is the face of the divine when separated from its contrary Christ-like aspect, has been described as very close to the dark world in Boehme's theosophy (Deghaye 452). "In his first principle God is the master of Hell, and Boehme inclines dangerously towards identifying him with Satan. The world of Hell is the *fundamentum*, that is, the basis or the first level of the universe" (Koyré 405).¹⁰

Zinzendorf, for his part, suggests that for those who regard Christ as an abstraction the devil is found lurking in the depth of this Godhead (Deghaye 453). This terrifying, diabolical divinity is well known to Blake as well: he can be found in the deep abyss of the human soul. In Plate 12 of his illustrations of the Book of Job he offers a graphic image of the terror in face of this threatening cosmic/psychic force (Fig. 2). One of the legs of this Creator God, who simultaneously points at the Law and at damnation, has a hoof: he is identified with Satan.

All the similarities I have touched upon can be explained by a reference to a tradition of hermetic and theosophical thought that, after a long period of suppression, came to the surface and in the second half of the eighteenth century was drawn upon by thinkers and artists who wanted to complement Enlightenment anthropology by disclosing the emotive and irrational energy in the creative human mind. In conclusion, without any further evidence of Blake's interest in the Moravian Church, one tends to doubt if indeed the Moravian background of his mother and his father's relations is likely to change our image of Blake as a radical opponent of the artistic, clerical and political establishment in any significant way.

^{10 &}quot;Dans son premier principe Dieu est le maître de l'enfer, et Boehme penche dangereusement vers son identification avec Satan. Le monde de l'enfer est le *fundamentum*, c'est-à-dire la base ou le première étage de l'Univers."

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FIGURES

Fig. 1. William Blake. The Book of Job. Plate 13.



Fig. 2. William Blake. The Book of Job. Plate 12.

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