

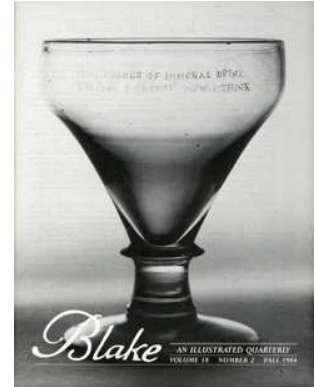
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R E V I E W

Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's
Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art*

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REVIEWS

Biblical Tradition in
Blake's Early Prophecies
The Great Code of Art

LESLIE TANNENBAUM



Leslie Tannenbaum. *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982. xiii + 373 pp.

Reviewed by Jerome J. McGann

What critical and scholarly books are indispensable for an advanced study of Blake—leaving aside original, facsimile and critical texts of the works themselves? They are not many. G.E. Bentley, Jr.'s *Blake Records* is probably one, though it could of course be foregone if one had access to the early "records" themselves. David V. Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* is essential, as is Robert Essick's *William Blake, Printmaker*. After those, a number of scholars might add Northrop Frye's *Fearful*

Symmetry, which has been a seminal contribution to modern Blake studies. Its influence has been so great, however, that the student could read in its stead any number of other critical studies. *Fearful Symmetry* is not in itself essential to the study of Blake any longer, unless one would wish to study the reception history. Frye's is a wonderful book, but it could be dispensed with. But we could not do without Erdman's, Essick's, and probably Bentley's books.

I have posed this question about Blake scholarship because Leslie Tannenbaum's recent book *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* establishes a *prima facie* claim not merely to be taken seriously, but to be weighed against fundamental studies such as those noted above. The book requests such a judgment for two reasons. First, the topic which Tannenbaum has addressed is crucial for the student of Blake. The influence of Milton on Blake, which has engaged a host of Blake subcontractors, is in fact a tributary subject when viewed in its proper context—that is to say, in the context of Blake's absorption within the biblical tradition generally. Second, the handful of articles on Blake which Tannenbaum published before the appearance of this book, and in particular the essay on *The Book of Urizen* (incorporated and revised in the book), showed that Tannenbaum would be setting himself ambitious goals and standards. This is in fact the case. His study of the biblical tradition—a second volume on the later prophecies is to follow—has little in common with Avni's or Roston's easy-going works on the Bible and romanticism.

So, what do we have now that we have Tannenbaum's book? Ten chapters are here, the first four dealing with Blake's relation to the biblical tradition in general, the last six with a series of specific works (*America*, *Europe*, *The Song of Los*, *The Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*). Chapter 1 takes up Blake's relation to the institutional and literary-critical traditions which mediated Blake's understanding of the Bible, and chapters 2–4 move from that base to consider what Tannenbaum regards as the most important elements which Blake took from those traditions. These include Blake's adherence to a prophetic ideology, a typological and allegorical method, and a dialectical or participatory rhetoric which aimed to reproduce an incarnational event in the artistic experience itself.

Students of Blake will find in these chapters an excellent summation of the knowledge which scholarship has already gathered, albeit in widely dispersed forms and areas. The strength of this work lies in its clear presentation and scrupulous synthesis. Unlike Essick's book, however—and least of all unlike the startling scholastic apocalypse which Erdman's work produced—Tannenbaum's book does not carry us beyond what we already know into fresh and unexplored

territories. The comparison with Essick is especially interesting, because Essick's book, like Tannenbaum's deals with subjects and materials which many people in many different fields have been concerned with. Essick's book is, however, at once a careful recapitulation of earlier findings and an important, not to say dramatic, advance.

For myself, reading Tannenbaum's first four chapters was most useful for clarifying the current state of Blake studies in the area of biblical tradition—for indicating very clearly what we now know (or think we know), and what has yet to be done. What Blake scholarship still badly needs is an elucidation of the social and institutional networks in which the literary-critical traditions were immersed, in the eighteenth century especially. Tannenbaum takes up some of these matters in his first chapter but the treatment is schematic and only shows that a great deal of original historical scholarship has yet to be done if we are to have anything more than an ideological understanding of Blake's use of his prophetic and typological traditions. When this historical matrix is provided for these biblical and religious traditions, we shall be prepared for a truly monumental synthesis of Erdman's work and Tannenbaum's interests.

The six chapters which concentrate on individual

works are the most important part of this book. Here Tannenbaum offers close readings of the particular poems, and in the process he provides the reader with a wealth of new, particular information about their allusive contexts. Most of this new material is related to the Bible or its exegetical tradition, but Tannenbaum unearths a fair amount of other, equally interesting materials used by Blake out of other traditions. His discussions of *The Song of Los* and *The Book of Los* are especially notable in this respect. Less catholic but even more significant are the (related) chapters on *The Book of Urizen* and *The Book of Ahania*, which will serve as points of departure in Blake studies for some time, I suspect.

One interesting aspect of Tannenbaum's individual readings is that he does not attempt to place these poems in some processive interpretative scheme. No "development" is essayed in the presentation, no suggestion that these poems have to be understood in some significant order of production. But neither are the poems looked at in a purely seriatim fashion. Tannenbaum deals with them in their historical order of composition, but he is not interested in that order as such. Rather, he is concerned to demonstrate how the poems make their special and particular uses of the biblical traditions which Blake incorporated and transformed.

Charu Sheel Singh. *The Chariot of Fire: A Study of William Blake in the Light of Hindu Thought*. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Univ. of Salzburg, 1981. iv + 194 pp. \$25.00.

Reviewed by Mary V. Jackson

The best that can be said for this book is that it was too hastily rushed to press. It is a model of botched research offered in support of half-thought-through ideas conveyed in prose that is generally stale and often fuzzy-minded. Added to these are a smug patronizing of almost

anyone who has ever written about Blake or thought about Hindu thought and a pointless peevishness about Anglo-Indian relations. The wonder is that *The Chariot of Fire* was published at all. It is the 104th volume of the *Salzburg Studies in English Literature, the Romantic Reassessment*, edited by Dr. James Hogg. Heretofore, the Romantic section has published books like Boleslaw Taborski's *Byron and the Theatre* (1972), Henry R. Beaudry's *The English Theatre and John Keats* (1973) and Warren Stevenson's *The Divine Analogy: A Study of the Creation Motif in Blake and Coleridge* (1972)—works that demonstrate, at the least, reliable scholarship and a respectable level of critical accomplishment. *Chariot* is one of the series' most recent books on Blake, and that is a pity. For the publication of a work like this does nothing whatsoever to enhance Blake criticism in general, let alone the troublous matters of Blake's art and belief in relation to certain mystical traditions. It is difficult enough to keep one's critical footing as one tracks Blake's poetry through snow (or sand), without having to do so knowing that something perilously close to a travesty of such legitimate efforts is around. Prof. Singh is right when he tells us that Blake's indebtedness to Hinduism is significant and has been somewhat neglected; but we'd all have been better off had it remained so a bit longer.

The Foreword by Prof. P.S. Sastri sets a tone that