

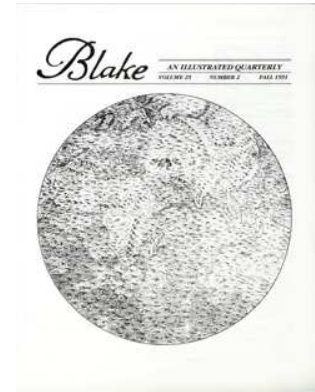
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

David V. Erdman, ed., *Blake and His Bibles*

Karen Shabetai

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 25, Issue 2, Fall 1991, pp. 92-93



Huib Emmers has abandoned all convention, too: his music is a mixture of different styles and genres—rock, Stravinsky, a remote Verdi—but he adapts them so easily that it sounds attractive and good. Some instrumental progressions are loud and stiff, chords hammered on the pianos, whiplashes on the drums, and venomous motifs on the horns, and some vocal passages are brimming with warmth and lyricism. In general, the music is very bright, contrasting nicely with the lyrics which are often heavy and emotionally charged. The “energy” Blake talks about is in the music and creates space in the slightly suffocating atmosphere. Furthermore, the vocal parts—often accompanied in unison by one instrument (violin, cello, clarinet)—are brilliant.

The *ad hoc* ensemble, alternately directed by Ernst van Tiel and Lucas Vis, consists of excellent musicians, and all credit is due to the singers and actors, too. In short, a professional show. The location does not add much, however. Vogelenzang on a week night is nothing more than a desolate village, and all that remains are a few location-bound lighting effects. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort.

(Originally published in *De Groene Amsterdammer*.)

David Erdman, ed. *Blake and His Bibles*. West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 1990. xvii + 237 pp. \$30.00.

Reviewed by Karen Shabetai

The oddities and disappointments of this collection begin on its title page, which includes the single appearance of its distinguished editor, David Erdman, who has contributed neither a preface, introduction, nor essay. The title is the second problem—it raises expectations that the collection's individual essays do not fulfill. One would expect *Blake and His Bibles* to have contributions from such Blakeans as Northrop Frye and Leslie Tannenbaum, who have written so wisely on this book's subject—the former shaping decades of Blake studies with the biblical orientation of his approach, the latter for his careful placement of Blake's early prophecies in the context of biblical traditions. Because of the collection's title, I also expected to find an essay by Jerome McGann, who has recently offered an historical account of Blake's bibles (the Geddes translation) in *The Book of Urizen*. The collection might have been enlivened had there been a contribution from Harold Bloom, who has caused such a stir with his depiction of a very Blakean sounding God, by the earliest author(ess) of the Hebrew Bible, called “J” by followers of the “documentary hypothesis.”

Still, most of the collection's authors, if they aren't as lively as Bloom might have been, are well worth reading, especially for their careful historical and textual analysis. If one wonders how the critical fashions of the last decade could have passed the contributors by seemingly without notice,

one must enjoy the clarity of expression in almost all of the essays. Certainly refreshing in a book appearing in 1990 (though there is nothing to indicate that any of the essays were written after 1987) is the absence of a politically correct agenda as well as the authors' clear respect for Blake.

Mark Trevor Smith, who provides both the introduction and an essay, takes as his subject Blake's enigmatic attitude towards systems. He concludes with the paradoxical position that Blake was simultaneously a system-builder and a system-smasher. When Florence Sandler takes up the compelling annotations to Watson's *Apolo-gy for the Bible*, she reveals, among other things, a nuanced attitude to deism, which is often ignored in the face of Blake's own less subtle articulations on the subject. The essays by J. M. Q. Davies, John Grant, and Mary Lynn Johnson are, characteristically, thoughtful and illuminating. With close attention to the rich subtlety of Blake's illustrations to Milton's “Nativity Ode,” Davies' “Apollo's Naked Human Form Divine: The Dynamics of Meaning in Blake's Nativity Ode Designs” contrasts the two sets of illustrations (the Whitworth and Huntington versions) to reveal Blake's “post-enlightenment perspective” on Milton's theme. Grant takes up the question of Blake's Christianity by examining the representations of Jesus in the *Night Thoughts* illustrations. These illustrations show the “wide range of sympathies and dis-sympathies to Young's text” (73) as well as to Young himself. Grant describes “the anti-theism of Blake's vision of Jesus,” which he locates in several works by Blake, as early as, he cautiously suggests, *All Religions Are One*. In an essay examining Blake's illustrations for the Book of Psalms, Johnson discovers “Blake's interpolation of Jesus into Psalms 18, 85, and 93” to be at once compatible with Christian and Jewish biblical traditions, and part of Blake's “lively, if subdued critical commentary on the Scriptures” (146). Her notes are especially complete and informative.

Perhaps the most valuable essay of the collection is Sheila A. Spector's "Blake as an Eighteenth-Century Hebraist," not so much for its conclusions as for its documentation of biblical traditions and the interesting questions her investigation implicitly invoke. Scholars who have claimed that Blake was not competent to participate in debates that require knowledge of the Hebrew language have typically based their arguments on the accuracy in Blake's use of the language in his works. But such arguments are anachronistic, because, says Spector, Hebrew was in a "state of linguistic anarchy" in the eighteenth century. While she illustrates the chaotic state of the Hebrew language during the eighteenth century in order to show the freedom with which Blake could use the language, she doesn't evaluate to what extent Blake was a critic of the specific set of beliefs and attitudes that she uncovers in her sources. While Spector convincingly refutes arguments that Blake knew little or no Hebrew and, by thoughtful historical analysis, she shows that in fact Blake participated, though perhaps surreptitiously, in eighteenth-century debates about Hebrew and the Jews in relation to Christianity, she never really addresses Blake's attitudes toward Jews. When examining Blake's use of eighteenth-century Christian Hebraism, Spector is content to stick to linguistic issues, though she herself demonstrates that in the eighteenth century "religion was not a study distinct from linguistics" (180).

But what Spector does do, she does to great effect. She examines four historical topics in order to characterize eighteenth-century Hebraism: "Anti-Semitism, Linguistics, Mythology, and Mysticism." The first of these, she claims, is the most important because linguistics was put in the service of religious arguments; it was the consensus of the time, oddly, that Jews were ignorant and that the text of their Bible was full of errors, "the only difference

Blake and His Bibles

Edited by
David V. Erdman

with an Introduction by
Mark Trevor Smith



LOCUST HILL PRESS
West Cornwall, CT
1990

of opinion being whether or not they deliberately mutilated the text" (181). "Anti-Semitism seems to be a means of questioning the authority upon which more orthodox interpretations of the Bible are predicated while, at the same time, providing a ready scapegoat for Christian misinterpretations of the Bible" (182).

Spector examines Blake's knowledge of Hebrew in the context of eighteenth-century Christian Hebraism. She rules out the supposition that Blake's mistakes in Hebrew came from carelessness or error because the poet was "an extremely careful artist": "Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place" ("To the Public"). She offers examples of Blake's accurate use of Hebrew words and phrases in the marginalia of his illustrations to demonstrate that "when he so desired, Blake could provide us with correct Hebrew lettering" (199). Spector attributes inaccuracies to technical errors, such as those that may occur in the etching process, and to deliberate and meaningful deviation. For example, she challenges Cheskin's conclusions in the pages of this journal (*Blake* 12 [1978-79]: 178-83) that Blake's errors in lettering were due to ignorance. When

Blake reverses an aleph when transcribing the seventh commandment—"Thou shalt not commit adultery"—it is, significantly, only the aleph in the negation that he gets wrong. Spector suggests that he wishes to render the commandment ambiguous, which would be consistent with his attitude toward chastity expressed elsewhere in his works. She offers several examples using similar logic to make sense of Blake's seeming errors in his Hebrew.

Spector is always cautious, more suggestive than certain in her conclusions. As she says, she wishes to facilitate further inquiry, a fertile approach missing in the closing off of further discussion with Cheskin's claim that "Blake knew little or no Hebrew." Her admirable caution, though, regrettably limits the conclusions she is willing to draw. Although she makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of Blake's Hebrew, Spector could do more with the fascinating historical data she offers. She might, for instance, have speculated about Blake's position on anti-semitism. In reviewing the fascinating, if shocking, virulence of the anti-semitic sources she uncovers to document the importance of anti-semitism to biblical commentaries in Blake's day, one cannot help but wonder how Blake would have responded to this material. Did he passively accept the views of his contemporaries? What can we make of blatant anti-semitic statements that seem to be so much at odds with the egalitarian spirit of his entire project? (In his annotations to Watson's *Apolo-*gy, he refers to "Jewish Scriptures" as "only an Example of the wickedness & deceit of the Jews," whom he two pages later calls liars, "Murderers & Revengers.") Taking up these kinds of issues would have provided a currency as well as a vivacity that the collection of essays as a whole lack.