

***Genesis: William Blake's Last Illuminated Work.* Edited, with a commentary, by Mark Crosby and Robert N. Essick. San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 2012. Pp. 100. £58. ISBN 9780873282475.**

As his life ended, Blake began to re-write the Bible. Crosby and Essick's *Genesis* shows the glorious result. This first ever complete, full-size, colour reproduction is a joy to behold. On the manuscript's eleven mighty pages (379 x 276mm) we not only have Blake's revised version of the King James Bible (1.1-4.15) accompanied by his own pungent chapter headings but, naturally, a collection of illuminating designs too. *Genesis* is very much a work in progress – with script ranging from coloured gothic to rough pencil, and images that run from two gorgeous title pages to vague squirls and dashes – whose 'unfinished state...offers a window onto Blake's method of graphic composition' (36). The editors identify six layers of lettering which bespeak 'a back-and-forth, non-linear process...with every layer, Blake re-formatted and thus re-conceptualized his preliminary intentions'. Moreover the 'same process of re-execution and re-conceptualization is evident in the designs' (32) too. Blake's belief, 'The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind' was clearly life-long.

As its previous editor Robert Wark notes, this sketchy manuscript is 'a puzzle' throwing up interpretative challenges which Crosby and Essick do indeed 'assault' (17, 21) and many of their claims are beautifully illustrated. The presentation of parallel Blakean and biblical texts, and their forensic analysis of the designs alongside Blake's other visual treatments of biblical themes, indisputably prove this to be a 'Christological version of Genesis' (46): Elohim becomes Jehovah, a harbinger of Jesus through his forgiveness of Cain. Highly informative sections on the Trinitarianism of Blake's patron John Linnell and on contemporary debates about the Genesis tradition underscore their case.

Less thoroughly convincing is the editors' insistence on another underlying meta-narrative in which material creation limits imagination and leads to the fall, tragically dividing humanity's androgynous ancestor and dooming us all to death: 'the creation of gendered states initiates the descent into mortality' (34). This is a venerable story but one it is hard to see told quite as clearly as Crosby and Essick's theme-fixing titles for Blake's designs on leaves 5-9 imply: The Creation of Adam, The Creation of Eve 1 and 2, The Judgment of Adam and Eve, The Expulsion from Eden. For example, outside of its present context Adam's 'Creation' would not readily be apprehended as a treatment of that theme, while the 'Expulsion' is little more than an arrangement of circles. Also, the more transparent Adam and Eve scenes may be less tragic than the editors' commentary suggests. For instance, Adam on Leaf 7, recumbent beneath a busty, beautiful Eve, is said to have his 'neck arched back as if in agony' (43) yet his posture could as easily suggest dreamy sleep – he does, after all, smile at her appearance on Leaf 6. Interpretation of Eve's gesture and expression on Leaf 8, the 'Judgement' scene, seems excessively gloomy too: 'signifying an awareness of her sexuality and consequent shame' (43) they contend. Actually, as Eve touches her breasts and genitals, while looking toward Adam and cocking her head at an open-mouthed serpent, she seems anything but abashed or ashamed.

Detailed and informative analysis of the two title-pages further supports their overarching arguments. Previously the variants had been seen as sublime and beautiful, but Crosby and Essick feel 'both can be interpreted as a movement from the Holy Ghost downward, an implicit visual narrative that anticipates Blake's chapter headings and represents a descent from unalloyed imaginative potentiality to material creation and the subsequent fragmentation of man into contentious states of consciousness' (40). They also understandably dwell on the significance of the title-pages' central figure, identified as Adam, whose enormous column-penis functions as the "I" of "GE-NE-SIS". Equally

understandably, grand claims are made: ‘the garment-like “I” covering his loins, [is] literally clothing the representative of humanity with the word of God’. It ‘serves as a rebus to identify Adam as the literal embodiment of humanity’ (37, 38). These are credible assessments, since the “I”/penis is most flamboyantly brandished, though female viewers may not easily swallow the notion that ‘Adam’s association with the letter “I” implies a self-reflexive connection with the reader’ (40).

Ultimately Crosby and Essick must be praised for bringing us Blakean treasure, whose value lies in the unique version of Genesis Chapters 1-4 contained in Blake’s designs and titles—and, since these are some of the last words he wrote, Blake best have the last word here too: (1) ‘The Creation of the Natural Man’, (2) ‘The Natural Man divided into Male & Female & of the Tree of life and of the Tree of Good and Evil’, (3) ‘Of the Sexual Nature and its Fall into Generation and death’, (4) ‘How generation and death took Possession of the Natual Man & of the forgiveness of Sins written upon the Murderers forhead [sic]’.

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