Blake, Enoch, and Emerging Biblical Criticism*

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Biblical scholars do not include the artist, poet, self-proclaimed prophet and visionary in their survey of the origins of modern study of the Bible. The subject of this essay is an explanation of why William Blake deserves to be taken seriously in the history of biblical scholarship. Blake was probably the earliest commentator on the Ethiopic Apocalypse, translated into English by Richard Laurence, and the first to exploit the impact of the Roman Catholic Alexander Geddes’s researches in the mythological character of Genesis. With regard to the latter, in 1794 Blake published his illuminated book, First Book of Urizen, which has the format of the King James Bible. Not only is it a parody of the Book of Genesis, but the various copies are all deliberately at variance with one another, making it difficult to work out which is the Urtext. According to Mark Goldie, it is the first English poetic reflection of German higher criticism. In particular, Goldie suggests that Blake’s idiosyncratic name, “Urizen,” may derive from Geddes’s commentary on the Greek meaning of “horizon,” the god of tyrannizing priests and moralists who requisition folkloric tales and transform them into oppressive legal codes.1

This essay, written in honour of a dear friend and colleague, whose work has helped and inspired me so much over the years, is a series of loosely related studies which have their origin in my studies of the texts and images of William Blake. The opportunity to lecture on Blake at the Yale Divinity School in 2008, with John a member of the audience, was a very special privilege. The essay begins with an attempt to locate Blake in the account of the emergence of biblical criticism offered by the Yale scholar Hans Frei, in his important study, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative.2 The second part seeks to relate Blake’s work to its assessment by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and to Coleridge’s own writing on the mystical and the apocalyptic. The third and final part considers Blake’s fascination with the figure of Enoch, who makes an occasional but significant appearance in Blake’s images, though only occasionally in his

It includes consideration of some of Blake’s predecessors who took an interest in Enoch, his antecedents in English theological writing, with particular regard to the little known work of Jane Lead. Finally, the study concludes with a consideration of the contrasting understanding of “apocalyptic,” including Coleridge’s assessment of William Blake as “an apo-, or rather ana-, calyptic poet and Painter.”

I

Whatever his knowledge of the emerging higher criticism of the Bible, William Blake’s inclinations took him in a parallel direction, similar, but largely parallel, to it. There are a variety of ways in which he anticipates the kinds of development which are commonplace in modern biblical theology: his espousal of Sachkritik and his willingness to recognise that the Bible is part of the problem for the modern world, as well as supplying the resources which might contribute to a solution. His critique of divine monarchy, his espousal of divine immanence, and his clear preference for autonomy over against heteronomy all evince typical features of Enlightenment biblical criticism. Yet there are other aspects to his work which look back to older ways of engaging with the Bible: the importance of self-involvement and imagination.

Blake sits awkwardly in the development of biblical study as sketched by Hans Frei.4 William Blake was mounting his critique of the Bible at the same time as a different kind of biblical criticism was emerging, with which we are familiar, and with which it would be easy to identify Blake. Hans Frei examined the wider developments in biblical hermeneutics in the late eighteenth century. Blake’s reading of the gospels betrays little sign of the influence of emerging historical criticism. Indeed, he explicitly denies much interest in questions of the date and purpose of a biblical text, and related interpretative questions which have become the stock-in-trade for historical critics. What counts are “sentiments and examples”: “I cannot concieve the Divinity of the books in the Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at what time or in the historical evidence, which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another but in the Sentiments & Examples.”5 On the basis