

R E V I E W

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Mark Crosby and Robert N. Essick, eds. *Genesis: William Blake's Last Illuminated Work*. San Marino: Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, 2012. Facsimile plus 58 pp. \$80.00/£58.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Morton D. Paley

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<sup>1</sup> **B**LAKE'S *Genesis* is at the same time one of the best preserved and least known of his manuscripts. The reasons for both are closely related. Before its accession by the Huntington Library, it had only two owners—John Linnell and his family (*Genesis* 28) and Henry E. Huntington, passing from the first to the second via Christie's sale of 15

March 1918, where it was bought for Huntington by the dealer George D. Smith. Its existence has posed something of a conundrum: eleven leaves, containing the text of the first three and a half chapters of *Genesis* in Blake's hand, accompanied for the most part by rather faint pencil drawings, with two unfinished and somewhat enigmatic title pages in watercolor. As it was in the possession of Linnell when William Michael Rossetti saw it (*Genesis* 28), it may have been commissioned by Linnell. It is, however, odd that Linnell would do this when the great Dante series that Blake was painting for him was in progress, and no account of it appears in the detailed Blake-Linnell financial records. Scholarly attention to it has been sparse.<sup>1</sup> After Rossetti's brief remarks, it was touched on by Damon in 1924 (*William Blake* 218, 220-21). Pilo Nanavutty's substantial article, limited in subject to the second title page, appeared in 1947. Robert Essick's detailed description of the manuscript was published in his catalogue of the Huntington Blake collection in 1985. A few books, most recently my own *Traveller in the Evening* (260-66), discuss it briefly. An important essay, "Blake's Illuminated Manuscript of *Genesis*," by Robert R. Wark, intended for publication in 1974, appears here (17-22) for the first time, along with the editors' own rich commentary and notes.<sup>2</sup> All eleven leaves are reproduced photographically in Martin Butlin's great catalogue raisonné of Blake's printings and drawings (#828.1-11), and they also appear on the Huntington Library's web site, <<http://emuseum.huntington.org>>, but this is the first facsimile ever to be published.

- 2 The Crosby-Essick edition begins, appropriately, with the facsimile itself. This is a beautiful piece of work, bringing out even very faint pencil lines, faithfully reproducing the delicate watercolors of the first two pages, and presenting the reader with pages of the size and approximate texture of the original. The editors' commentary and notes appear in the last part of the book (23-51), and I will discuss these along with the images themselves, starting with the two title pages, one of which is considered a substitute for the other.
- 3 In the first title page we see a central male figure, legs apart, left arm reaching out to the side. He is naked, but the *I* of the title hides his genitals. There are faint vertical lines on the stem of the *I*, suggesting a Grecian column. The man has a large halo behind him, and his right arm is reaching

1. Perhaps that is why this volume does not include a bibliography. There is, however, a useful, detailed index.

2. One of the most respected scholars of his time in the field of British art, Wark was head of the Huntington Art Gallery from 1956 to 1990. The circumstances under which his essay came to exist only in two proof copies are recounted in *Genesis* 16.

up as far as it can. Above and to his right, a figure with a short beard extends his left arm out almost to the hand of the naked figure. He sits in a sphere, the arcing far end of which has been colored rose. At the top center, above the area between *G* and *E*, a being with his back to the viewer leaps athletically toward the right, arms and legs stretched out horizontally as if to emphasize his speed. At the three o'clock position is a white-bearded man, whose right arm reaches up like the central figure's but whose hand is turned out flat, palm up, supporting what seems to be a wisp of cloud. His feet touch blue waves. Wearing a pale-blue gown, he stands in an ovoid nimbus. Near the bottom of the design are tongues of flame, and below these are four indistinctly sketched figures, of which three raise arms upward. Blue water flows on the left, with a little of it on the right, and the surface of the earth is on its way to becoming the greensward of the title page to come.

- 4 What is going on here? Even one unfamiliar with Blake would recognize the central figure as Adam, standing on a curve of the newly created earth. The three others, going clockwise, are Jesus, the Holy Ghost, and God the Father. Featuring the Trinity is unusual for Blake, as Damon (*William Blake* 220) observes; Crosby and Essick suggest this was the idea of Linnell, a Trinitarian Baptist. God the Father has separated the land from the sea, following Gen. 1.9-10: "And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the drie land, Earth, and the gathering together of the waters called hee, Seas: and God saw that [it was] good." Blake's rendition of the Father, however, is of a weak old man, stiff as a post. (Blake had trouble envisioning an admirable-looking Father: "First God Almighty comes with a Thump on the Head," he wrote, "Then Jesus Christ comes with a balm to heal it.")<sup>3</sup> Jesus in contrast is young and strong, so strong that his left arm bursts out of the sphere he inhabits. His close-fitting body stocking is blue, in contrast to the Holy Ghost's above, which is red, the color of *caritas*. The latter's giant wings have been penciled but not reinforced in ink or colored. He leaps across the top of the picture space, arms and legs extended in the air. His head is not visible; what looks like a doodle of a bird (the traditional dove?) appears in its place. All save the bottommost figures can thus be identified with Adam and the Trinity.
- 5 This is, obviously, a scene of creation, in keeping with the Gothic-lettered title "GE/NE/SIS[.]" All four traditional elements are prominent: earth, air (emphasized by the Holy Ghost's flight through space), water, and fire. Man is newly created (without, as yet, Eve), and Jesus reaches out toward

3. "[A Vision of the Last Judgment]," E 565.

Adam's upraised hand, "in," as the editors put it, "an act of physical and spiritual connection with Adam" (37). The drawing is not, however, entirely positive in effect, with the flames and the indistinct creatures below them, and what may be a powerful storm, indicated in gray and black, falling diagonally from near the first *E* down behind and below *N*. It may be that this was not the effect desired by patron and/or artist, for Blake produced a second title page. As Wark astutely comments:

The first is dynamic, awesome, and sublime (in the eighteenth-century sense of the word); the second is balanced, benign, and beautiful. The first suggests gloom, enlivened only by hell-like fires, as the setting for Genesis; the second suggests something more akin to the traditional Eden. (*Genesis* 21)

- 6 Indeed, one's first impression of the second title page is of lush greenery. Adam now stands on a green earth, with two thick-trunked trees growing at the bottom of the design. The one at the left is presumably the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, with its invitingly rich fruit (although of course the Tree of Life was also fruited) (Gen. 3.22). The letters of the title are green and gold, and from some of them sprout plants, such as wheat, a symbol of fertility, growing from the *G*, and a rose-colored lily from the middle horizontal of the second *E*. Nanavutty 117 identifies the latter as the Turk's cap lily, and says it is known among herbal writers as the lily of Calvary. The editors (39) accept her identifications, as they also do her suggestion that Blake could have found some of his flower images and their significations in Robert John Thornton's *Temple of Flora* (1799-1807). Among other flower symbols identified are the sacred lotus with pods full of seed, and three roses signifying martyrdom. The *Genesis* title is rich in vegetation, some suggesting fecundity and others prefiguring Christ's self-sacrifice.
- 7 Two persons of the Trinity are represented much as in the first title page, except that the Holy Ghost is uncolored and his head turned away from the viewer, and above and below the Father's ovoid mandorla areas that previously were blue are now black. Jesus, however, is shown much differently. He stands upright, arms cruciform, wearing a diaphanous garment. From his left hand a scroll (the text of Genesis?) flows downward to the upreaching right hand of the still-haloed Adam. Below are the four figures we previously encountered, seated on the greensward between the two trees. Their heads are now much more distinct, although their bodies, which are human, remain merely sketched in. The leftmost, wearing a crown and scaly armor, has a grotesque human head. He is the only one still shown as reaching upward (with his left arm). Next is the stylized head of an eagle, also crowned. The third head is

probably a (Chinese?) lion's. Fourth comes an ox-headed being. These may be, as Damon (*William Blake* 220-21) suggests, "the four Evangelists, represented ... as four demons." The ox traditionally represents Luke, the lion Mark, and the eagle John. According to the editors (40), "no beast is traditionally associated with St. Matthew," but they note that "typological parallels with the Evangelical beasts may also lie behind Blake's design, including the vision of a man, lion, ox, and eagle in Ezekiel 1:10." These were the prototypes of widely diffused images of the four evangelists, with Matthew being the man, or sometimes a winged man who could also be identified as an angel (see, for example, Lefrançois). However, Blake has made this crowned being as grotesque as, or even more grotesque than, the other ones, with his scaly (or mailed?) arms, goggle eye, and outthrust tongue. Identifying these four does not explain their puzzling presence as caricatures, which no one has done to date.

- 8 One other question about both title pages remains unresolved. Why does the pillar-like *I* obscure Adam's loins? It is unlikely that this was Blake's choice. As lately as the inscription in *Yah and His Two Sons* he had written, "Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed" (E 275). Was this Linnell's decision? Linnell had no objection to accepting commissions that involved painting out or altering nude figures by the prime practitioner of the Victorian nude, William Etty,<sup>4</sup> and this could tie in with the possibility that it was Linnell who expurgated and partially obliterated some of the *Four Zoas* drawings (see Damon, *William Blake* 399). That could, however, have been done by someone else in Linnell's household, and as Linnell died in 1882 and *Genesis* was auctioned in his estate sale in 1918, there was also a considerable interim during which someone else could have made these alterations.
- 9 The remaining nine leaves bear pencil drawings (with occasional touches of watercolor) as well as text. 3 shows above its "Chap: 1" heading God the Father flanked by a winged angel on either side. He reaches down with his left hand in a gesture that the editors compare (41) to the so-called Ancient of Days of the *Europe* frontispiece. (It also resembles the down-pointing arm of the central figure in plate 15 of *The [First] Book of Urizen*.) The emphasis on threesomes is continued in 4, with three winged angels below the first verse, and three soaring over the sea below the third. Leaping out of the waves is a "frolicsome cetacean" (41). A pencil design at the bottom is indistinct. Next, three

4. See "Exhibition Notes" to the John Linnell exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 17 July-4 November 2001, <<http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/Linnell/ExhibitionNotes.htm>>. Accessed 6 Nov. 2012.

figures, which Crosby and Essick identify as the Trinity (42), stand gesturing in 5, facing the newly created Adam, who holds his arms up in amazement. As the editors observe, this design is the tailpiece for chapter 1, as the first was the headpiece, and this arrangement, repeated for the following chapters, "conforms to eighteenth-century conventions for illustrated books" (35). The headpiece for chapter 2, 6, depicts the creation of Eve, a subject, as the editors point out, that Blake treated in a number of other paintings and drawings. This drawing is far from finished, so its details are subject to interpretation. Eve appears to have just emerged from the side of the supine Adam, with the Father behind him. To the left is a figure who may be Satan (42-43). Satan is not, of course, present at the creation of Eve in the Bible, but that would not have deterred Blake from representing him here, as a foreshadowing of things to come. Crosby and Essick remark: "All four beings complicit in the fall are represented" here (43). The tailpiece, 7, is another creation of Eve, but in this rendering she floats in the air above the sleeping Adam, and above her fly three winged figures in parallel formation, the one nearest us being the Father. Adam's upper chest is wrapped in a band that may close the wound of Eve's delivery. The editors compare the color-printed drawing *Elohim Creating Adam* (Butlin #289), in which the deity blindly gropes the head of his anguished creation. Here Blake's vision of an inhuman and dehumanizing God closely approaches Robert Lowell's in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket":

... cast up the time  
When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime  
And breathed into his face the breath of life,  
And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.  
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

- 10 By 8 the Fall has already occurred, unpictured. Adam and Eve are now abjectly on their knees facing someone or something not clear enough to be identified. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the fruit of which they have eaten (a partly bitten one lies before Adam), stands before them, but Eve, at least, is not facing it. At the base of its trunk lies what could be the enormous head of a serpent, with its body training around the trunk, although when Blake draws serpents with out-of-scale heads, they are usually elongated rather than round as here. Although they have not yet put on coats of skins, Adam kneels so that his genitals are hidden, and Eve is in a *Venus Pudica* position (as the editors point out [44]). Since they already know good and evil, it cannot be that the couple is kneeling to the serpent; it is likely, as the editors conjecture (44), that the lines at the right are the beginnings of a sketch of God.
- 11 The tailpiece, 9, is the most unfinished of the drawings, and so its subject is not immediately evident. Crosby and Es-

sick, however, argue convincingly on the basis of some of Blake's other representations (44) that this sketch would have shown the expulsion from paradise. There can be little doubt about the subject of *10*, in which a figure lies on the ground, another stands bowed over it, and a small-headed form flees at the right, with a giant being in the air pursuing him.<sup>5</sup> Eve may also be represented in lines suggesting someone kneeling at the body's head. The first murder much occupied Blake during his last years: it is the subject of his last illuminated book, *The Ghost of Abel*, and also of his 1826 tempera *The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve* (Butlin #806, Tate Britain, reproduced here as fig. 11). It may be, as he copied Blake's earlier drawing on this subject in 1821 (Butlin 1: 481), that Linnell had a particular interest in it as well.

- 12 The theme of Blake's final drawing is forgiveness. He chose to eliminate the end of Gen. 4.15, "lest any finding him, should kill him," and his heading to chapter 4 concludes "& of the forgiveness of Sins written upon the Murderers forehead." The ghost of Abel cries "Life for Life!" but Jehovah says "Lo I have given you a Lamb for an Atonement instead / Of the Transgres[s]or, or no Flesh or Spirit could ever Live" (1.14, 2.10-11, E 271-72). The mark the Lord puts upon Cain is a sign of God's forgiveness, as is shown in Blake's endpiece drawing for *11*, where the Father bends over the kneeling youth and embraces him. Several traditional prototypes have been put forward for this design; the editors suggest and reproduce Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. This powerful etching is indeed similar in form to Blake's drawing, but Blake introduces a detail that is consistent with his own purpose: God kisses Cain's forehead. Either the mark is being set in this manner, or God is kissing the mark, but in either case the point is the forgiveness of sins.
- 13 In writing out the text of Genesis, Blake created headings that cast the events of each chapter in the terms of his own myth. These headings give the late Blake's interpretation of what is really going on, not only in the text proper but also in the Authorized Version's headings to each chapter. Because the AV is now often printed and read without its original chapter headings, the importance of these may not be realized. Some earlier English Bibles had been divisive among readers not only because of their translations but also because of their interpretive chapter headings, something the King James translators wanted to avoid. The AV headings were both an integral part of the text and set off from it, being printed in roman above the gothic of the text proper (Bobrick 237, 253). Blake would of course have been familiar with them, and drew upon them parodically for his own.

5. Damon (*A Blake Dictionary* 152) suggests it is Abel's ghost.

- 14 For his first chapter heading, "Chap: 1 / The Creation of the Natural Man," Blake took, selectively, "[The creation] of Man in the Image of God" from the AV heading.<sup>6</sup> Blake's "Natural Man," bound by his five senses, is created of the *Adamah*, but not the Spiritual Man. This is a Pauline distinction: "But the naturall man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishnesse unto him: neither can he know [them], because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2.14). (Compare Blake's annotation to Wordsworth's *Poems* of 1815: "I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually" [E 665].) This distinction, also analogous to Swedenborg's between the External and the Internal Man,<sup>7</sup> is typical of only the later Blake, in contrast to the devil's monistic proverb in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses. the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (E 34).

- 15 Blake's heading for chapter 2 is "The Natural Man divided into Male and female, & of the Tree of Life & of the Tree of Good and Evil." Here he focuses on the AV heading's

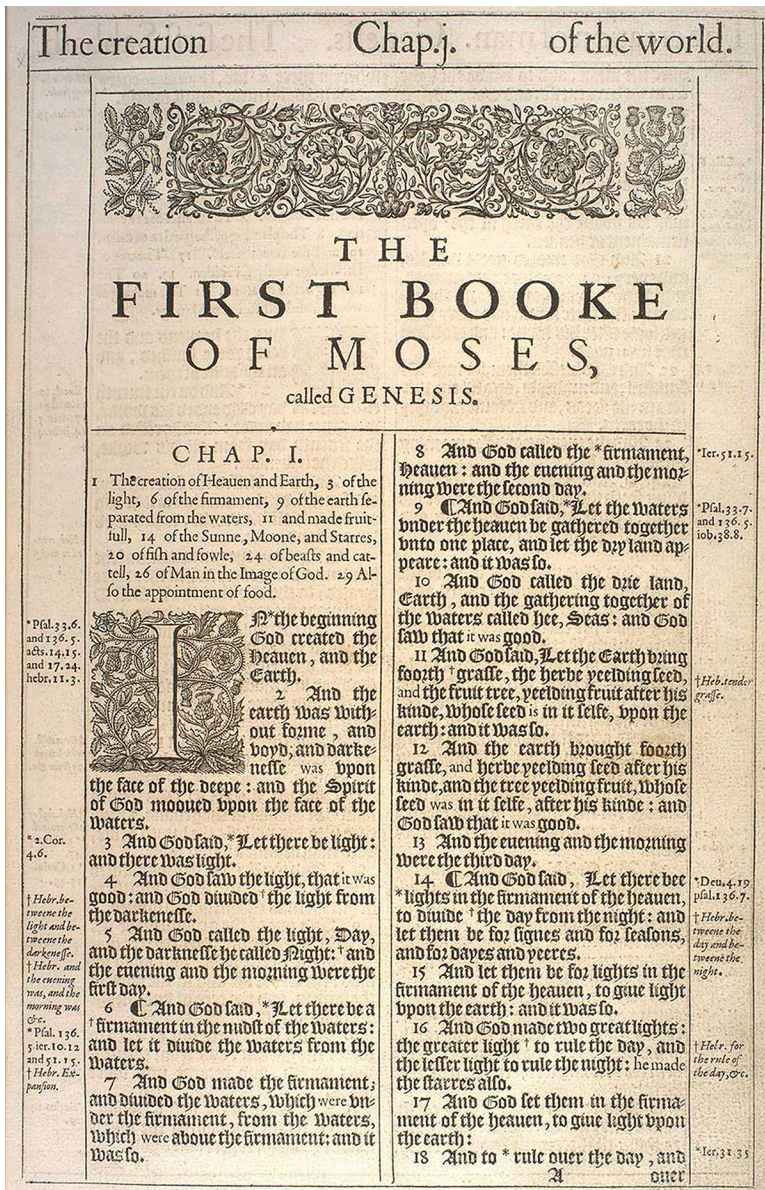
6. What edition(s) of the Bible Blake owned is unknown, but as to what translation there can be little doubt. On 30 January 1803 he wrote to his brother James: "I read Greek as fluently as an Oxford scholar & the Testament is my chief master. astonishing indeed is the English Translation it is almost word for word & if the Hebrew Bible is as well translated which I do not doubt it is we need not doubt of its having been translated as well as written by the Holy Ghost" (E 727).

I am not, of course, suggesting that Blake owned the first edition of the AV. Many subsequent editions retained the headings verbatim, as, for example, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments; Newly Translated out of the Original Tongues, and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised, by His Majesty's Special Command. Appointed to be Read in Churches*. Cambridge: Printed by John Archdeacon Printer to the University; and Sold by John Beecroft, John Rivington, Benjamin White, and Edward Dilly, in London; and T. & J. Merrill, in Cambridge, 1769.

7. Swedenborg's commentary on Genesis had been republished in English as recently as 1802. Of the creation of Adam he writes:

94. Verse 7. To form man the dust from the ground, is to form his external man, which before was not man; for it is said, verse 5, that there was no man to till the ground: To breathe into his nostrils the breath of lives, is to give him the life of faith and love: By man's being made a living soul is signified, that his external man was also made alive. 95. The life of the external man is here treated of; the life of his faith or understanding in the two former verses, and the life of his love or will in this verse. Heretofore the external man was unwilling to comply with and serve the Internal, being engaged in a continual combat with him, wherefore at that time the external was not a man; but now, being made celestial, the external beginneth to comply with and serve the internal, and in this case becometh a man, being so rendered both by the life of faith and the life of love; the life of faith prepareth him, the life of love maketh him to be a man. (*Arcana Cœlestia* 1: 144)

This is, of course, a much more optimistic view than that of Blake's *Genesis*.



The Holy Bible (1611), showing the heading (“1 The creation of Heaven and Earth, 3 of the light, 6 of the firmament ...”) for Genesis chapter 1. Image courtesy of The Official King James Bible Online, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>.

“17 The tree of knowledge onely forbidden ... 21 The making of woman, and institution of Mariage.” Gen. 2.21 is the version in which woman is made out of Adam’s rib, in contrast to Gen. 1.27, where God creates them both together. Blake chooses the version from chapter 2 because it is an account of division, and of something lost. The next loss is asserted in Blake’s caption to “Chap. 3: Of the Sexual Nature & its Fall into Generation & Death.” Again, Blake echoes the AV heading selectively: “6 Mans shamefull fall ... 16 The punishment of Mankind. 21 Their first clothing. 22 Their casting out of Paradise.” It is worth noting that the word “fall” does not occur in the text of Gen. 3, nor does it appear elsewhere in Genesis with reference to Adam and Eve. Generation will not occur until the next chapter, but the Lord God does pronounce his death sentence upon hu-

manity in 3.19. Blake’s chapter 4 heading is “How generation & death took Possession of the Natural Man & of the forgiveness of Sins written upon the Murderers forehead.”<sup>8</sup> This adds a significant detail to both the AV heading and its text, which read, respectively:

The birth, trade, and religion of Cain and Abel. 8 The murder of Abel. 9 The curse of Cain. And the LORD set a marke upon Cain, lest any finding him, should kill him.

8. E, usually careful to follow Blake’s orthography, has four capitalized words here that are lower case in Blake’s text (E 688).

The mark completes the process begun by the murder itself, which Leonard Michaels (71), writing of Byron's *Cain*, calls "identifying Cain to himself and his community as none other than Cain, the infamous Biblical murderer." However, Blake has added an element of redemption for Cain that is in accord not with the biblical text, but with his own beliefs as expressed, for example, in *Jerusalem* 45.33-35, where Los says:

If I should dare to lay my finger on a grain of sand  
In way of vengeance; I punish the already punishd: O  
whom  
Should I pity if I pity not the sinner who is gone astray!  
(E 194)

As in other aspects of the manuscript, this is very much William Blake's *Genesis*.

- 16 The Crosby-Essick *Genesis* is both a splendid facsimile and an indispensable work of reference for Blake studies. It is also a beautiful book with clear, easily readable typography (something not to be underestimated in a folio-sized volume that necessarily had to be set two columns to the page). For Blake scholars, becoming familiar with it will be both a pleasure and a duty.

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