Discussion

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Blake's Priestly Blessing: 
God Blesses Job—Postscript

By Abraham Samuel Shiff

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G. E. Bentley, Jr.’s report1 of a newly discovered book owned by Blake, The History of the Present Jews,2 prompts this postscript to my article “Blake’s Priestly Blessing: God Blesses Job,”3 where I argue that Blake incorporated into his artwork the hand gesture that is integral to the Jewish synagogue ritual of the priestly blessing.

At the time I conducted research for the article there was only circumstantial evidence that Blake knew about Jewish religious practices. The book reported by Bentley is direct evidence that he did study them, as the full title indicates: The History of the Present Jews throughout the World. Being an Ample tho Succinct Account of Their Customs, Ceremonies, and Manner of Living, at This Time.

In “Blake’s Priestly Blessing” I also argue that Blake could not have learned about the hand gesture from reading. Although the priestly blessing is commanded in the Old Testament, the gesture is not there described, nor is it detailed in books available to Blake that were reviewed for the article. Because The History of the Present Jews was not among those evaluated, it is necessary to determine if he could have learned about the gesture from this specific book. A review of all versions finds the blessing ceremony is barely mentioned:

And they [the priests] bless the People on Solemn Festivals, with these Words of Chap. vi. of Numbers, The Lord bless thee and keep thee, &c.4

From these few words Blake could not have deduced or inferred anything about a priestly blessing hand gesture. His knowledge must have come from elsewhere. The article’s conclusion stands unchanged. Blake learned about the hand gesture from some person with knowledge of the priestly blessing ceremony as practiced by contemporary Jews.

5. Modena 52 (part 1, chapter 12, “Of the Priests and Levites, and Their Oblations and Tithes”).