

With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought

Blake's Priestly Blessing: God Blesses Job—Postscript

BY ABRAHAM SAMUEL SHIFF

ABRAHAM SAMUEL SHIFF (abe.sam.shiff@gmail.com) studies at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, in the Master of Liberal Arts Program. He has also published on Shakespeare.

- 1 **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.
- 2 At the time I conducted research for the article there was only circumstantial evidence that Blake knew about Jewish religious practices.⁴ 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.*
- 3 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

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., et al., "William Blake and His Circle: A Checklist of Publications and Discoveries in 2015," *Blake* 50.1 (summer 2016): par. 9, "Previously Unknown Copy of a Book Owned by Blake."

2. Leo Modena, *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.* ... (London: Printed and sold by Edm. Powell in Black-fryars near Ludgate, 1707). *Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)*: two examples printed in 1707 (Gale documents CW3318062586 and CW3318062895); one in 1711, published by W. Bray at the East-End of the Inner-Walk of Exeter-Change (Gale CW3323062380).

3. Abraham Samuel Shiff, "Blake's Priestly Blessing: God Blesses Job," *Blake* 47.3 (winter 2013–14): 29 pars.

4. Abraham Samuel Shiff, "Blake's Hebrew Calligraphy," *Blake* 46.2 (fall 2012): 34 pars.

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.*⁵

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").