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**Great Code or Great Codex? Northop Frye, William Blake, and Construals of the Bible**

**Abstract:** This article reconsiders Northrop Frye’s classic study of the Bible and literature, *The Great Code* (1982), in order to question whether his application of that titular phrase might not significantly distort the meaning the phrase must have borne for its coiner, William Blake. My contention is that Blake’s engraving of the *Laocoön*, in which the “Great Code” aphorism appears, is itself a code of sorts, but not in Frye’s sense of a key to be used to unlock the meanings of works of art and literature – or to unlock anything else, for that matter. Nothing in the *Laocoön*, or in any of Blake’s other works, suggests that this was what Blake meant by “code.” Nor do any of the connotations the term bore in English usage in Blake’s time suggest such a meaning. My suggestion is that, far from promoting the Bible as a forward-functioning key by which to decipher the mythology of post-biblical literature, Blake’s *Laocoön* is a work fixated upon its own complex, synthesizing reception of the biblical and classical past, a tradition of strong creative misprisions about whose all-powerful influence Frye’s own work betrays an unmistakable anxiety in Harold Bloom’s sense of the phrase.

**Keywords:** Bible; Christianity; literature; Northop Frye; William Blake.

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1 Introduction

In reading *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (2011), I was struck by the terse, passing allusion to “big, old, critical beast Northrop Frye’s *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982).”¹ This rather inglorious evocation

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constitutes the sole reference in the Handbook’s 725 pages to that late, celebrated Canadian luminary, whose Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957), at one time “the most frequently cited book by a writer born in the 20th century,” led Harold Bloom to pronounce Frye “the foremost living student of Western literature” and “surely the major literary critic in the English language.”

In this article, I wish to revisit Frye’s The Great Code for a very specific purpose: to question whether his application of that titular phrase might not significantly distort the meaning the phrase must have borne for its coiner, the English poet-artist-prophet William Blake (1757–1827). In doing so, I am well aware of the shadow of the “intentionalist fallacy” that might seem to haunt this venture. So, too, do I realize that in identifying a discrepancy between Frye’s apparent, and Blake’s probable, understandings of the meaning of the same phrase, I may seem to be resisting precisely what Jonathan Roberts suggests is the Gadamerian demand implicit in reception studies, namely, that we relinquish the positivist, “foundationalist dream that the meaning of biblical (or indeed any) texts can be settled once and for all.”

However, aside from inviting a reconsideration of what Blake may have meant by his expression “the Great Code,” I will hope to suggest that Rezeptionsästhetik and the historical-critical approach to the Jewish and Christian holy scriptures (or to any texts) need not place us in an either/or predicament. Instead, as reflected by the very structure of The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR), which combines them, the two approaches can work together in fertile and fruitful ways. My concluding suggestion will be that the particular work by Blake in which his “Great Code” aphorism appears is itself a code of sorts – but neither a code in Frye’s sense, nor a code that yields any definite, foundationalist meanings, but rather one that floats in a multivalent sea of biblical and classical reception.

5 Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception, 30 prospective volumes, ed. Dale C. Allison et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009–). To date, nine volumes have appeared.
2 The Bible as Books, Library, and Encyclopedia

Blake, in calling the Bible the Great Code of Art, and Frye, in repeating, elaborating upon, and championing that epithet, joined in—to adapt a phrase from Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler—a great conversation that has been going on since antiquity over the question: what exactly is the Bible? For this reason, to contextualize my own later reconsideration of Frye’s understanding of Blake’s epithet, I wish to begin with that question, specifically by surveying several of the most prominent and influential construals that have been offered of the Bible over time.

As far as their self-conceptualization and self-presentation goes, the holy writings that comprise what is called the Bible never did themselves or their readers the favor the Qur’ān did. Intermittently throughout its 114 sūrahs, the Muslim holy book conveniently defines itself through its self-applied title: al-qur‘ān, “the [al] recitation [qur‘ān]” (e.g., Q 28:85; 41:26; 46:29; etc.). Thus, as Fazlur Rahman put it: “For the Qur‘ān itself, and consequently for the Muslims, the Qur‘ān is the Word of God (Kalām Allāh).”⁶ To be sure, for many Jews, the Tanakh, and for many Christians, the Christian Bible, likewise constitute God’s Word (whatever that might mean), but the scriptures themselves make no such explicit claim, especially as the diversity of times and places in which they were composed, edited, and redacted originally precluded any illusion that they comprised any sort of unified whole. According to The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a Wycliffite sermon of 1425 yields the earliest documented use of the expression “God’s Word” or “Word of God” to refer to the Bible, or to some part or passage of it, as divinely inspired or as Scripture.⁷

The multiplicity of the Hebrew scriptures is emphasized in the allusions to them as “the holy books” (τὰ βιβλία τὰ ἅγια) at 1 Macc. 12:9, as “the sacred writings” (τὰ ἱερὰ γραμματα) at 3 Tim. 3:15, and as “the scriptures” (τὰς γραφὰς) at John 5:39. The term ό βιβλος, originally denoting the inner layer of bark, and part of the Papyrus stalk, of which paper was produced, came to connote a book, a writing, or a letter, and hence its diminutive, ὁ βίβλος, ...
τὸ βιβλίον, denoted “small book” or “tablet." In the Septuagint and Josephus, the term βιβλίον or its plural βιβλία is applied to individual texts, the Torah, or the whole Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament, except in Revelation, where βιβλία is used twenty-three times to refer to “heavenly” books, βιβλίον and βιβλίας designate individual documents of the Old Testament. The plural, τὰ βιβλία, “the books,” was adopted probably by Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215), and definitely by Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254), to denote the New Testament books, while the Old Testament and the New Testament compilations in their entirety were called τὰ βιβλία by early ecclesiastics, putatively beginning with Chrysostom (ca. 347–407).

It is uncertain when biblia debuted as a Greek loanword in Medieval Latin, first as a neuter plural noun (as in Greek), but then, as a feminine singular of the same spelling in the nominative. There exists a 9th-century example of the Latin biblia, though “the evidence of the Romanic languages shows that biblia must have been the popular name, and have been treated as a feminine singular, much earlier than this.”

Meanwhile, there developed two other views of the holy scriptures, both traceable back to Jerome. Jerome spoke of his possessing “multis sacrae bibliothecae codicibus [many codices or volumes of the sacred library],” while, as Michel Pastoureau points out, Jerome and other Christian authors (notably excluding Augustine, however) also shared a notion of the scriptures as an immense sort of encyclopedia — a notion that finds a South Asian counterpart in Mircea Eliade’s claim of the Mahābhārata, through centuries of accruing newly interpolated episodes reflecting a diversity of Yogic traditions, “transformed into an

12 See, e.g., Schnelle, “Bible. I. Concept,” 1, who cites Chrysostom, Hom. In Col 9:1, PG 62:361. However, the claim that Chrysostom was the first to use βιβλία “in the special sense of ‘the Bible’” is rejected by Eberhard Nestle, “The First English Example of ‘Biblia,’” The Expository Times 15 (October 1903–September 1904): 565–66.
14 “Bible, n., Etymology,” OED Online.
15 Jerome, Epistula 5.2.4 (CSEL 54: 21–23). Van der Toorn, Scribal Culture, 236, 353n.11 cites this passage as well as De viribus illustribus 75 (PL 23:683C), where Jerome speaks of Pamphilus’ love of “bibliotheca divina [the divine library].” With regard to the latter passage, however, the fact that Jerome immediately proceeds to illustrate that love by mentioning that Pamphilus transcribed by hand a large portion of Origen’s writings suggests that Jerome was not using the term bibliotheca to denote the Bible.
encyclopedia.” Here, the difference between these two notions is worth noting. A library (from the French, \textit{librairie}), in the most basic sense of the word, essentially synonymous with \textit{bibliotheca} (from the Greek \textit{βιβλιοθήκη}, “book room”) is a building, room, or some other place whose purpose is “to contain books for reading, study, or reference,” whereas the term encyclopedia (\textit{encyclopaedia}, a late Latin transformation of the pseudo-Greek term \textit{ἐγκυκλοπαιδεία}, “an erroneous form (said to be a false reading) occurring in MSS. of Quintilian, Pliny, and Galen, for \textit{ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία ‘encyclopedic education’}”), originally denoted “the circle of learning [in arts and sciences],” but has come more conventionally to refer to “a literary work containing extensive information on all branches of knowledge.” The notion of the Bible as a library emphasizes the Bible’s containment of a multiplicity of books, whereas the notion of it as an encyclopedia emphasizes the extensiveness, or even the universality (“all branches of knowledge”), of the “information” it contains.

Neither one of these notions ever fully disappeared. The library analogy, which persisted as \textit{bibliotheca} remained the term “commonly used for the Bible throughout the Middle Ages,” has resurfaced for debate since the 19th century, most notably in connection with construals of the Bible “as literature.” For example, the American theologian Lyman Abbott, writing in 1896, described the Bible as “not a book but a library” that “contains many different types of literature,” a description which J. H. Gardiner, a professor of English at Harvard,

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17 Definitions quoted from the \textit{OED’s} entries on “library” and “encyclopædia/encyclopedia.”


19 Lyman Abbott, “Introduction” to Richard G. Moulton, John P. Peters, A. B. Bruce, et al., \textit{The Bible as Literature} (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1896), x, xi. In the first of these two quotations, Abbott seems to be echoing Frederic Myers, \textit{Catholic Thoughts on the Bible and Theology} (“For Private Distribution Only”), 2 vols. [in 1] (Cambridge: C. J. Clay, 1841–48)], 1:3: “In fact the Bible is not so much a Book as it is a Library: by no means indeed an Encyclopaedia.”
flatly rejected ten years later, insisting: “In English literature the Bible is a single book, and not a ‘library of books.’” These two views anticipate those promoted by, on the one hand, Northrop Frye, and, on the other, Harold Bloom. In the decades prior to *The Great Code*, Frye construed the Bible first, by the late 1930s, as “the archetypal anatomy,” and then, from the mid-1940s through at least the mid-1960s, as a “Symbolic Encyclopedia” or “definitive encyclopedic poem,” whereas Harold Bloom, by 1990, in contrast found “profound reason for regarding the Bible as a library of literary texts, which to me and many other readers it must be.” (Frye, of course, was well aware that “the Bible is more like a small library than a real book,... and may be only a confused and inconsistent jumble of badly established texts,” but he insisted that “all this, even if true, does not matter. What matters is that ‘the Bible’ has traditionally been read as a unity.”) Still more recently, Karel van der Toorn, surveying the influences of scribal culture on the making of the Hebrew Bible, agrees that the Bible’s books “were not designed to be read as unities,” but he suggests that the library analogy be revised: “They rather compare to archives. A biblical book is often like a box containing heterogeneous materials brought together on the assumption of common authorship, subject matter, or chronology.”

As for the persistence of the encyclopedia comparison, it is worth recalling the function of the medieval cathedral as the so-called Poor Man’s Bible, whose stained glass, paintings, statues, carvings, and other art presented in effect a Bible-based narrative of human history and encyclopedic image of the world — “an encyclopedia in stone and glass,” as Robert Calkins describes it, conveying

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22 “Notebook 34” (ca. 1946–50), par. 82, Northrop Frye Fonds, Victoria University Library (hereafter NFF), CW 15:50.
26 Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 16. For van der Toorn’s full critique of the “library hypothesis,” see 236–44.
a perception whose roots are retraceable to early 19th-century France.\textsuperscript{28} Although the notion of the Bible itself as an encyclopedia has not gone without its modern

\textsuperscript{28} In book 5, ch. 2 (entitled “Ceci tuera cela” [The one will kill the other]) of Victor Hugo’s novel \textit{Notre-Dame de Paris} (1831), known in English as \textit{The Hunchback of Notre Dame}, the narrator submits that “humankind has two books, two registers, two testaments: stone-work and printing, the bible of stone and the bible of paper \textit{[la bible de pierre and la bible de papier]” (\textit{Notre-Dame de Paris}, 2 vols. [in 1] [Paris: Jacques Vautrain, 1947], 1:184, translation mine hereafter), and that, “for the first six thousand years of the world, from the most immemorial pagoda of Hindostan up to the cathedral of Cologne, architecture was the great writing of humankind” (ibid., 1:174), though, the revolution of print brought about by Gutenberg has meant that “the printing press will be the death of the church [i.e., architecture]\textit{[La presse tuera l’église]” (ibid., 1:172). For Hugo, the medieval cathedral was thus one of many structures around the world epitomizing architecture as, so to speak, a \textit{stone bible}. In this formulation, the indefinite article is to be emphasized, in contrast to the definite article that stands out in the titular allusion to the Amiens cathedral in John Ruskin’s \textit{The Bible of Amiens} (1884), in \textit{The Works of John Ruskin (“Library Edition”), 39 vols., ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: G. Allen/New York, Longmans, Green, 1903–12), vol. 33 (1908): 3–174. Ruskin singles out the famous cathedral of that northern French city as \textit{the stone Bible}, a point exploited by Ruskin’s great French admirer, Marcel Proust, in his preface to his translation of Ruskin’s work, \textit{La Bible d’Amiens} (1903):

But it is time to arrive at what Ruskin refers to in particular as the Bible of Amiens, the West Porch. ‘Bible’ is taken here in the literal and not the figurative sense. This porch of Amiens is not merely a stone book, a \textit{stone Bible}, in the vague sense in which Victor Hugo would have understood it: it is ‘the Bible’ in stone. (Quoted from M. Proust, \textit{On Reading Ruskin} trans. and ed. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987], 19).

Further, echoing Hugo by claiming that “the teaching that men of the thirteenth century came to seek at the cathedral” seems now “written in ... a language no longer understood,” Proust credits Ruskin for the fact that “the stones of Amiens have acquired for me ... almost the grandeur the Bible had, when it was still the truth in the hearts of men and solemn beauty in their works” (ibid., 27).

The notion of cathedral as a Bible-based \textit{encyclopedia in stone} also had roots in the theories set forth by French art historian Adolphe Napoleon Didron in his \textit{Iconographie chrétienne} (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1843), and was further encouraged near the end of the century by two works that reference Didron: Joris-Karl Huysman’s novel \textit{La Cathédrale} (Paris: P.V. Stock, 1898), one of whose characters (Durtal) says of Chartres: “It contains a translation of the Old and the New Testament; it also grafts upon the sacred scriptures the Apocrypha which discussed the Virgin and St. Joseph, the saints’ lives collected in the \textit{Golden Legend} of Jacobus de Voragine, and the monographs of the \textit{Célicoles} of the diocese of Chartres. It is an immense encyclopedia \textit{[dictionnaire]} of medieval knowledge about God, the Virgin, and the elect” (ch. 9, 234); and art historian Émile Mâle’s \textit{L’ Art religieux du XIIIe siècle en France: étude sur l’iconographie du moyen âge et sur ses sources d’inspiration} (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898), which equates the gothic cathedral with the \textit{Speculum maius} (great mirror): the mirror of nature, of instruction, of morals, and of history.
detractors, the same notion has had its notable espousers as well, even prior to Frye. In the late 19th century, for example, Henry Ward Beecher described the Bible as “an encyclopaedia of history, describing... the course of progress down to the present time.” And several decades later, G. K. Chesterton, excoriating the “Puritanism” of British progressives in the early 1930s, lauded the Bible as “an Encyclopaedia Britannica of varied topics and multitudinous human interests compared with the amount of knowledge that can be conveyed under those new conditions.” Indeed, *EBR*, with its editorially-avowed “aspir[ation] to completeness... in its coverage of the scriptures themselves and their formation,” might appear as a kind of latter-day doppelgänger of the holy scriptures, effectually shadowing and documenting their whole encyclopedic contents, development, and span – and also their reception.

3 Code? Codex? Key?

“The Great Code of Art,” the epithet Blake coined for the Bible almost two hundred years ago, has since then met the fate of most clichés, separating itself from


29 Not everyone agrees; see the second clause in the quotation from Myers in n. 19 above. Likewise, Anna Nilsén observes that there is little evidence to support the common assumption that medieval churches functioned as an illustrated Bible for the illiterate; see her *Program och funktion i senmedeltida kalkmåleri* [Program and Function in Late Medieval Church Painting] (Sw) (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1986), 510; cited by Tracey Sands in her article on Nordic Folklore in a volume I am editing on biblical reception in the world’s folkloric traditions, to be published by De Gruyter Press in Berlin.


32 Editors’ “Introduction,” *EBR* 1: xi. We, *EBR*’s editors, do qualify in the ensuing sentence: “Inasmuch as a complete accounting of the global history of their [i.e., the scriptures’] reception and influence over two millennia is impossible, *EBR* documents that history in ways that pragmatically account for the major themes and issues and provide the necessary guidance for further research” (ibid.).
from the place, context, and, as I shall suggest, meaning of its initial articulation, and assuming a life of its own. Ironically, the distancing of the expression from its locus originis is largely attributable to Northrop Frye’s now “classic” 1982 study of the Bible and literature that takes as its title part of the phrase: The Great Code. To be sure, early in his “Introduction,” Frye quotes Blake’s entire phrase, “The Old and [sic] New Testaments are the Great Code of Art,” a phrase he “used for [his] title after pondering its implications for many years” (CW 19:10). Frye is well aware that “The phrase is from Blake’s annotations surrounding the Laocoön” (CW 19:235). Yet Frye never relates the “Great Code” aphorism to Blake’s Laocoön picture, despite his keen awareness of Blake’s prominence in the emblem tradition, which includes “thousands of lyrics so intently focused on visual imagery that they are, as we may say, set to pictures.” Nor does Frye ever discuss the phrase in its relation to those “annotations” – or, more precisely, to those aphorisms and epigrams, fragmentary expressions of what Gananath Obeyesekere characterizes as non-cognitive, non-egoistic, dreamlike “aphoristic thinking.” Blake inscribed these in graffiti-like manner around his engraved representation (ca. 1826–1827) of the Laocoön, that Hellenistic marble sculpture of ca. 25 BCE, in the Vatican Museum, which portrays the Trojan priest of that name, with his sons, struggling in agony to escape the giant serpents that have beset them as the consequence of Minerva’s curse, as related in Virgil’s Aeneid (2.199).


34 Cf. Frye’s lecture of March 1979, “Reconsidering Levels of Meaning,” in which he describes Blake’s epithet as “a very haunting and suggestive phrase which I have been pondering for a great many years” (CW 25:316). In an interview of January 6, 1983, he says of the same phrase: “I am still exploring the implications of that single statement” (CW 24:684).

35 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957), CW 22:256. Frye continues on that same page: “In the emblem an actual picture appears, and the poet-painter Blake, whose engraved lyrics are in the emblem tradition, has a role in the lyric analogous to that of the poet-composers Campion and Dowland on the musical side.”


In Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake (1947), Frye alludes in passing to Blake’s expressed theory that the Laocoön group “originally portrayed ... Jehovah and the two limits of the fallen world, Satan and Adam; the strangling serpents again represent the Fall” (CW 14:145). In his essay “Blake’s Reading of the Book of Job” (1976), Frye notes that same theory, as well as Blake’s placement of “Malak Yahweh” and “Angel of the Divine Presence,” and the inscription “He repented that he had made Adam/... / & it grieved him at his heart,” around “Jehovah’s” head (CPP 273; CW 16:400). His “Notebook 27” (1985–January 1, 1986), par. 344, NFF (CW 5:61) includes the one-sentence non sequitur: “Hence Blake’s Laocoon [sic] assertions that prayer, fasting, sacrifices, etc., are aspects of creating art.”

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39 See, e.g., Northrop Frye, The Critical Path (1971), CW 27:87–88, where, after quoting Blake’s expression, he comments simply that it “indicate[s] the context of [Blake’s] own work, and similarly literature is the ‘great code’ of concern.” In a number of interviews he simply quotes Blake’s expression without commenting on it; see those of April 15, 1981, CW 24:518; June 7, 8, and 10, 1988, CW 24:883.
this time in its entirety, after pronouncing the Bible both “the world’s greatest work of art” (CW 14:112) and “the archetype of Western culture,” because it...

... provides the basis for most of our major art: for Dante, Milton, Michelangelo, Raphael, Bach, the great cathedrals, and so on. The most complete form of art is a cyclic vision, which, like the Bible, sees the world between the two poles of fall and redemption. In Western art this is most clearly represented in the miracle-play sequences and encyclopedic symbolism of the Gothic cathedrals, which often cover the entire imaginative field from creation to the Last Judgment, and always fit integrally into some important aspect of it. (CW 14:113–14)40

A tension or discrepancy of sorts is already evident in Frye’s characterization, or, more precisely, in Frye’s characterization of Blake’s characterization, of the Bible as both “the world’s greatest work of art” – a description from which Frye will later shy away – and “the archetype of Western culture.” The former characterization is an evaluative statement about the Bible itself. Although it assesses the Bible’s value as a “work of art” as qualitatively higher than that of any other art work (i.e., “the greatest”), the statement focuses upon the Bible’s intrinsic contents, substance, and worth as “art,” not upon the Bible’s relation to other art works. In contrast, the characterization of the Bible as “the archetype of Western culture,” which is directly related to (Frye’s understanding of) the notion of the Bible as “the Great Code of Art,” focuses on the Bible’s specific connection to subsequent art (including literature), as well as to us, as readers, viewers, or experiencers of art. Even etymologically, as the “first” (ἀρχε = ἀρχι) “impress, stamp, or type” (τῦπος), an archetype (ἀρχέτυπον) is significant as such only in its relation to its consequent copies, imitations, adaptations, or transformations. Thus, as Frye explains in Anatomy of Criticism, by “archetype” he means “a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (CW 22:91–92; cf. 331).

It should be noted that this difference between the construal of the Bible as art work and that of the Bible as archetype of culture is essentially the same as the more conventional distinction between “the Bible as literature” and “the Bible in literature.” The effort to appreciate the scriptures as literary texts was already underway, mainly among Protestant Christian scholars and clergy, by the end of

40 The same point could be made just as vividly by quoting the narrator of Flannery O’Connor’s novel The Violent Bear It Away (1960), summarizing the education of fourteen-year-old, backwoods prophet-in-training, Francis Mason Tarwater: “His uncle had taught him Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment” (Flannery O’Connor, The Violent Bear It Away [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960], 4).
the 19th century. In his speech “Christianity as Interpreted by Literature” delivered at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religion in Chicago, Theodore T. Munger, pastor of New Haven’s United Church, opened by casting Jesus as an unacknowledged literary master:

Christ indeed left no book, but he was not, therefore, a bookless Christ.... It is not amiss to say that Christ himself uttered much that is in the truest sense literature.... Christ was without the literary purpose, but that does not forbid us from counting the parable of the Lost Son as a consummate and powerful piece of literature.... I speak to such as will understand... that Christ is to be put among the poets.41

Likewise, Munger proceeded, “the veneration in which [the Epistles of St. Paul] are held” should not prevent us from appreciating “their excellence as compositions”; nor should we fail to appreciate the Book of Revelation as “the sphinx of literature” (1:680). Munger thus anticipated an approach taken not only to the New Testament, but to both Testaments, in Richard Moulton’s The Literary Study of the Bible (1895),42 and in at least four books by different authors that have appeared under the title The Bible as Literature, from the one published by Moulton and several collaborators in 1896, to the one by John B. Gabel and Charles Wheeler in 1986.43 This approach, having expanded far beyond exclusively Protestant parameters, crystallized the next year with the publication by Harvard University Press of The Literary Guide to the Bible (1987), whose editors Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, noting “a revival of interest in the literary qualities of these texts,” professed “a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority,” one that “now bids fair to become part of the literary canon.”44

This brings us back to Frye, as a kind of unexpected counterpoint to the Bible-as-literature approach. Punctuated by the subtitle, “The Bible and Literature,”

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borne by both *The Great Code* and its 1990 sequel *Words with Power*, Frye’s self-distancing from the Bible-as-Literature approach was evident as early as a talk he gave in 1972, about an undergraduate course he taught on the typology and symbolism of the English Bible: “in this whole process,” he concluded, “the emphasis gradually changes from the Bible as a literary work to a conception of the Bible as the work which enables one to understand, among other things, the social function of literature. It would not ultimately make sense to call the Bible a work of art, but it does make a good deal of sense to call it, as William Blake does, ‘the Great Code of Art.’” In another lecture several years later, on “History and Myth in the Bible,” Frye repeats this point. Asserting that “there is unmistakably a sense in which the Bible transcends the poetic as well as the historical,” he states: “Even Blake, for all his devotion to both the Bible and the arts, did not call the Bible a work of art: he called it the ‘Great Code’ of art.” In closing that same lecture, he offers a rare comment on what he takes to be the meaning of Blake’s phrase: “No book could have had the Bible’s literary influence without itself possessing a literary form.... There is also the question of the mythological framework which the Bible has provided for Western literature,... and which is part of what Blake’s phrase ‘Great Code of Art’ means” (CW 4:22).

Nowhere does Frye state more explicitly his understanding of Blake’s phrase, though in his study named after it, he reiterates more emphatically that the Bible “has had a continuously fertilizing influence on English literature from Anglo-Saxon writers to poets younger than I, and yet” – pace the whole tradition of Bible-as-literature scholarship – “no one

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46 Northrop Frye, “Pistis and Mythos,” notes from a talk given at the annual convention of the Learned Societies of Canada, McGill University, June 1, 1972, CW 4:9, emphasis mine. In an interview of March 18, 1982, Frye states explicitly that the notion of “the Bible as literature ... is not really what I’m after, nor what I think Blake meant [in calling the Bible ‘the Great Code of Art’]” (CW 24:547). In another interview, of September 16–17, 1982, he pronounces it “nonsense” to interpret Blake’s “Great Code” aphorism as suggesting “that the Bible is a work of art itself” (CW 24:652). Cf. his interview of September 20, 1982, where he reiterates that Blake’s aphorism “mean[s] that the Bible is not in itself a work of art but that it contained endless ideas and suggestions for people who were working in the arts” (CW 24:658).


48 Frye continues: “Similar frameworks have been provided for other cultures by other sacred books: if one is attempting a serious study of Islamic literature, one has to begin with the Koran as a piece of literature” (CW 4:22). As provocative as this last suggestion seems in the light of the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses* fourteen years later, Frye missed the opportunity to acknowledge here the Qur’an’s capacity as the central vehicle of biblical reception in Muslim culture.
would say that the Bible ‘is’ a work of literature. Even Blake... did not call it that: he said '[The Old & New Testaments are] the Great Code of Art.' 

In thereby invoking Blake’s phrase to consummate his own shift from a Bible-as- to a Bible-and-literature orientation (by denying that the Bible “‘is’ a work of literature”), Frye inadvertently encouraged a rather serious, anachronistic misinterpretation of that phrase. As early as May 17, 1957, in a convocation address at Carleton University, Ottawa, he spoke of the gospel parable of the Prodigal Son as “one of the keys to the whole imagination and thought of Western culture” (CW 12:278). Twenty-five years later, in *The Great Code*, he “take[s] the Bible as a key to mythology, instead of taking mythology ... as a key to the Bible” (CW 19:111). Although I am unaware of whether Frye ever called the Bible itself the “key” to Western literature itself, this is precisely what many if not most of his readers and critics were led by him to assume he and Blake alike meant in calling the Bible “the Great Code.”

To state the assumption quite simply: if the Bible provided “the mythological framework... for Western literature,” on the multiple levels of language, myth, metaphor, and typology analyzed by Frye, then the Bible must be the hermeneutic “key” by which to unlock that framework and to decipher its contents. As he put it in an interview on January 22, 1990, in relating Blake’s


50 See A. C. Hamilton’s review (of Frye’s *The Great Code*), “The Bible as Key to All Art,” Whig-Standard Magazine (Kingston, ON), May 1, 1982, 18–9; here 18: “... by [his book’s title, Frye] meant that [the Bible] provides the imaginative key to understanding all art”; Frank Kermode, “The Universe of Myth,” *New Republic* 186/23 (June 9, 1982): 30–3; here 31: “... so [biblical] typology is the key to almost everything. Not surprisingly, Frye is able to say with confidence that he knows of no other book that covers the same ground as this one [i.e., the Bible]”; Fixler (n. 3 above), 76: “Frye sees the Bible as a key to the design-making impulses of the human imagination and to language as a generative process”; Susan Einbinder, “Alter vs. Frye: Which Bible?,” *Prooftexts* 4, no. 3 (September 1984): 301–8; here 302: “[Frye’s] generalized study sees in the Bible, ultimately, the key to the mythological and poetry structures it bequeathed to the Western world, and which they syncretized to their Hellenistic counterparts”; Lynn Poland, “The Secret Gospel of Northrop Frye,” *Journal of Religion* 64, no. 4 (October 1984): 513–19; here 513: “But in keeping with the full Blakean title, the volume also reads the Christian Bible as the code, or perhaps key to the code, of Western culture”; Robert Detweiler and David Jasper, eds., *Religion and Literature: A Reader* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox, 2000), 14: “For [Frye], the Bible is the key to understanding Western literature and culture”; Michael Dolzani, “Introduction,” *Northrop Frye’s Notebooks on Romance*, CW 15: xxxix: “The study of anagogy begins with the Bible, because it is what Blake called ‘the great code’ of art, the key to the universal symbolism of the order of words, and this is true whether or not one ‘believes in’ the Bible”; Ernest Rubinstein, *Religion and the Muse: The Vexed Relation between Religion and Western Literature* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007), 99: “Frye wished to uncover the biblical themes that held what he believed the key to unlocking the structure Western literature.”
“phrase ‘Great Code’ about the Bible” to “the deliberately cryptic quality about [Blake’s own] work,” Frye observes: “Well, there is something of a code to be deciphered” (CW 24:1057).

This assumption has two problems, even aside from Bloom’s observation that “Frye’s code, like Erich Auerbach’s figura, ... is only another belated repetition of the Christian appropriation and usurpation of the Hebrew Bible.” First, if we consider the holy scriptures as constituting a “key,” we are forced to assume, somewhat uncomfortably, that they played a determinist, perhaps even supernatural role in relation to the Western imagination, exerting a kind of sympathetic magic, in James G. Frazer’s sense of the term, upon the literature and art that came after them. That is, given his own Frazerian assumption that “Magic postulates the same kind of universe the artist works in: a universe in which like is connected with like,” Frye would have us accept that the scriptures influenced, or even conditioned, literature in a manner requiring – in Frazer’s own words – “that things act on each other at a distance through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether”; how or why else could the Bible now serve as their “key”?

52 I make this suggestion in neither a facetious nor a hypercritical manner. Allusions to Frazer’s theories and writings crop up throughout Frye’s writings. In the mid-1940s, he already acknowledged that “for ten years I’ve been befogged & bemused by a lot of intuitions derived from Spengler & Frazer” (Notebook 42a), par. 26, CW 15:11. He later acknowledged Frazer’s influence on his writing of his Blake monograph; see Frye’s preface to the 1962 Beacon Press edition of Fearful Symmetry, CW 14:419. On Frazer’s influence on some of Frye’s writings on Shakespeare, see Troni Y. Grande and Garry Sherbert’s introduction to CW 28: xli–xliii. Most significantly for our purposes, Frye was of course well familiar with Frazer’s famous theory of sympathetic magic. For Frye’s own discussions of sympathetic magic, see, aside from the crucial passage cited in our next note below, those in his student paper, “The Concept of Sacrifice” (written in 1935 at Emmanuel College), CW 3:123–24, 127, 130, 135; “Notebook 21” (1969/71–1976), par. 523, CW 13:237; “Notebook 11d” (1991), par. 44, CW 13:279; and The Great Code, CW 19:173–74, where he also references Frazer more than once (CW 19:53, 111). In his lecture “Creation and Recreation” (1979–80), he recalls being “amused,” upon looking over some of his own early reviews, “to see how preoccupied I had been then with ... Spengler and Frazer, who haunted me constantly, though I was well aware all the time I was studying them that they were rather stupid men and often slovenly scholars [!]. But I found them, or rather their central visions, unforgettable” (CW 4:39).
53 Quoted from a paper entitled “The Relation of Religion to the Art Forms of Music and Drama” which Frye wrote in 1936 as a seminarian at Emmanuel College, in the University of Toronto; CW 3:330.
Perhaps this is what Frye had in mind in speaking about “our mythological conditioning,” of which criticism is supposed “to make us more aware”: the Bible as “Great Code” conditions, and in turn is conditioned by, western culture, and then provides the “key” to unlocking cultural products such as literature and art. Secondly, it is unlikely that Blake, in calling the two Testaments “the Great Code of Art,” regarded the Bible as any sort of “key” to be used to unlock “Art” – or to unlock anything else, for that matter. Nothing in his *Laocoön*, or in any of his other works, as we shall see, suggests that this was what he meant by “code.” Nor, indeed, do any of the meanings and connotations the term bore in English usage in Blake’s time.

The word derives from the Latin *codex*, a variant of *caudex*, which originally denoted a block of wood split or sawn into planks, leaves, or tablets, and which hence came to refer to a book or writing, especially a ledger. From this meaning, eventually, developed the notion of a code or digest of laws, most notably the Codex Theodosianus and Codex Justinianus. It was in this Roman legal sense that the term entered the English language, evidently in the 14th century, as “code,” a term that, by the early 18th century, began also to refer to “a systematic collection or digest of the laws of a country, or of those relating to a particular subject.” What seems clear is that the specific connotations of “code” that would justify our reading the expression “Code of Art” as “a key to art” were not yet sufficiently current in the time of Blake to make it plausible that he would even have thought of using the word in that sense. To be sure, with the development of telegraphy, the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852) alludes to his own request for “a code of signals for the army” in a missive of 1808. However, if the representative quotations compiled by the *OED* are any indication, this expression did not enter common parlance until the last quarter of the century.

56 In his interview of January 6, 1983, Frye speaks of his “examination of the role of the Great Code [i.e., the Bible]: of how it has created us, and of how we go on creating, and recreating it” (CW 24:684).
59 *The Dispatches of Field Marshall the Duke of Wellington, During His Various Campaigns [...] from 1799 to 1818*, vol. 4 (London: John Murray, 1837), 21
60 “Code, n., 3.b,” *OED Online*: “1875 W. S. Jevons *Money* (1878) 166 Maritime codes of signals....1880 *Brit. Postal Guide* 241 Code telegrams are those composed of words, the context of which has no intelligible meaning....1884 *Pall Mall Gaz.* 12 Sept. 5/1 Telegraph companies had to face ... the extension of the use of code words.”
1836, almost a decade after Blake’s death, did the American Samuel F. B. Morse and two associates begin developing their electrical telegraph technology whose signal system would eventually become known as Morse Code. Only in the 1880s did the term “code-book” emerge, denoting “a list of letters or other expressions, and of their correlates in a code, arranged as a key for encoding and decoding.”\(^6\)

It was from this usage of “code” that Frye’s construal of Blake’s usage ultimately derives, as does the somewhat comparable usage in Pierre Bourdieu’s claim: “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded [celui qui est pourvu du code selon lequel elle est codée].”\(^6\)

4 The Bible as Nonpareil Book of Art

What might Blake have meant “code” to denote when he called the Old and New Testaments “the Great Code of Art”? Twenty-five years ago, John C. Villalobos proposed as a “possible source” for Blake’s phrase a reference by Robert Lowth to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in Lowth’s introduction to his translation (1778) of Isaiah, as “the great Code of Criticism.”\(^6\) For Blake, according to Villalobos, the Bible inverts the *Poetics*: “The Bible was the sacred Great Code of Art as opposed to a code of criticism, a lesser form of expression. The Bible finally became for Blake the quintessence of art, a work perfectly formed, infinitely superior to any of the ancient works.”\(^6\) Villalobos may well be right. But, then again, must it really be supposed that Blake’s coinage was inspired by a specific “source”? And, even if Lowth’s comment about “the great Code of Criticism” did influence Blake, the question would still be begged. We would still be left wondering: what exactly did Blake – or Lowth, for that matter – mean by the word “code”?  

\(^{61}\) “Code, Compounds, C.2,” *OED Online*, emphasis mine. *OED* cites three quotations that illustrate the history of this usage of the term: “1884 Electrician XIV. 62/1 This firm recommends the use of the ‘ABC Telegraphic Code Book’... 1908 Westm. Gaz. 15 Oct. 4/2 The Royal Automobile Club proposes...to establish a law unto itself, with its own code-books of rules, morals, and punishments.... 1964 Y. Bar-Hillel Lang. & Information xvi. 279 A short signal sequence ... to be decoded at the receiving end with the help of a code-book.”


To answer this question, it may be instructive to consider the general usage of the term in Blake’s time, rather than trying to pin-point some specific “source” for Blake’s expression. Far from referring to any sort of key, “code” is defined concretely – in line with its derivation from codex – as “a Volume or Book” in Nathan Bailey’s *Dictionarium britannicum* (1730; 2nd ed. 1736), which also discusses at some length the application of the word to the Theodosian and Justinian Codes. Accordingly, Samuel Johnson, in his monumental *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), boils the definition down to haiku-like concision: “Code.... 1. A book. 2. A book of the civil law,” the second denotation being documented by quotations from John Arbuthnot and Alexander Pope.

Nowhere in these dictionaries is “code” associated with the Bible. But their definitions of “code” as book accords with the use the English botanist Nehemiah Grew had made in his *Cosmologia Sacra* (1701), subtitled, “A discourse... to demonstrate the truth and excellency of the Bible.” In its fourth book, entitled “Sheweh [sic], That the BIBLE, and First, That the Hebrew Code, or Old Testament, is God’s Positive Law,” Grew uses the term “Hebrew Code” routinely to denote the Hebrew Scriptures as a book or volume. (In the title just quoted, we might note, “the Hebrew Code” is equated through the conjunction “or” with a book, the “Old Testament,” while being identified only synecdochally with the divine “Law” imparted therein.) This meaning of the term persisted up through

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67 Nehemiah Grew, *Cosmologia sacra, or, A discourse of the universe as it is the creature and kingdom of God chiefly written to demonstrate the truth and excellency of the Bible.*, which contains the laws of his kingdom in this lower world (London: Printed for W. Rogers, S. Smith and B. Walford, 1701), bk. 4 [title], 133.
68 For example, book 4, ch. 1 of ibid. is entitled: “Of the INTEGRITY of the Hebrew Code” (133). Consider also, e.g., book 4, ch. 1, §2, 133: “I’ll begin with the Writings of the Hebrew Code”; book 4, ch. 1, §6, 136: “... Translations, which were made of the Hebrew Code” (cf. “... a Translation ... made of the Entire Hebrew Canon” [book 4, ch. 1, §8, 136]); book 4, ch. 1, §11, 137: “And that the Translation made by the 72 Elders, took in the whole Hebrew Code, is also certain”; book 4, ch. 1, §12, 138: “And that there were Copies both of this Translation, and of the Hebrew Code, in the Library of Cleopatra, is acknowledged by all”; book 4, ch. 1, §13, 138: “Then having learned the Hebrew tongue, and procured a Copy of the Hebrew Code, [Origen] added two more columns; in one, the Hebrew Text and Letters; in the other, the same Text, in Greek Letters: and this he called Hexapla”; book 4, ch. 1, §15, 139: “And between these two Codes, the Alexandrian and the Vatican, there is a great Accord” (here he is using “Codes” to connote two “manuscripts,” “volumes,” or “editions” of the LXX); book 4, ch. 1, §18, 140: “The Agreement of all which Translations aforesaid, both one with another, and with the Hebrew Code; may suffice to satisfy us of the Integrity hereof. That is to say, that the Sacred Canon, which Ezra and the Prophets, his Contemporaries, left to the Jews, was the same with that we now enjoy.”
Blake’s time, as William Paley, in his widely influential *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), speaks of Irenaeus’ “put[ting] the evangelic and apostolic writings in connection with the law and the prophets, manifestly intending by the one a code or collection of Christian sacred writings, as the other expressed the code or collection of Jewish sacred writings.” 69 “From many writers also of the third century,” Paley later adds, “it is collected, that the Christian scriptures were divided into two codes or volumes, one called the ‘Gospels or Scriptures of the Lord,’ the other, the ‘Apostles, or Epistles of the Apostles.’” 70 (Were we searching for a “source” of Blake’s “Great Code” aphorism, incidentally, either one of these two quotations from Paley would seem a candidate no less compelling than the Lowth quotation cited earlier, although unlike Paley, Blake defines “The Old & New Testaments” as a single “code” rather than as separate “codes or volumes.”) Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, in a letter of October 12, 1813 to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson applied the term in a slightly variant way in reference to his project of reducing the Gospels – literally cutting and pasting them – into his own radically abridged, Deistically-palatable *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, known popularly as *The Jefferson Bible*. Once all the supernatural and hence rationalistically unacceptable stories, and all the “amphibologisms,” had been pared away, there would remain “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.” 71 Here, a Paley-like association of “code” with “collection” combines the old legal sense of regulations to which adherence is expected.

As it happens, these meanings and associations of “code” in English usage over the century and a quarter leading up Blake’s *Laocoön* square more or less with what can be gleaned of Blake’s understanding of the term. In all his writings and letters apart from the *Laocoön*, the word crops up half a dozen times – in three poetic works, and one prose work, all of them pre-*Laocoön*. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), he uses the term in two pronouncements. The first reads: “All Bibles or sacred codes. [sic] have been the causes of the following Errors,” namely, that “Man” has two “existing principles”: a “Body,” from which proceeds “Evil,” “callld Evil,” and a “Soul,” from which proceeds “Reason,” “callld Good”; and “That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies” (pl. 4, *CPP* 34). In this statement, the term “sacred codes” seems either to denote “sacred books” or to hark back to the Roman sense of *codex* as a code of law, albeit religious rather than civil law – an impression supported by Blake’s later claim in the same

70 Ibid., vol. 1, pt. 1, ch. 9, sec. 3, §7, 245.
poem: “... all nations believe the jews [sic] code” (pl. 12, CPP 39). In the line in Europe a Prophecy (1794), “The Guardian of the secret codes [i.e., Urizen] forsook his ancient mansion” (pl. 12, CPP 64), “codes” clearly denotes books or volumes, while it is equally evident that it is again in the sense of religious law that Blake twice uses the term in his “Annotations” to An Apology for the Bible (1797): “The laws of the Jew were... the basest & most oppressive of human codes. & being like all other codes given under pretence of divine command were what Christ pronounced them The Abomination that maketh desolate. i.e., State Religion which is the Source of all Cruelty” (Letter III, CPP 618). Finally, just as his several allusions to the Jews’ “code” are evocative of the Old Testament (either as a book, or as a container or conveyor of religious laws), so does Blake’s one other usage of the word, in The Song of Los (1795), associate “code” indirectly with the Bible. This happens in a passage that refers to Norse Mythology as, implicitly, the Nordic counterpart of the Bible, just as the Qur’an is, he implies, the Muslim equivalent:

And to Mahomet [Antamon, a spirit of graphic art] a loose Bible [i.e., the Qur’an] gave.

But in the North, to Odin, Sotha [who symbolizes worldly conflict] gave a Code of War [i.e., Norse mythology] (The Song of Los, pl. 3, lines 29–30, CPP 67)

As the textual and contextual evidence suggests, in calling the Old and New Testaments “the Great Code of Art,” Blake is not construing them as any sort of key. Nor is it likely here that he is prescribing the Bible as anything comparable to a legal code; indeed, to do so would be antithetical to Blake’s salient and of – remarked antinomian tendencies – tendencies reflected, for example, in his construal of eternal

72 Cf., several lines earlier: “Rolling volumes of grey...:/For Urizen unclaspd [sic] his Book...” (Europe, pl. 12, 64).
73 Cf. Bloom’s commentary, CPP 905.
74 See, e.g., E. P. Thompson, Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law (New York: New Press, 1993), 18–19: What must ... be insisted upon is the ubiquity and centrality of antinomian tenets to Blake’s thinking, to this writing and to his painting”; Christopher Rowland, “Antinomianism, Atonement and Life in the Divine Body: Blake and Paul,” in idem, Blake and the Bible (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 200: “[Blake] is part of a long tradition of ambivalence about assent to a written code and the preference for the indwelling Spirit as a source of theological [and, we might add, aesthetical] insight.” In one instance, it is worth noting, Rowland does ascribe to Blake the notion of the Bible as a “codebook,” but, quite oppositely from Frye, he does so to specify precisely an aspect of the Bible that Blake deplored. Blake’s The First Book of Urizen (1794), writes Rowland, “is a direct attack on the biblical Genesis ... because [Genesis] laid the foundation for considering the whole Bible to be a codebook to distinguish good from evil, the sacred from the profane, and it was a key text in modeling divine monarchy which was emulated by kings and priest on earth, a system that Blake despised” (102, emphasis mine).
life after death as “Freedom from all Law,”75 and in such passages in his poetry as “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion”;76 “One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression”;77 “No individual can keep these Laws, for they are death.”78 Rather, Blake appears to be using the term “code” more in its etymological sense of a codex, or perhaps, loosely, in the Roman sense of a digest. Much more in keeping with the notion of the Bible as literature, or even as “a library of literary texts,” than with the notion of the Bible and literature, Blake is suggesting that the two Testaments, as “the Great Code [or Codex],” comprise a nonpareil book or digest of art. And on the subject of art, his Laocoön has so much to declare that the engraving could be read as his own last testament on art, a word that occurs no fewer than eighteen times amid the aphorisms that haphazardly engulf the pictorial image. One of these reads: “The whole Business of Man Is The Arts & All Things Common” (CPP 273), yet “Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed ... No Secresy in Art.” So, what is art for him? “ART is the Tree of LIFE GOD is JESUS” (CPP 274). Two of his declarations on art pertain specifically to Hebrew art: “HEBREW ART is called SIN by DEIST SCIENCE,” yet “Israel deliverd [sic] from Egypt is Art deliverd from Nature & Imitation” (CPP 273). Other declarations relate the discussion of art specifically to Jesus and Christianity. God’s “Works of Art” are those in which “The Imagination,” qua “God himself” and “The Divine Body,” “manifests itself” – that is, through Jesus, with us (“we”) as “his Members” (CPP 273). Moreover, “Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists” (CPP 274), and “Christianity is Art & not Money, /... its curse,” and “Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only” (CPP 274, 275). What does art require of the artist? Blake’s multiple answers combine practical exhortations with an injunction adapted from one of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples: “Prayer is the Study of Art/Praise is the Practise of Art / Fasting & c. all relate to Art / ... / ... / Practise is Art If you leave off you are Lost / ... / You must leave Fathers & Mothers if they stand in the way of art.” The latter clause, notably, appears to paraphrase Luke 14:26: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (KJV).

5 Conclusion

Considered collectively, the statements on art and artists in Blake’s Laocoön make up a code in the Roman sense of a digest or collection. In this way, the Laocoön’s

75 Blake, Letter of April 12 1827 to George Cumberland, CPP 784.
76 Blake, “Proverbs of Hell,” line 25, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 8, CPP 36.
77 Blake, “A Memorable Fancy,” The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, pl. 24, CPP 44.
78 Blake, Jerusalem (1804), ch. 2, pl. 31[35], line 11, CPP 177.
very nature approximates the Bible’s own nature, as Blake regards it. The difference is that the Laocoön is a digest not of art (as the Bible is for Blake a book of art), but rather of aphorisms largely about art.\textsuperscript{79} And these, in turn, are shot through with the rhetoric of struggle and conflict (“war,” mentioned four times; “destroy,” twice; “Destroyer,” once; “Good & Evil,” once; and so forth) – a rhetoric in tune with the central visual agonistic image of the Trojan prophet and his two sons, biblicized in Blake’s vision as “n’ [Jah, for Jehovah] & his two Sons Satan & Adam.”

In this respect, the Laocoön might also be viewed as a veritable manifesto on literary-aesthetic reception, betraying a monumental case of Bloomian anxiety of influence. For here, dramatized in a pagan prophet’s mortal struggle, is the agon of the poet Blake with innumerable predecessors. On one level, as “the most radical expression yet of his methodological assumptions about the reciprocity of text and design,”\textsuperscript{80} the Laocoön embodies Blake’s refutation of the distinctions between word and image submitted in Lessing’s treatise \textit{Laokoon: oder, über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie} (1766, Laocoon: or, on the boundaries of painting and poetry), itself a refutation of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s restatement of the classical rule \textit{Ut pictura poesis} (“as is painting, so is poetry”).\textsuperscript{81} On another level, as if to illustrate Bloom’s theory that all great art stems from creative misprisions of previous works,\textsuperscript{82} the image in Blake’s Laocoön is based not directly on the late 1st-century BCE marble statue ascribed by Pliny to the Rhodian sculptors Hagesander, Polydorus, and Athenadorus, which Blake never saw, but instead, upon one or more of the pictures Blake had made years earlier of the plaster-cast replica of Laocoön in the Royal Academy. Nor would the chain of reception and misprisions find its point of origin in that Rhodian marble group, for not only is the latter itself assumed to have been “carved after a mid-Hellenistic bronze,”\textsuperscript{83} but both the marble and the (supposed) bronze statues presupposed the episode in Vergil’s epic, while Blake himself presents the scene as “copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact. or. History of Ilium” – an expression of Blake’s conviction that the imitation of Greco-Roman

\textsuperscript{79} This of course is not to gainsay that the Laocoön, taken as a whole, constitutes a work of art.
\textsuperscript{81} See Johann Joachim Winckelmann, \textit{Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Grieschiechen Werke in der Malerey und Bilderkunst} (Dresden: Walther, 1756).
art leads to a “Degraded Imagination,” in contrast to the deliverance of the imagination effected by biblical art and religion.

None of what I have said in this article is meant to question the value of the contributions of Frye to the study of the Bible and literature. It is noteworthy that in 1982, he himself, after his The Great Code had appeared in print on February 10, acknowledged in interviews about the book that the term code “has an enormous number of ramifications in the English language” (September 20, CW 24:658), and “was a word that had rather specific reference to the Bible itself, whereas now it means communication theory, so I’m simply using the title for all it’s worth: for all its echoes together” (March 18, CW 24:546). My suggestion is only that, far from promoting the Bible as a forward-functioning key by which to decipher the mythology of post-biblical literature, Blake’s Laocoön is a work fixated upon its own complex, synthesizing reception of the biblical and classical past, a tradition of strong creative misprisions about whose all-powerful influence Frye’s own work expresses an undeniable anxiety – in the Bloomian sense.

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