

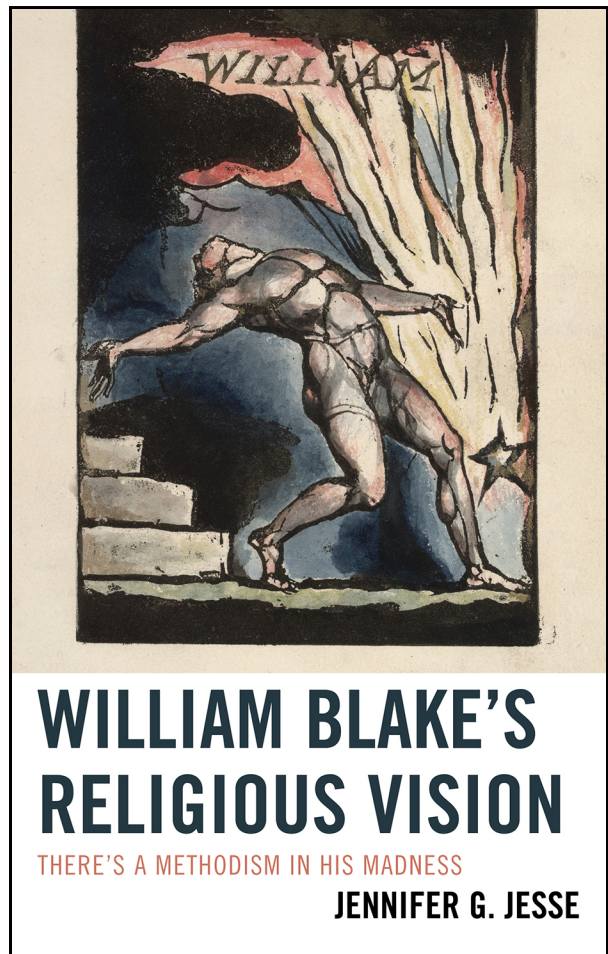
Jennifer G. Jesse. *William Blake's Religious Vision: There's a Methodism in His Madness*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. xiv + 298 pp. \$84.00/£54.95, hardcover; \$44.99/£29.95, paperback or e-book.

Reviewed by Jennifer Davis Michael

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1 AS Blake's religious views have come under fresh scrutiny and reassessment during the past decade or so (Ankarsjö, Davies and Schuchard, Rix, Ryan, Schuchard), it is refreshing to see some theologians wade into the waters previously ruled by literary scholars. Jennifer G. Jesse's book challenges the predominant association of Blake with antinomian radical dissent (Mee), viewing him instead as a religious moderate in the tradition of John Wesley. Not only does she claim that Blake "endorses Methodist doctrines and values" (7), she also wishes to correct a common misconception that Methodism at the time was based on irrational "enthusiasm." She advances her argument by positing that Blake wrote differently for different audiences, so that an antirational discourse might be aimed at deists, while antinomians might be challenged to accept a more moderate view of reason. Jesse identifies images and phrases (comparable to the "family values" of recent currency in the US) as "hot buttons" for particular sects. Her book thus highlights the need to contextualize Blake's work more fully with regard to the Christian religious discourse of the day.

2 As the problematic role of reason is fundamental to Jesse's argument, broad chapter divisions address three potential functions of reason: "Definitive of Religion," "Destructive of Religion," and "Redemptive of Religion." Under these headings, she considers Blake's "road signs" addressed to specific groups: deists, the established Anglican Church, the religious radicals such as Muggletonians, and the moderates such as Methodists. Within each category, she further selects one or two spokespersons—for example,



Samuel Johnson for the established church. At times these selections seem arbitrary, especially when it comes to the radical groups, of whom it is more difficult to identify a representative view.

3 Jesse does not claim to treat any of Blake's theological arguments "exhaustively," and she deliberately omits three rather large religious groups from her study: rational dissenters such as Joseph Priestley (whose faith in reason would have been shared by the Anglicans of the time), Swedenborgians (whose beliefs, she explains, were so wide ranging that there could be no single message addressed to them), and Roman Catholics (because she does not find this group engaging directly in the contemporary debates of the time). Nor does she explore any non-Christian religions, arguing that even Blake's abundant references to Jews and Judaism are really aimed at Christian audiences, especially the Muggletonians (who associated "Jewishness" negatively with moral law) and the followers of Richard Brothers (who claimed he was appointed to lead the Jews back into Palestine). Jesse is honest and explicit about her "roads not taken" (including *The Four Zoas*), and while

these parameters may frustrate some readers and limit her argument, they allow ample room for future study.

- 4 In a key chapter (chapter 3), she problematizes the traditional dichotomy in which Urizen is cast as villain and Los as hero. She emphasizes the ambiguity of both figures, suggesting that Urizen not only represents “your reason” but may also be the “appointed” or “ordained” one, designated as “separate” (drawing on other meanings of the Greek “horizō”). Such ordination and designation might be positive, in the sense that Paul uses the same Greek verb, or, conversely, critical of Paul’s theology (52-53). Moreover, she notes the ambiguity of Urizen’s presentation, even in his own nominal book, which might be a book *by* or *about* him. The book by Urizen, for example, might well be describing Los in its first line, “Lo, a shadow of horror is risen”: the same Los who governs time and space. The separation of Los from Urizen obscures the fact, evident to “a Christian reader of any stripe,” that we are already “risen” with Jesus: resurrected and reunited (57-58). The possibility of a risen or redeemed reason drives Jesse to question “the metanarrative that is usually imposed on Blake’s myths that valorizes Los and demonizes Urizen” (55). She uses Urizen and Los as a test case for her theory that “Blake is addressing multiple audiences at once ... using Urizen and Los as tropes to diagnose what he sees as the theological disorders of his day” (59), so that what she calls “the first story line” with Urizen as villain appeals to radical/antinomian readers, while the “second story line” with Los as the instigator of superstition appeals to rationalists. Yet, puzzlingly, she does not address in this chapter the varying sequence of plates among different copies of *The Book of Urizen*, mentioning this fact only in a footnote. This seems a missed opportunity to address the question of variant audiences more specifically. And while Jesse makes a valid point about the reductive way in which the character of Urizen is usually read, she also seems to make assumptions about her own audience and to assume a prescriptive attitude on Blake’s part—for example, “If we are in the appropriate frame of mind sculpted for us by the poem [*Milton*] and have images of *Paradise Lost* dancing in our heads, we will surely see ...” (62).
- 5 I must admit, when I first read the subtitle, “There’s a Methodism in His Madness,” it sounded like a joke. Jesse, however, is serious in her effort not only to uncover a neglected connection between Blake and this very popular evangelical movement, but also to correct the common caricature of Methodism as pure sentiment and enthusiasm. She briefly summarizes the Calvinist/Arminian divide within evangelicalism and reads *Milton* as an “Arminian-style conversion narrative,” claiming that the theological commitments revealed in this poem would be recognized as Arminian by Blake’s contemporaries (192). The

Methodist leaders John Wesley and George Whitefield seem to be the only contemporary religious leaders given positive mention in Blake’s corpus, and while there was a split between them along Arminian/Calvinist lines, Jesse agrees with Morton Paley that Blake downplays that split in order to present them as prophets and models of self-annihilation (188). On the other hand, Blake’s application of the “Three Classes of Men” clearly seems to mock and undermine Calvinism—but, according to Jesse, his expansion of the two Calvinist categories into three seems designed “to appeal to the understanding of those he addresses, to draw them gently into his story” (190). She spends time defining the central and yet balanced role that reason plays in Wesley’s theology (essential to faith, but not exclusively defining it), then returns to her examination of Urizen’s role in redemption, tracing the positive use of reason all the way back to Blake’s early tractates on natural religion. Intriguingly, she suggests that in these tractates Blake emulates Methodist empiricist formulas (202), putting reason to the test of experience. Indeed, what Blake calls “Poetic Genius” in *All Religions are One* sounds a great deal like the “spiritual sense” Wesley affirms in his sermons. Jesse suggests that Blake’s perennial emphasis on “experience” and “experiment” not only complicates our view of Urizen but also employs the vocabulary of Wesleyan Methodists as much as deists (239). The emphasis on conversion and redemption in *Milton* and *Jerusalem* also provides fodder for her interpretation. While Jesse announces at the outset that she is not attempting “to squeeze Blake into a Methodist box” (8), Blake’s relationship to Methodism would seem—from the hints given here—to warrant more than two chapters’ worth of exploration, particularly in terms of the imagery and language she identifies.

- 6 The book culminates in a reading of *All Religions are One* from the perspective of each of the groups already identified, finding that it rejects the deist conception of reason while not rejecting reason altogether. In other words, it advocates “a mediating theology” (267), tempering both deist and Anglican positions while refining Methodist doctrine on an important point (identifying the Poetic Genius as innate) (263). This persuasive reading synthetically and effectively demonstrates the methodology she has been advocating in the preceding chapters.
- 7 The “madness” in the title is far less prevalent in the book than the Methodism, and indeed could have been omitted altogether, although Jesse frames the book with this secondary theme. Chapter 1 attributes the perennial assertions of Blake’s madness to his association with antinomianism and antirationalism (4). The final chapter, “Whose Madness?,” cites the Arminian (Methodist) view of salvation as “madness indeed” to the rationalists (275). However, an inability to be rational and a conscious rejection of rational-

ism are not the same thing; hence this argument tends to distract (if not detract) from her main one.

- 8 In conclusion, this is an interesting and provocative book that could have used more careful editing. To my taste, the book sometimes reads like a transcription of a lecture, with some of the repetitions and other verbal tics one might find there. Exclamation points appear frequently, as well as clichés such as “part and parcel,” “doom and gloom,” “lock, stock, and barrel.” The use of terminology is not always precise either, as when “images” seems to refer to ideas (122). Nonetheless, Jesse has opened up important and unexpected areas of inquiry that are likely to yield a greater understanding of Blake’s polyphonic work in a heterogeneous religious milieu.

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