R E V I E W

G. A. Rosso. *The Religion of Empire: Political Theology in Blake's Prophetic Symbolism*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016. xviii + 274 pp. 8 color plates, 6 black-and-white illustrations. $69.95, hardcover; $19.95, PDF e-book.

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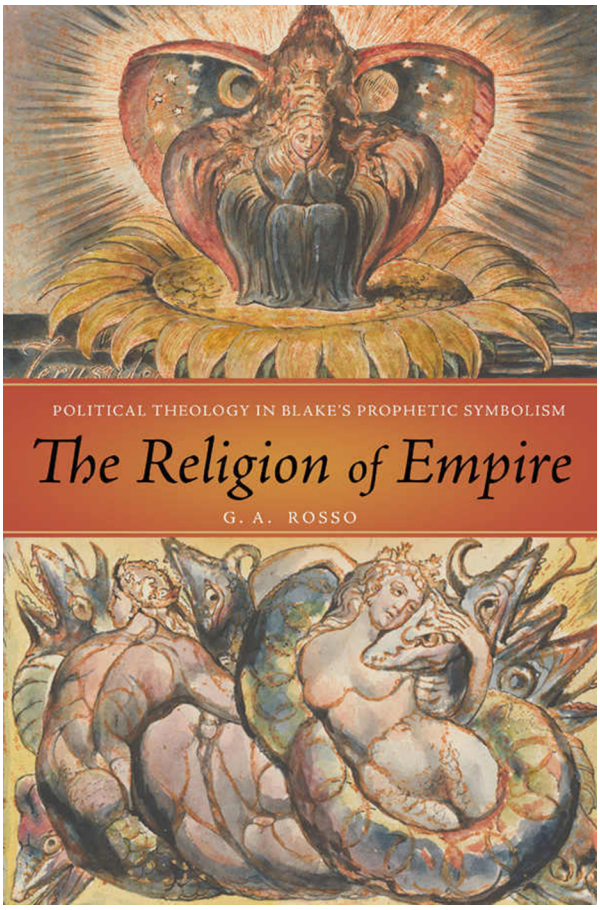

1 In *The Religion of Empire: Political Theology in Blake's Prophetic Symbolism*, G. A. Rosso makes a strong, systematic case for the importance of the character Rahab in Blake's three longest poems, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton a Poem*, and *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*. It is an interesting case because Rahab is a relatively late arrival into Blake's work, and, as Rosso himself admits, she "never speaks directly in Blake's entire corpus" (185). Nonetheless, in an introduction and six chapters he logically and clearly moves from Rahab's roots in the Bible to what he sees as the character's initial appearance in Night VII of *The Four Zoas* as the "Shadowy Female," her increasing ascendancy through *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, and her crucial role as part of the "dark Hermaphrodite" that menaces Albion in *Jerusalem*.

2 The introduction, "Reading Blake's Long Poems," lays out the critical context of the argument, positing a widespread perception that Blake's work fundamentally changed after 1800:

> For a majority of scholars, this shift involves a move away from the more accessible and overtly political work of the 1790s to the more obscure and mystical work after 1800, when religion allegedly trumps politics in Blake's outlook. This book aims to challenge that position by finding in Blake's later poems a broadly political critique of empire and its theological justifications in Judeo-Christian history. (1-2)

Rosso responds to works like Julia Wright's *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* and *Blake, Nation and Empire*, edited by Steve Clark and David Worrall, by "reading the long prophecies in close relation to their anti-imperial biblical contexts and by correlating Blake's radical approach to narrative and characterization with his critique of empire" (11). He finds this critique in Blake's handling of the character of Rahab. I'm not sure the critical divide about earlier and later Blake is as profound as Rosso suggests, and in my case at least, he is preaching to the choir about Blake's blend of religious-political critique even late

in his career. Much more important, however, is his sharp and unwavering focus on Rahab as the embodiment of the alliance of religion and empire.

3 Chapter 1, "The Biblical Roots of Blake's Political Theology," traces Rosso's argument back to three specific biblical incidents: the willingness of the female prostitute Rahab to help the Hebrew spies sent into Jericho in the early chapters of the book of Joshua, and the two appearances, in Isaiah 51 and in Psalm 89, of a divinely defeated male sea dragon, also called Rahab. Rosso argues that Blake "deconstructs the Bible's positive evaluation of Rahab [the harlot]," ultimately "making her the embodiment of the power elite that crucifies Christ" (23). He seizes on Rahab's "differently gendered identities" (22) to argue that by blending the female harlot of Jericho with the male sea dragon, Blake created a hermaphroditic figure, a monstrous contrary to the androgynous savior figure of Ololon in *Milton*. Perhaps Rosso's boldest move for Blake's readers is to replace Vala with Rahab in our thinking about Blake's later prophecies, asserting that Rahab and Jerusalem "constitute the core female opposition in [Blake's] long prophecies" (23).

4 In the discussions in chapters 2-6, Rosso confronts the problem of demonstrating the importance of a character whose influence is shadowy at best. As he admits, the challenge in identifying Rahab's influence in Blake's work lies in what he calls her repeatedly "surreptitious role" in which her "indefiniteness enhances the mystery and extension of her power" (182). As noted earlier, he acknowledges that Rahab "never speaks directly in Blake's entire corpus," and, in the discussion of *Jerusalem*, he writes that her "inherent formlessness conceals the nature of her power. Ironically, it is only by discerning this lack of form that Rahab can be known" (185). Rosso's discussion suggests that Rahab emerges in Blake's work as Blake himself comes to understand how he can use her biblical dual sexuality "as the containing form for a dizzying array of other female characters" (6), as well as a similar array of ideas. Rahab is not even named in her first appearance as the "Shadowy Female" in Night VII of *The Four Zoas*; in *Milton* she does not appear until the latter half of the Bard's Song, and is named only three times in book 2. Much of our awareness of her influence in *Jerusalem*, Rosso says, depends on noting the "periphrastic nature of Rahab's presence" (197)—that is to say, "Although Rahab appears by name only once in each of the first two chapters [of *Jerusalem*], her increasingly explicit presence in chapters 3 and 4 indicates her gradual ascendency in the narrative" (158). Yet that "increasingly explicit presence" is most evident in a cluster of "periphrastic" images associated with the biblical Rahabs and with Blake's interpretation of them. Thus references to flax or to harlots (including the Whore of Babylon), for example, imply Rahab's presence or influence, since the prostitute Rahab hid Joshua's spies under piles of drying flax; Leviathan or the sea dragon similarly implies Rahab's presence because of the associations in Isaiah and Psalm 89. To these more obvious references to Rahab, Rosso adds most prominently the "abomination of desolation," which he says carries meanings "ontological-sexual," "eschatological," and "ideological" that together relate the generation of the temple veil and its rending at the crucifixion to the "interrelation of British religious thought and Enlightenment philosophy" (197). Rahab is the "harlot-dragon" that symbolizes "the alliance of religion and empire" (48); she is "Blake's *magna mater*" (151), associated with weaving and Vala's "ontological veil" (164), as well as with Druids, Deism, and the covenant of Priam.

5 Despite Rahab's shadowy influence, Rosso makes a good case for the importance of the character. Chapter 2, "The Harlot and Hermaphrodite: Rahab Symbolism in *The Four Zoas*," focuses on "Rahab's story"—her "emergence" in Night VII, her "revelation" in Night VIII, and her "ironic redemption" in Night IX—"as central to the development of Blake's political mythology in *The Four Zoas*" (90). Her hermaphroditic nature, Rosso says, serves two important functions: 1) "structural …, draw[ing] together the multiple strands and characters in the narrative and creat[ing] a containing form for them"; and 2) "thematic …, establish[ing] an analogy between Christian origins in Roman Palestine with corruptions of Christianity in contemporary Europe" (55). He argues that in juxtaposing "the conversion of early Christianity into Christendom and the secularization of radical Protestantism in the Enlightenment," Blake shows "how revolutionary energy is compromised in each age by … the monstrous union of religion and empire" (55). As for Blake's more immediate historical concerns, Rosso says that insofar as "the rulers in Britain and France both appeal to religion to justify imperial expansion and war, Blake places both within the constellation of Rahab's power" (55).

6 In chapter 3, "The Birth of Rahab: A Reading of the Bard's Song in *Milton*," Rosso emphasizes "the female presence [implicating Rahab] in the [Bard's] Song as the crucial component of Satan's rule, … essential to the formation of his hermaphroditic body," which itself "symbolizes England's church-state imperium in the post-Miltonic era" (95). This hermaphroditic Satan, he says, "profoundly alters the romantic portrait of Satan in *The Marriage*," so that instead of "representing the energy of religious and political revolt, Satan becomes an icon of state power and its hegemonic practices" (96). In the drama of the Bard's Song, Rosso sees a sort of allegory for how "the English state (Satan) seeks to take control of apocalyptic tradition by sowing

division between sectarian prophecy (Rintrah) and its allies in Parliament (Palamabron)" (105). Chapter 4, "The Divided Emanation in *Milton*," examines how "Blake ties the elements of rationalism and monotheism in Enlightenment philosophy and religion to Milton's theology and … charges both with undermining revelation and denying Christ's divinity" (124). Rosso says that, in opposition to the hermaphroditic body of Rahab, Blake offers Ololon, whose "identity is both androgynous and collective … a multitude that joins with the Messiah to create a divine body more powerful and diverse than Rahab's 'hermaphroditic' alliance with Satan" (125). At stake here is the recovery of "Milton's prophetic heritage, specifically the visionary and antiwar elements" personified in Ololon (124). As Rosso's argument develops, the hermeneutical struggle returns again and again to the problem of distinguishing between options that seem similar but that imply radically different worldviews. In *Milton*, he says, whether the subject is language, violence, writing, war, or eschatological history, Blake "foregrounds the difference between literal and spiritual signification, which serves ultimately to distinguish Rahab and Ololon" (152).

7 In chapters 5 and 6, Rosso splits his religion/empire theme into separate discussions, noting that Blake himself does not separate them, but rather uses imagery of veils and weaving to carry "political and economic as well as cosmological and sexual meanings" (158). Thus, in chapter 5, "The Veil of Moral Virtue in *Jerusalem*," Rosso's "goal is to foreground the religious aspect of [his] religion-of-empire thesis and reserve analysis of its political dimensions" (158) for chapter 6. In this focus on the religious aspect, he examines the relationships between the female characters in *Jerusalem*, especially that "between Jerusalem and Vala as shaped by the hidden but ubiquitous power of Rahab" (157), and he argues that in *Jerusalem* "Blake develops more fully the sexual and imperial dimensions of Rahab's religious power" (179). Chapter 6, "The Abomination of Desolation: Empire and Apocalypse in *Jerusalem*," demonstrates how Rahab, with associated phrases and symbolic figures, "constitutes a broad-scale attack on the conceptual bases of British imperialism, which Blake identifies with the political theologies that support empire generally throughout history" (197). Part of this discussion includes a fascinating account of the influence of Claudius Buchanan, chaplain of the East India Company who became vice-provost of the college at Fort William in Calcutta. Rosso concludes from this account that "the 'exalted' character of Buchanan's missionary elite, the role he assigns the state church in his vision of British Christianity in India, and his attitude of racial superiority all contrast sharply with Blake. In fact, they are defining features in his characterization of Rahab" (202).

8 I do wish that Rosso had considered more the implications of his discussion for our understanding of Blake's characterization. All too often, in my opinion, we tend to treat Blake's characters as mouthpieces for certain ideas, and we pay little attention to them as characters with feelings and motivations. Rosso makes good progress against this way of thinking in his handling of Los. For example, in his consideration of *Jerusalem*'s "primal scene" (19.36-25.16) he says, "Thus Los, whose prophetic capacity is instrumental in keeping a transformative vision of the past alive, also cannot serve as a dependable guide in the scene because of his own fear of generation and bias against Vala" (160). Similarly, Rahab's "surreptitious role" and her "hidden but ubiquitous power" suggest not simply a symbol of oppression but a shadowy, scheming character, whose machinations extend across millennia. She is like the recurring figure in the background of crime-scene photos whose complicity is implied by her repeated presence.

9 Near the end of his book, Rosso makes an important point about the conclusion of *Jerusalem*. He notes that the "most celebrated of [Blake's] apocalyptic finales," the final speech on plate 98, is "expressed in the form of rhetorical questions," suggesting that even here, "Blake retains the contraries of faith and doubt" (217). Blake could easily have phrased those lines as statements—"Where is the Covenant of Priam" (*Jerusalem* 98.46) could just as easily be "Gone is the Covenant of Priam"—but his deliberate use of the questions may suggest both the ongoing struggles of faith and doubt and, perhaps more darkly, a nostalgia for a more certain resolution. In his conclusion, "Building Jerusalem?," Rosso focuses on the implications for modern Blake scholarship of "the contrary forces of order and entropy in the long poems" (233). He notes that "relating Blake's amalgam of religion and empire to these broader contexts [political tensions surrounding the emergence of Christianity in the time of St. Paul] helps show that Blake scholarship has not taken full account of the heterogeneous nature of millenarian culture, relying on a historical method that separates religious from critical thought" (239). I have my doubts about the prevalence of the separation of religious from critical thought in Blake studies, but I do take Rosso's point: even Blake specialists can settle into an all too easy acceptance of certain "truths" that require periodic questioning and review. What Rosso has done is to identify the character of Rahab as the shadowy form that drives those questions in Blake's long poems.

10 Back in the early 1980s, when I first started to work on *Jerusalem*, I was lucky enough to discover a series of essays written in the 1960s and 70s by Edward J. Rose on particular aspects of the poem, including the structure, the characters of Hand and Los, and images of the opened center,

circumcision, and wheels within wheels.[1] In the time before Morton Paley's *The Continuing City* (1983), even before Minna Doskow's *William Blake's* Jerusalem: *Structure and Meaning in Poetry and Picture* (1982), Rose's essays offered hope that Blake's most baffling poem was actually approachable, and they suggested a method—focus on a particular element of the poem, catalogue the textual evidence, look for patterns in that evidence. I was never the same after reading those essays. Rosso's *The Religion of Empire* may not have the impact on me that Rose's essays did, but it does remind me very much of them in the way it gathers and synthesizes information, laying the foundation for much future work.

1. "The Structure of Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Bucknell Review* 11 (1963): 35-54; "Blake's Hand: Symbol and Design in *Jerusalem*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 6 (1964): 47-58; "The Symbolism of the Opened Center and Poetic Theory in Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 5 (1965): 587-606; "The Meaning of Los," *Blake* 1 (Dec. 1967): 10-11; "Circumcision Symbolism in Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Studies in Romanticism* 8 (1968): 16-25; "Wheels within Wheels in Blake's *Jerusalem*," *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (1972): 36-47. See Henry Summerfield's *A Guide to the Books of William Blake for Innocent and Experienced Readers* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998) for a fuller bibliography of Rose's essays.