

**Jennifer Jesse, *William Blake's Religious Vision: There's a Methodism in His Madness*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2013. Pp. 312. Hb. £52.95. ISBN 9780739177907. Pb. £29.95. ISBN 9781498511780.**

Blake studies is in crisis and has been for many years. Blake scholars long ago decided that Blake was to be summed up as a dissenter and an antinomian. These terms were never properly defined; indeed, no distinction was made between religious dissent and political dissent. And any evidence contradicting the 'dissenter' Blake was ignored. As for 'antinomian', in much eighteenth-century polemic this is just a meaningless term of abuse — for instance as a routine libel on the Moravians. The distinguished historian E.P. Thompson, in *Witness Against the Beast* (1991), makes much of the antinomian Blake. Thompson refers repeatedly to what he terms 'the antinomian doctrine of justification by faith alone' (*Witness*, 164). But justification by faith alone is the central tenet of Luther's Protestantism and forms Article 11 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Furthermore, Article 11 would have been assented to by any non-conformist wishing to licence a Dissenting Meeting-House. Thompson would thus make every Christian in England an antinomian apart from the Roman Catholics.

Jennifer Jesse's important new book reveals a Blake 'neither antinomian nor anti-rational in his religious thought ... who defended a moderate, evangelical faith, which becomes visible when viewed in the context of the early Methodism of John Wesley' (7). Jesse stresses that Blake's works are entirely unlike those of Thompson's Muggletonians, rejecting 'their strident anti-rationalism, their strict Calvinism, and their autocratic self-righteousness' (178). She argues compellingly that Blake and Wesley stand in similar positions in relation both to the rationalists and to the radicals. 'Both men would have been perceived as much too enthusiastic to be acceptable to the rationalists, and far too rationalistic to be claimed by the radicals' (200). Jesse proposes that Blake worked with specific audiences in mind, 'drawing on the most distinctive theological arguments of each audience' (247), and reads Blake through his audiences, sorting out his theological 'road signs' (24 *et passim*). She asserts that these road signs 'can only be interpreted accurately when seen through the eyes of those audiences for whom the signs are designed, and that these signs signify different meanings to different audiences' (72). Once we collate Blake's messages to his intended audiences, we find him advocating a system that would have been recognized by his contemporaries as remarkably similar to a Methodist theological vision.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters. Four of these: 'Rationalist Road Signs: The Bible and Creation' (Chapter 5); 'Anglican Road Signs: Christology and Atonement' (Chapter 7); 'Radical Road Signs: Sin and the Last Judgment' (Chapter 9); and 'Methodist Road Signs: Justification and Sanctification' (Chapter 11) elucidate Blake's approach to his different audiences. But Chapter 10: 'Blake and the Religious Moderates' is, I think, Jesse's key chapter, allowing for intriguing new interpretations of his works, particularly in the area of reason: 'we see him affirming not only the same basic axioms as a Wesleyan view of reason, but also the logical insights and implications of those principles' (209). Within this framework, Blake emerges as much a 'reasonable enthusiast' as Wesley.

And as for the vexed issue of 'dissent', Jesse makes clear that Wesleyans and Moravians registered their preaching houses in the 1740s as dissenting under the Act of Toleration for practical considerations (to avoid prosecution for unlawful assembly under the Conventicle Acts), but that theologically they continued to insist on unity with the Established Church. I would have wished for a fuller discussion of the Moravians — the only sect with which the Blake family can be associated and for which the evidence is compelling and irrefutable. This is a significant gap in an otherwise comprehensive study. Jesse, of course, acknowledges that Wesley's religious thinking was 'deeply shaped by the Moravian

tradition' (9). We know from Wesley's accounts that his own faith was awakened on 24 May 1738 at a meeting of the Moravian Society in Aldersgate; he then became active in the Fetter Lane Society in London, though he left after only two years in its company, and progressively distanced himself from their theology over time.

Jennifer Jesse's audience-oriented approach is a powerful hermeneutical tool. At last we can see clearly the M/methodist aspects of Blake's religious thought. Blake would have known Methodism as the major social and religious movement of his time. The sermons, hymns, and other writings of Methodists would have contributed to the ever more apparent emphasis in Blake on inward vision, spiritual renewal, and the creative imagination. It may be too much to claim that Blake is responding specifically to Wesley, as opposed to using ideas and rhetoric current in evangelical circles, but there is much to value in Jesse's very welcome account of the relationship between Blake and Methodism.

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