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Blake and the Bible by Christopher Rowland (review)

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Christianity & Literature, Volume 62, Number 3, Spring 2013, pp. 455-458
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Middle-earth fictions, or of the relationship between myth-making and personal religious faith in general, will find this anthology accessible, useful, and thought-provoking.

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Blake and the Bible. By Christopher Rowland. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0300-11260-3. Pp. xix + 289. \$50.00.

Christopher Rowland's *Blake and the Bible* will immediately call to mind David V. Erdman's similarly-titled collection *Blake and his Bibles* (1990), and the difference between the titles says much about what literary scholars may question in Rowland's study of Blake's biblical exegesis. Rowland's working assumption is that Blake's view and use of the Bible was consistent throughout his lifetime. Accordingly, he does not consider the evolution of Blake's relationship to the Bible in any kind of chronological sequence. Instead, he analyzes Blake's biblical hermeneutics from four general perspectives: how Blake interpreted the Bible through images; how he critiqued the Bible; how Blake's exegetical model paralleled those of the biblical prophets and the self-declared prophets of the long eighteenth century; and how Blake used Jesus and Paul. Rowland's thematic and systematic approach sometimes makes his organization seem haphazard, and readers would do well to first read both the introductory chapter and conclusion in order to get a full sense of his argument. Even in these places, however, Rowland still seems to struggle with balancing Blake's incessant use of the Bible with his fierce criticism of it (2). Rowland's best answer to this conundrum is that Blake believed the Bible "rouze[s] the faculties to act" (6). The Bible thus served as "a stimulus rather than a template for Blake" (9). As Rowland acknowledges, though, this was how Blake viewed all great texts (234), which seems to sidestep why the Bible remained so central to Blake's artistic mission.

Rowland's second and third chapters argue that the *Illustrations to the Book of Job* were "the acme of [Blake's] theological thinking" (13), emblematic of Blake's "biblical exegesis" (13), and "a heuristic lens to view Blake's theology and interpretation of the Bible as a whole" (15). For Rowland, the interplay between word and image in *Job* is central to Blake's biblical exegesis because it forces the engagement of the readers/viewers in the interpretative process. This is an important point, but it really doesn't explain the role of the Bible in Blake's poetry, unless one determinedly reads Blake's works in their material context, which is not Rowland's approach. Rowland illuminates *Job's* visual and verbal allusions to the

Bible and Blake's other works in wonderful detail, but his analysis of each plate is so exacting that our broader understanding of Blake's exegetical principles seems little advanced by the end of the two chapters.

Chapter four makes the claim that Blake understood the divine as a "multiplicity" (73). This view includes but goes far beyond the classic tension between God's justice and mercy, and Rowland highlights how Blake personified figures such as Elohim, the Angel of the Presence, Satan, and Jesus. For Rowland, Blake's practice of mythologizing the divine is "reminiscent" (81) of the Gnostics (a favorite topic of Rowland's), but he admits this interpretative technique could have just as easily derived from his reading of Jacob Boëhme, the Kabbalah, Milton, or simply his own reading of the Bible (83). What is key for Rowland is that Blake's mythologizing exegesis shows how the divine multiplicity was perpetually engaged in its own battles of contraries, a fruitful intellectual and spiritual battle that ultimately reveals the true organic nature of the divine and human. This argument leads to chapter five's consideration of how Blake critiques biblical form and authority in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The First Book of Urizen*, the Genesis Manuscript, and the drawings for the Book of Enoch, works that "exploited the fissures in the depiction of God within the Bible" (87). Rowland concedes, "None of these texts, strictly speaking, is an interpretation of the Bible" (118) but they serve instead as radical critiques that, again, "rouze the faculties to act" (118). Rowland adds, "Blake did not see himself as an exegete, in the sense of one who systematically expounded the Bible on the basis of received wisdom. Instead, he found it necessary to write new books which would show up with the problems that already existed in the Bible" (87). Rowland notes that Blake's critique is built on the belief that "he shared the Poetic Genius of those who first wrote" the Bible (119), but rather than theorizing the aesthetic dimensions of Blake's biblical hermeneutic, Rowland turns in the next chapters to Blake's interpretative "affinities" (160) with the biblical prophets and the self-declared prophets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For Rowland, the prophetic encounter with the multiplicity of the divine is embodied in Ezekiel's "vision of the throne-chariot" (138), which leads to an informative reading of Blake's allusions to Ezekiel, parallels between *Jerusalem* and Revelation, and Blake's critique of the Bible as an authoritative "revelatory text" (152). Rowland then considers a well-known list of prophets that includes Johanna Southcott, Richard Brothers, Anna Trapnel, Gerrard Winstanley, and Abezer Coppe. Unfortunately, after the studies of Niegel Smith, Morton Paley, Jon Mee, E. P. Thompson, and others, Rowland's discussion isn't sharp enough to bring much new light to these figures and their relationship to Blake.

Chapters eight and nine consider Blake's use of Jesus and Paul. Rowland reads *The Everlasting Gospel* and the Mary and Joseph scene from *Jerusalem* 61 in terms of their biblical sources, stressing Blake's antinomian Jesus and his critique of sexual morality. Rowland sees Paul as both a "mystic" and "broker of divine mysteries" (200, 201), as well as being a key source for Blake's antinomianism.

Rowland suggests that Blake's differences with the apostle are "more apparent than real" (207), and he shows how Paul was key source for Blake's conception of the Divine Body and even notions of atonement and sacrifice through his engaging analysis of *The Ghost of Abel* and "The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve." Chapter ten reads Blake's Bible illustrations, which would seem to be the natural complement to the *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, but Rowland makes no reference to either the earlier chapters or vastly different interplay of text and image in these works. He analyzes paintings of the life of Jesus and the Last of Judgment before closing with a discussion of Blake's early painting "An Allegory of the Bible" (c. 1780-85). Each of his readings succinctly explicate how Blake adapted his biblical sources, and his suggestion that *The Protoevangelium of James* (translated in 1726 and reissued in 1798 and 1820) impacted the depiction of the hovering Christ child in "The Nativity" is quite persuasive (219). The fact that Rowland uses the very early "Allegory" as a coda, however, is rather disorientating. Rowland claims that, like the Job Illustrations, it too embodies Blake's approach to the Bible, with its depiction of a translucent Bible suggesting that "one must look through [the Bible], with it, and indeed, beyond it, back to the reality in which one lives" (232). Like other books, the Bible, should be "used and not revered" (232, Rowland's emphasis). But Rowland's lack of engagement with his own reading of Job will prevent readers from feeling that the "Allegory" reveals the "Original Stereotype" of Blake's biblical exegesis in any meaningful way (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 1988, 272).

In the conclusion, Rowland lights on the phrase "dialectical interpretation" (237) to describe Blake's biblical exegesis (and his exegesis of texts in general), a phrase that could have been very fruitful if introduced earlier and developed throughout the study. But rather than formally developing the heuristic dimensions of "dialectical interpretation," Rowland explains it by a reference to plate 43 (21) of *Milton*, in which a crouching Blake is fellating the spirit of Los and/or Milton. For Rowland, "This picture captures [...] what is absolutely typical about Blake's hermeneutics" (237). Unfortunately, Rowland does not explicitly acknowledge the sexual act beyond coy references to "intimacy" and "potency" (237), thus ignoring important feminist and queer readings of the plate, and he instead quickly ties this image of ingestive interpretation to the prophetic consumptions of scrolls in Ezekiel and Revelation. Rowland ends by comparing Blake's hermeneutic practices to the modern practice of *Sachkritik*, which is to read a work "in the light of the overall drift" (239), and he compares Blake's exegesis with Karl Barth's, likening Barth's description of biblical interpretation, "the creative straining of the sinews," to Blake's phrase, "mental fight" (240).

While there are many insightful gems scattered throughout the work based on Rowland's unquestioned mastery of the Bible and love of Blake, there are some additional methodological problems. Without any explanation, Rowland sometimes offers Geoffrey Keynes' punctuated version of Blake's text. This is particularly

jarring given that his discussion of what should be titled *The [First] Book of Urizen* (there are two versions of the title page) closely follows Jerome McGann's view that Blake incorporated the discoveries of late eighteenth-century biblical scholarship into his own parody of biblical form. Similarly, Rowland relies on Erdman's edited version of *The Everlasting Gospel*, but, at least in this case, he reproduces the transcription of the text from Blake's notebook in an appendix. Rowland also never discusses which Bibles Blake may have used or what visual interpretative traditions he may have drawn upon. He makes a few references to the work of Marsha Keith Schuchard, but he never acknowledges the direct biographical connections linking Blake to Moravianism and early Methodism through his mother, preferring instead to generalize Blake as a "protestant and a non-conformist" who "harked back to a way of reading the Bible that is more characteristic of the early centuries of Christianity and of medieval scholarship" (7, 9). *Blake and the Bible* provides useful in-text reproductions of all the Job and Enoch Illustrations, but, for reasons that might rest more with Yale University Press than with Rowland, the text lacks parenthetical references to its beautiful color plates, which are not arranged in the order in which they are discussed. Finally, Rowland has the tendency to classify Blake as a theologian rather than an artist. Blake's "purpose," he writes, "was not an aesthetic act narrowly conceived. For him the text was a means to an end: to bring about the conversion of minds, heart, and lives" (1). And again: "The author of *Jerusalem* is no critical interpreter, but rather a theologian of a grand vision of human redemption, albeit in his idiosyncratic version of systematic theology" (3). These statements may be true, but, as Blake often wrote in his annotations to Lavater, they left me "rather uneasy" (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 1988, 586).

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Saint Sinatra and Other Poems. By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell. Cincinnati: Word Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1-9363-7035-1. Pp. 102. \$19.00.

The Garbage Eater: Poems. By Brett Foster. Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8101-2745-6. Pp. x + 78. \$16.95.

These two collections by a fine pair of professors of English—Angela O'Donnell of Fordham University and Brett Foster of Wheaton College—display virtuosity in style and innovation in subject matter. The titles alone warn us of surprises to come: *Saint Sinatra* and *The Garbage Eater*. Frank Sinatra is a saint? And what is a garbage eater? And why write about either one, particularly through the eyes of faith?