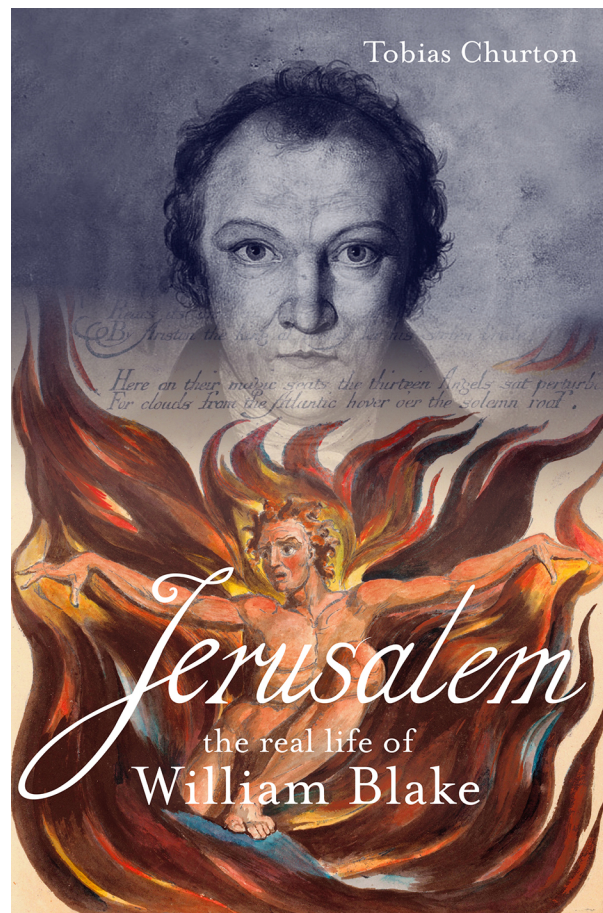


Tobias Churton. *Jerusalem! The Real Life of William Blake*. London: Watkins, 2014. xl + 360 pp. £25.00/\$29.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Dennis M. Read

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- 1 **S**TARTING with its boastful title, complete with an exclamation point, Tobias Churton's book promises much. The boast is driven by two claims: that the papers of Churton's ancestor Ralph Churton (1754–1831), an English churchman and Oxford University academic, significantly illuminate Blake's life and times, and that Blake's works should be viewed through the lens of Gnosticism, particularly the theosophy of Jakob Böhme. Churton argues that Blake "has been lost under a myriad of inadequate biographies, college dissertations and arts commentaries, too frequently written by people who have not found the luminescent keys to Blake's symbolism and liberating spirit" (xxviii). He aims to provide luminescence.
- 2 Disappointingly, he delivers more heat than light. First, the Churton papers. Ralph Churton was a close contemporary of Blake, born three years earlier and dying four years later. During his lifetime he published several biographies of church worthies. Tobias Churton draws from them, as well as from Ralph Churton's letters, diaries, and pamphlets, "to cast light and perspective on Blake's life and times," explaining that the "essential interests [of Blake and Churton], the spiritual destiny of their country, remained, fascinatingly, the same" (xxxvii). The two, however, were completely unknown to each other; furthermore, Churton offers no evidence that either man was aware of the other's public production. (The closest Ralph Churton came to Blake was in January 1806, when he met John Flaxman in London to confer about mending broken sculptures in the Arundel collection at Oxford.) The usefulness of the Churton papers, therefore, lies in Ralph Churton's recording various moments of state affairs and reflecting on their import.
- 3 Churton lards his biography of Blake with quotations from Ralph Churton's writings, and, while they indeed illumi-



nate decisive moments, they add little to our sense of Blake. For instance, the diary entry about the Battle of Waterloo:

23rd June [1815]. Banbury [Oxfordshire]. Important victory of the Duke of Wellington near Nivelles, 150 Cannon taken & 60 in the night by Prince Blucher in pursuit [of French forces]; but with heavy loss of Officers etc. 18th the decisive day in a battle [Waterloo] from 10 till 7, & fighting on 16th and 17th. D.G. [Thanks be to God]. (313)

Other entries express Ralph Churton's concern about the restless and possibly revolutionary mood of the English common people, forms of dissent from the Church of England, and changes in the politics of the English Parliament. He offers no special insight into these matters, and they have no direct implication for Blake—with the possible exception of his diary entry of 11 March 1803 that "the French are arming O Lord, be Thou our Defence & Shield; & let not those who would overturn the world prosper; Pardon, unite, and save us for Thy dear Son's sake" (271), which registers the desperate patriotism of the nation underlying the charge of Blake's sedition later that year.

- 4 The other engine is the Gnostic source of Blake's thought. Tobias Churton's strongest credential is as a scholar of

Western esotericism, a grab bag of mysticism including Neoplatonism, Swedenborgianism, and Böhme's writings. In this regard he is inspired by the writings of Kathleen Raine (the dedicatee of his book) and, more recently, the published research of Marsha Keith Schuchard and Keri Davies into the Blake family's involvement with the Moravian church. His argument that Blake was substantially influenced by the Gnostic tradition is unsustainable, however, despite great attention to parallels between Böhme's writings and Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (165-77). Blake indeed refers approvingly to Böhme in *Marriage*, but establishing his indebtedness to such mystical thinkers requires a much more systematic and detailed study.

- 5 Churton follows the lead of Schuchard's *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* (2006) in suggesting that an exercise of sexuality promotes visionary states, a belief that Blake took from Swedenborg (151). This line of thought leads him to pay particular attention to plate 29 in *Milton*, depicting Milton's star entering Blake's left foot. Churton claims, "The figure [of Blake] has a healthy erection, obscured in some copies of the plate by underwear ..., applied for reasons of 'taste' by either Tatham or Linnell" (297). He goes on to state that, according to Swedenborg, "the big toe of the left foot [is connected] to the genitals (a Tantric doctrine also), and its stimulation by the spiritual condition of the person brings to the left foot a 'fiery' sensation linked to the fire in the genitals." The suggestion is tantalizing, but likely nothing more. Later, in his discussion of *Jerusalem*, Churton states that Los's hammer "is clearly a phallus and testes" (308). To paraphrase Freud, however, sometimes a hammer is just a hammer.
- 6 The biography otherwise follows the established course of Blake's career, with particular attention given to the last two decades of the eighteenth century (chapters 7-18, pp. 77-261, more than half the text). Along the way, Churton laments what he calls serious mistakes of Blake's judgment. The first is his becoming an engraver: "A seven-year apprenticeship as an engraver was the wrong footing for Blake altogether. It was the worst and most fundamentally damaging decision of his life, and he made it, or was forced into it, when he was just 14" (62). Churton maintains that Blake should have channeled his talents exclusively into painting because engraving was regarded as a craft, not an art, and Blake consequently was branded as a tradesman not capable of realizing artistic expression. Considering that the bulk of Blake's work is his illuminated writings, it is a strange position to take.
- 7 The second mistake, according to Churton, is Blake's joining James Parker to establish a print shop in 1784:

Blake himself now made another of what hindsight shows was one of his singularly bad decisions. ...

Ten years later a print shop might have done better business, but it was not a good time for prints, and the shop was not situated advantageously for the trade. They might have made a success of it on the Strand or in Piccadilly, or even Golden Square itself, but Broad Street was no artistic mecca, and Blake was no businessman. (102)

The key word in this passage is "hindsight." Certainly the business was not a success. But it seems odd to single out this venture. Throughout his life Blake showed over and over that he was no businessman.

- 8 Churton makes several other remarkable claims. Regarding the lost large-scale *Vision of the Last Judgment* and *The Ancient Britons* he asserts, "Had the paintings survived, perception of Blake's artistic significance would most certainly have been enhanced, and people might see why he compared himself, without qualification, to Michelangelo and Raphael" (300). Earlier, he speculates, "Had Blake been born in Germany, he would have been considered a great philosopher" (250). Such cannonballs are arresting, if nothing else.
- 9 Throughout the biography, Churton shows that he is not stuck in antiquarianism by making copious references to such recent pop figures as Van Morrison, the Doors, and, especially, the Beatles. He sprinkles in other recent figures, events, and issues as well, perhaps to show that Blake is relevant today. These references, along with Churton's generally adulatory tone, make clear that he holds Blake in the highest regard. That counts for much and makes the study more engaging.
- 10 His writing leaves much to be desired, however. I'll single out only a couple of howlers: "To ignore the gifts of the spirit is to ignore God's voice; the result is to become a slave to history, a passive performer whose acts are dust: an empty fool who has put his wealth in a house of cards built on sand" (126). The combination of dust, a house of cards, and a foundation of sand makes for a precarious situation. "On 2 July, Blake wrote to Cumberland, bearing his soul" (257). One can silently emend the word to "baring," but the image of Churton's formulation is haunting.
- 11 Overall, Churton's delineation of Blake's life is derivative and his facts need more careful verification. For instance, he states in a footnote that Cromek collected 89 subscriptions to *The Grave* (341). The actual number is 680. But even if some details are questionable, this biography is nevertheless a worthwhile effort. Churton is an apostle who gives Blake proper homage, and he brings to life a Blake who engages us as an artist and thinker.