The God Who Weeps: Notes, Amens, and Disagreements

Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens. *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life.* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ensign Peak, 2012). 160 pp. Hardcover: $19.99. ISBN: 978-1609071882.

Reviewed by Adam S. Miller

The God Who Weeps is a different kind of book. It's devotional in spirit but academic in pedigree. It's published by Deseret Book but under its Ensign Peak imprint. It's an aggressively expansive book that, instead of quoting General Authorities, ranges across the whole Western tradition, skillfully absorbing and repurposing whatever stories and ideas speak to its Mormon ears. It's a book that matters because, rather than asking us to agree, it asks us to think.

Its importance depends on this difference. In order for *Weeps* to make a lasting difference—and I think it can and should—it needs to be different enough for us to care. If its ideas are too similar (or dissimilar) to what we usually say, then its influence will be limited. But if its account of Mormonism is just different enough to simultaneously prompt a moment of recognition *and* motivate a cascade of thoughtful disagreement, then its influence will radiate. On the other hand, if the book prompts only assent, I worry that a chorus of amens will silence it.

Weeps is invigorating precisely because it does not mime the voice of authority. It speaks and thinks in its own name. We honor that work best by offering the same thoughtfulness back again. In what follows, I sketch a response to *Weeps* that looks at its position on five topics—faith, satisfaction, premortality, evolution, and agency—and offer, in return, a mix of sincere amens and honest disagreements.

1. Practicing Faith

In its first chapter, *Weeps* argues that faith is a response to uncertainty. Only our uncertainty about God can make our decision to be faithful meaningful because "an overwhelming preponderance of evidence on either side would make our choice as meaningless

as would a loaded gun pointed at our heads" (4). Faith like this has its place, but I doubt that this kind of uncertainty is ordinary. For instance, in this same chapter, *Weeps* describes the death of a friend who had a faith that "did not seem a choice for her. It descended upon her as naturally and irresistibly as the heavy snow that fell on her upstate New York farm" (3). If this friend's belief in God was natural and irresistible, is her faith still meaningful?

It seems to me that the most salient feature of belief is often its involuntary character. Our beliefs are generally given as common-sense conclusions that are drawn from a shared but unchosen background of practices, institutions, and assumptions. Depending on the infrastructures we inhabit, God's existence may or may not show up as a common-sense conclusion. But, in either case, it is a conclusion that is unlikely to be freely chosen.

What then of faith? When slipping from one existential framework to another, we may experience a dark night of the soul. But such dark nights of uncertainty are typically brief and faith is necessary even (and perhaps especially) when we are *not* in crisis and our place in a framework is firmly settled. In most situations, faith is not a choice about *what* to believe but a choice about *how* we respond to beliefs we did not choose.

Faith is not the same thing as belief or common sense. For some, belief in God comes easily and naturally. Belief isn't a choice and can't be unchosen. God, like words or air, just is. But this isn't enough. Though this common-sense belief in God's reality can be a blessing, it can also be a hurdle to practicing faith. It can lull us into thinking that the hard work of being faithful is done when, in fact, we haven't even started. On the other hand, for some, God's absence is itself an obvious aspect of the world as it is given. God's improbability presents itself as a fact not as a choice. And while this kind of common-sense godlessness can obviously be a barrier, it's not the end of the story. It, too, can open a path to God by freeing you from common-sense idolatries. Neither kind of common sense is faith. Whether God is or isn't obvious to us, the work is the same. Faith is a willingness to lose our souls in faithfully caring for the work that's been given to us. Common-sense theist, common-sense atheist, common-sense (or anguished!) agnostic—the work is the same. Each must practice faith. Each must choose to care rather than wish or run.

Weeps claims that "the greatest act of self-revelation occurs when we choose what we will believe, in that space of freedom that exists between knowing that a thing is, and knowing that a thing is not" (5). I'm hesitant to agree. It seems to me that the greatest act of revelation comes when we faithfully care for what God, unchosen, has given. Faith, on this account, is still a choice, but it's a choice of a different kind.

2. Saving Satisfaction

Weeps argues that the world is inadequate to satisfy our desires. "Who has never felt the utter inadequacy of the world to satisfy the spiritual longings of our nature?" (40). It is clearly true that the world is inadequate to our desires and that, in the end, it cannot satisfy our "insatiable longing for wholeness" (41). But *Weeps* goes on to claim that the world's inability to satisfy our desires compels us to posit the existence of an object that *could* satisfy them: namely, God. This is a classic theological move with a prestigious pedigree: our longing for wholeness and completion is strong evidence that *something* must exist that *can* make us whole.

Weeps invokes this pedigree by way of both Aristophanes and Augustine. To dramatize our longing and brokenness, Plato's Aristophanes tells a story about how human beings originally had four legs, four arms, and two heads. But, full of ourselves, we angered the gods and Zeus split us in two as punishment, condemning us to wander the earth as half-persons with just one head, two arms, and two legs. As a result, humans are hungry for sex because it allows us to—at least temporarily—put ourselves back together. Of this, *Weeps* says:

> Aristophanes was surely half-joking, but he captures brilliantly our sense of incompleteness and longing for wholeness, for intimate union with another human being who fits us like our other half. Yet even when we find true love and companionship in the rediscovered other, the restoration that should fulfill us falls short; Aristophanes himself is baffled. It is as if, coming together, we are haunted by the memory of an even more perfect past, when we were even more whole and complete, and this suspicion lends an indefinable melancholy to our present lives. . . . So what can we make of this unsatisfied longing, this sense of a primordial loss that no human love can heal? (13)

The Christian tradition picks up on this same longing and says: "Aha! You feel this way because *God* is your one true other half!" In

this vein, Augustine famously prays in the opening lines of his *Confessions:* "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." But, as *Weeps* asks, what *should* we make of this unsatisfied longing? Are hungers that will not quit an accidental defect of sin and mortality? Or is this hunger an inseparable feature of what it means to be alive and, perhaps, especially alive in Christ?

I won't deny that it is possible for our restless hearts to find rest in God, but I do want to deny that this rest results from the *satisfaction* of our desires. God does not save our hungers by satisfying them. God saves us from the tyranny of our desires by saving us from the impossible work *of* satisfying them. God may be what we desire, but God's arrival does not quench this desire. It gives it. And in giving it, God means to show us how living life depends on caring for rather than being done with desire. Rather than trying to simply satisfy desire, we must be faithful to life by being faithful to the unquenchable persistence of the desires that animate us as alive. Life depends on our being open and incomplete. To be "whole" is to be dead. The heavens are filled with an unquenchable fire. Only hellfires die down. Jesus liberates us from the problem of desire by saving our desires rather than solving them.

3. Weighing Preexistence

Weeps argues that our world can't support its own weight. Life, meaning, agency, and morality aren't native stock but must be imported from elsewhere. Meaning and stability are drawn from off-world accounts. Here, our doctrine of a premortality is a handy answer as to why things still manage to make sense when our world is so senseless. "The only basis for human freedom and human accountability is a human soul that existed before birth as it will after death. Moral freedom demands preexistence, and preexistence explains human freedom" (51). Because this world is too weak, "there must be a true beginning rooted in a time and place of greater dignity and moment" (45). This kind of theological outsourcing is, again, a classic gesture with a prestigious pedigree.

The issue is *identity.* Given how messy and multiple the world is—and this includes, especially, our split and messy selves—there must be (the story goes) some deeper source of unity and identity. Against the complicated dependencies of this world, there must be

"an independent, existing principle of intelligence within us" (12). Moreover, "a sense of unease in the world and the poignant yearnings and shadowy intimations of an eternal past, attest to a timeless heritage at the core of human identity" (6). To be spiritually solvent, we need an "identity that lies deeper than our body, rooted beyond actions, reaching past memory" (43). The only trouble with this approach is its nihilism.

You must, of course, decide for yourself, but I endorse Nietzsche's sharp critique of our Christian tendency to devalue the present world by anchoring its true meaning and substance in another. The irony, in this respect, is that *Weeps* is well aware of the Nietzschean critique and it, too, wants to *agree* with Nietzsche: "Nietzsche was right when he said Christians had a tendency to turn away from this life in contempt, to dream of other-worldly delights rather than resolve this-worldly problems" (111). But a sensitivity to this Nietzschean problem never shows up in any of the many celebrations of our doctrine of a pre-world as an essential supplement to this world's poverty.

Rather, with respect to preexistence, *Weeps* ignores the Nietzschean critique of theological outsourcing by ignoring the more fundamental Nietzschean critique of identity. Premortality figures large in the book as a ready-made way to stabilize meaning and identity. In this world you may be composed of split and compromised selves that require your patience and care, but beneath this jumble lies a pre-self, a divine self, that doesn't have these same problems. The pre-self is the true, ideal self. Religion is the work of being faithful to this primordial intuition that my self is something better, simpler, and more independent than it appears.

When we hear an echo of this other self, when we intuit that we must be something more ideal than we appear, what are gesturing toward? "Who is this 'I' we are referring to in such instances? It could just be an idealized self we have in mind, except the sense is too strong that it is our actions that are unreal, not the self to which we compare them. So, is the most plausible candidate for that 'I' really a hypothetical self we might someday be, or is it what the minister and novelist George MacDonald called an 'old soul,' a self with a long history, that provides the contrast with present patterns of behavior?" (44).

On this, *Weeps* and I part ways. Where *Weeps* sees a solution, I

see a problem. Where *Weeps* reads this ideal pre-self as what's real and our present split selves as pale shadows, I regard the ideal pre-self as a dubious and sticky fiction and the present, competing, and multiple selves that compose my soul as the truth about what's really eternal. Now, this is not to deny that I have a pre-self from a premortal life. But it is to deny that we should understand this pre-self as something more true, more divine, and more ideal than our present fleshy one. We're not less true and real in this world. We're more true and real here.

On my account, the Mormon doctrine of preexistence is crucial because it *prevents* us from positing a "deeper" and "truer" original self. Preexistence shouldn't be read as a guarantee of my eternal identity and self-possession. It should be read as what guarantees their impossibility. Preexistence names my always preexisting lack of self-possession. It testifies that I have *always already* been emptied into a world that both composes and divides me with its competing loves and demands. Here, both the pre-world and the post-world must be understood as continuous with the messy work of the present one.

Weeps wisely notes that, with respect to the post-world, "it is in the continuity of our lives now with our lives hereafter that we find rescue from the dangerous heaven of fairy tales" (111). I agree. But I would warn that our lives heretofore must also, just as surely, be rescued from such dangerous heavens and fairy tales. Our belief in a preexistence should commit us to the doctrine that our work in this world is the only kind of work there has ever been: We must work loose our fantasies of self-identity for the sake of love.

4. Defending Darwin

I'm glad to see that *Weeps* makes room for Darwin, but I wish it had made more. Theologically, Darwin is a sticky wicket. On this front, the fact of biological evolution can be approached in one of three ways: (1) we can shut the evolutionary door and pretend we're not home, (2) we can allow it occasional, supervised visits and hope it doesn't make too big a mess, or (3) we can allow that we are the visitors in the house that it built. *Weeps* accommodates something like the second position. And, to the extent that it does, this is a big and welcome step forward in mainstream Mormon discourse.

But I'd like to see us take one step more. I'd like to see us explore—

carefully and charitably and experimentally—what it might mean for Mormons to see evolution not just as a local twist in God's top-down management of a wholly rational real but as indicative of a fundamental truth about the contingent world to which both we and God find ourselves given. *Weeps* seems willing to answer the door but (like any wise investigator) it doesn't want to let the discussion move much beyond the doorstep. The following passage is representative:

> Darwin explained how random, incremental change over millions of years, leads to many species developing from one original source, and he proposed mechanisms and processes by which the giraffe acquired his long neck, and our species the miraculous human eye. . . . In sum, he made it intellectually respectable to be an atheist. Why, then, do we need faith in God and things eternal? Perhaps because the development of complex human beings, with self-awareness and lives filled with love and tears and laughter, is one too many a miracle to accept as a purely natural phenomenon. Perhaps because the idea of God is a more reasonable hypothesis than the endless stream of coincidences essential to our origin and existence here on earth. (10–11)

Darwin gets a nod, here, but really only to juxtapose the weak contingency of evolutionary processes with the reassuring rationality of a strong theism. While I think this seriously underestimates the explanatory force of these "natural" processes, I also think that Weeps is expressing a solid, acceptable, mainstream theological response to evolution: evolution can be taken seriously as a creative process but *only* insofar as it is an instrument in the hands of a guiding intelligence. Otherwise, evolution involves one "miracle" too many.

This same sentiment is on display in a later passage that chides Darwin for his inability to account for something as powerful and gratuitous as the beauty of the natural world:

> Darwin was sure that even those spectacles of nature that overwhelm us by their beauty, from the peacock's tail to the fragrance of an English rose, serve not man's purposes but their own, which is survival and reproducibility. If anything in nature could be found that had been "created for beauty in the eyes of man" rather than the good of its possessor, it would be "absolutely fatal" to his theory. In other words, maple leaves in autumn do not suddenly transform into stained glass pendants, illuminated by a setting sun, in order to satisfy a human

> longing for beauty. Their scarlet, ochre, and golden colors emerge as chlorophyll production shuts down, in preparation for sacrificing the leaves that are vulnerable to winter cold, and ensuring the survival of the tree. But the tree survives, *while* our vision is ravished. The peacock's display attracts a hen, *and* it nourishes the human eye. The flower's fragrance entices the pollinator, *but it also* intoxicates the gardener. In that "while," in that "and," in that "but it also," we find the giftedness of life. (36)

I really like this passage. In fact, it is one of my favorites in the book. It is a pitch-perfect description of giftedness or grace. But the passage seems to me to offer a stunning account of exactly how evolution *does* work, not a rebuttal that is "absolutely fatal" to its credibility. Evolution works by way of exaptation. The fundamental process is one in which gratuitous features are purposelessly generated *and then these features get repurposed by extant systems for some other productive end.* The "while" and the "and" and the "but it also" fit perfectly with a Darwinian picture. In fact, they epitomize how natural selection works. But what does this mean? What does it mean if something *Weeps* sees as key to defending the gospel ends up also being key to defending *evolution* itself?

Generations of theologians are jealous of our day. On no merit of our own, we've inherited the task of probing the theological implications of the planet-sized shift in our self-understanding imposed by the latter-day revelations of biological evolution and deep geological time. We have a lot of work to do.

5. Distributing Agency

Weeps takes a hard, all-or-nothing line on agency. It argues that "something is free only if it is not caused or created by something else" (48). Freedom equals freedom from outside influence. The confused and cross-pollinated conditions of mortality compromise free will. Here, there are too many competing claims. "In our present, earthly form, we are clearly the product of forces outside our control that influence our personality, inform our character, and shape our wants and desires. And yet, we know we are free. How can this be, unless there is something at the heart of our identity that was *not* shaped by environment, *not* inherited from our parents, and *not* even created by God?" (50). If we are free, then there must be some part of us that is not conditioned by our earthly conditions.

According to *Weeps,* any freedom that is *given* is, by definition, unfree. Freedom cannot be given or enabled or inherited or created. A doctrine of co-eternality figures large here as the answer to how we're free. If we are free, it must be because we are uncreated, our agency always already given only by ourselves to ourselves. Our ability to act must not be acted upon. Freedom is a form of self-possessed, self-informed, self-determining autonomy.

Along these lines, it follows that we are free in this world only if we freely chose this world. *Weeps* asks: "If we were simply cast adrift on the shore of this strange world, where is the freedom in that?" (52). But, "if we were involved in the deliberations that culminated in creating and peopling this world, then we are not passive victims of providence. We would have entered into conditions of this mortal state aware of the harrowing hazards mortality entails" (53).

I find this account of agency unconvincing. More, I think it obscures the truth about the kind of thing agency is. Take, for instance, the claim that our freedom in this conditioned world depends on our having freely chosen those same conditions in a former life. Does this same logic apply to the preexistence itself? For *Weeps,* if we were also free in the preexistence, then wouldn't it have to be the case that either (1) the preexistence did not, itself, impose any unchosen conditions, or (2) we must have freely chosen even those preexistent conditions in a *pre*-preexistence? Option one seems to me to make little sense of the preexistence, but option two doesn't seem much better. With option two we've just pushed the problem back a level and, to be fair, we'd have to pose the same two alternatives again. And again. Until we reached that ur-moment when we *did not* find ourselves *already* pitched into a world we did not choose, conditioned by conditions we did not will.

This hiccup in the book's treatment of agency isn't decisive, but it is, I think, symptomatic. I'm inclined to think that our doctrine of co-eternality means just the opposite of what *Weeps* proposes. Rather than safely positioning us (and God) beyond the reach of any unchosen conditions, co-eternality guarantees that there is no such unconditioned place. Co-eternality guarantees that the only thing unconditional is the unconditional imposition of always already existing and unchosen conditions. In fact, I'm inclined to think that this is, at root, the reason why it makes sense for us to claim, as *Weeps* surely does, that our Mormon God weeps.

Does this rule out real agency? No. Just the opposite. Unchosen conditions are the condition of possibility for any meaningful agency. The limits that constrain agency enable it. Recall our other Mormon narrative (one that *Weeps* also draws on) about why mortality is so important. Mortality makes agency meaningful because it *limits* our knowledge and *constrains* our agency. "We need the continuing spiritual friction of difficulty, opposition, and hardship, or we will suffer the same stasis as the bee" (62). Friction is the thing. I'm empowered to act by the unchosen and uncontrollable frictions that compose me and oppose me. Agency isn't simple and internal, it's complex and distributed. Agency is niche-dependent. It is a situated gift dependent on context. Agency isn't a kind of autonomy, but a peculiar, reflexive, and responsible kind of heteronomy. My freedom is *always* given and enabled by something other than myself (cf. 2 Nephi 2:26–27).

Agency isn't possessed, then, but borrowed. It isn't a freedom *from* the conditioned world but a freedom *for* that world. Our ability to act is always both empowered and reciprocally affected by that which it acts upon. All active agents are enabled only by their passivity. "Free" agency is a myth. Freedom is never free. Agency always comes at a cost. And that cost is often paid by others. This is why charity is the greatest virtue.

Weeps concedes that, as a matter of fact, agency works this way. Given our mortal conditions, "hardly ever, then, is a choice made with perfect, uncompromised freedom of the will" (100). But I would raise the stakes and push this one step farther: *never,* then, is a choice made with perfect, uncompromised freedom of will. Why? Because a perfect, uncompromised freedom of will is antithetical to the expression of real agency.

My very favorite passage in all of *The God Who Weeps* has to do with the intersection of agency and atonement. *Weeps* wants to know how the atonement can intervene in our lives without ruining the law of agency. The passage asks:

> The question, however, remains: on what basis can the consequences of our choices be deferred or abated? The law of moral agency, of choice and consequence, does not require that we entirely bear the burden of our own choices made in this life because those choices are always made under circumstances that are less than perfect. Our accountability is thus always partial, incomplete. Into that gap between

> choice and accountability, the Lord steps. (91–92)

Into that gap between choice and accountability, the Lord steps. That gap, that beat of "imperfection," is what makes room for love. Love is possible because our choices are *always* made under circumstances that are less than "perfect."

Weeps qualifies that "always" with an "in this life," but I don't think that qualification is necessary. The borrowed and incomplete character of our agency is not an "imperfection" in the expression of that agency, but its condition of possibility. And, moreover, it is the condition of possibility for the fullest possible expression of agency: redeeming love. "The paradox of Christ's saving sway is that it operates on the basis of what the world would call weakness" (29). The paradox of agency is the same.

Prophetic Glimpses of Mormon Culture: Recent Publications on Patriarchal Blessings

Irene M. Bates and E. Gary Smith. *Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of the Presiding Patriarch.* Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 272 pp. Notes, index. Paper: $23. ISBN: 978-0-252-07115-7.

H. Michael Marquardt, ed. *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.* Salt Lake City, Utah: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007. 447 pp. Index. Hardcover: ISBN: 978-1-56085-202-5.

H. Michael Marquardt, ed. *Later Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.* Salt Lake City, Utah: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2012. 648 pp. Index, appendices. Hardcover: $90. ISBN: 978-1-56085-221-6.

Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd. *Binding Heaven and Earth: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism.* University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. 185 pp. Notes, references, index. Hardcover: $54.95. ISBN: 978-0-271-05633-3.

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