

[Finding Mormon Theology Again](#)

Terryl L. Givens. *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 424 pp. Hardcover: \$36.95. ISBN: 978-0199794928.

Reviewed by Taylor G. Petrey

Wrestling the Angel is the first volume in Terryl Givens's latest project on the "foundations of Mormon thought and practice" (ix). The first of a two-volume work, this book deals with theology while the subsequent study aims to deal with practices. The thesis is straightforward: "I hope to illuminate what is continuous with the Christian tradition and what is radically distinct from it" (ix). This is a work of Mormon theology, but it is most immediately a work of comparative theology. Givens is not content with the questions of historians who seek to situate and explain Mormonism in its nineteenth-century environment nor those of theologians who articulate the merits and justifications for specific ideas. Rather, Givens wants to place Mormonism in the larger context of "the Christian tradition" writ large. In his recuperation of theology as a useful mode of thought for Mormonism, Givens sets Mormon ideas against the backdrop of major intellectual traditions and movements in the West.

Givens offers an impressive and learned treatment that manages to put Mormonism into conversation with ancient Israelite religion, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, the Cambridge Platonists, Universalism, and other American religious movements. The concept of the book is pulled by competing impulses to both locate Mormonism within the broader stream of Christian thought and establish Mormonism's distinctiveness and exceptionalism. Sometimes the championing of Mormonism appears

on both registers, both for its uniqueness as well as its participation and sharing of ideas found in other Christian thinkers of the past.

Just as “the Christian tradition” becomes the primary interlocutor, there is a kind of Mormon tradition that is produced in this book—an amalgam of Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and others. The book actively rejects much of the fundamentalist and anti-intellectual trajectories of the Mormon past and sees the reclaiming of theology as an antidote to the reactionary conservatism marked by the “growing unease with worldly learning and with intellectualism generally” that characterized much of twentieth-century Mormonism (15). In doing so, Givens’s work travels among a description, a defense, and a critical re-articulation of Mormonism’s key ideas.

One of the strengths of the book is that it offers a richer, more textured treatment of Mormonism that can acknowledge development and retreat. Yet Givens is clear in affirming essential “foundations” to Mormonism that transcend the runoffs and dead ends of imperfect historical manifestations. The language of “foundations” may also be an homage to Sterling McMurrin’s similar project of laying out the “foundations” of Mormon theology fifty years ago, covering much of the same ground and sharing the same approach as Givens.

As a treatment of Mormon thought, the book concentrates on three classical theological themes already outlined in the title: cosmology, theology proper (that is, discourse about the nature of God), and theological anthropology (discourse about the nature of the human being). Each section is then further broken down into twenty-one separate chapters of varying length (some chapters are only a few pages while others are over fifty). Long chapters are further subdivided, such that the book can function like a handbook of Mormon thought wherein each section can be read as a stand-alone essay. Each section offers overviews of broader Christian thinking on these topics and

how and why Mormonism developed alternative approaches, often locating parallels to these innovations in other Christian movements.

The section on cosmology is very brief, emphasizing monistic materialism and a rejection of creation *ex nihilo*. The section on theological accounts of God emphasizes Mormonism's ontological distinctiveness, its rejection of Trinitarianism and impassibility, and its defense of "anthropomorphism" and male and female gods. It also offers important theological expositions on Christology and the history of the doctrine of the Holy Ghost in Mormonism, plus a treatment of numerous other beings that populate Mormon heavens. The final section on human beings focuses on pre-mortal existence, the nature of human sin, agency, embodiment (including sexuality), salvation (including marriage), and "theosis," or the idea that humans have divine potential.

Each chapter has much to offer, presenting a robust explanation of numerous complex theological and philosophical topics. Some readers may push back against the equivalencies Givens invites us to consider among Mormon notions of a divine feminine, premortal existence, anthropomorphism, and theosis with other Christian traditions because of the fundamental ontological differences among them. Others may feel unsatisfied with Givens's treatment of race and gender, which is often highly selective. At moments in the text, Givens proves inconsistent in his attribution of some historically controversial ideas to provisional deviation (polygamy), others on cultural circumstance (exclusion of black members from priesthood and temple), while yet others receive the stamp of unalterable truth (heterosexuality).

Givens acknowledges that the foundations he emphasizes are partly his own choosing, but some of the absences are notable. For instance, there is no discussion of eschatology, which governed much early Mormon thought, scripture, and revelations, and continues to be relevant today. Further, besides a brief discussion of process theology, there is no effort to put Mormonism in discussion with more modern theological movements, including hermeneutics, various liberation

theologies, ecotheology, or comparative theology beyond the borders of Christianity.

The Christian tradition as Givens defines it proves to be a fruitful point of comparison with Mormonism's principal teachings. At the same time, the limitations of this endeavor are evident when one begins to consider what exactly constitutes this category of thought and how it might draw attention away from other more unique aspects of Mormon thought. For instance, the framework of "the Christian tradition" means that Givens makes only small mention of Masonry, new scientific discourses, and American racism, and there is no mention of how magic, colonialism, or utopianism have shaped Mormonism. Readers may ask what is at stake in the desire to establish Mormonism as both Christian and "radically distinct." What is the explanatory value of putting Mormonism in conversation with "the Christian tradition" in such a way? Givens's project seems to be the result of recent impulses to identify Mormonism as more obviously "Christian" in recent decades, but he does so by appealing to Christianity in a broad sense rather than a narrower Evangelical register.

Givens's offering is successful in laying a foundation for a Mormonism that is less dogmatic and more speculative, willing to engage in theological reasoning beyond its borders. However, what is often missing from the structure of any argument that seeks to locate Mormon parallels within Christian history is an assessment of whether the idea itself is any good. The greater challenges to Mormon thought are not in whether there is precedent for some of its most imaginative ideas in other Christian theologies but whether it is itself coherent and meaningful in its own right—and whether it can maintain relevance in the twenty-first century. The task of Mormon theology going forward may be to transform the traditional theological categories of cosmology, the nature of the divine, and theological anthropology in addressing the world as it is now rather than the intellectual categories of the world as it once was.