

The Queer Possibilities of Mormon Theology

Taylor G. Petrey. *Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024. 214 pp. Paperback: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-1-4696-8270-9.

Reviewed by Rebecca L. Davis

Taylor Petrey's ambitious, rigorous, and enlightening new book, *Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos*, wields the concept of kinship as a sort of skeleton key to unlock the faith's teachings about gender difference, sexuality, family hierarchy, the nature of God, and spiritual eternity. Petrey's aim is not to argue that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had queer origins that were subsequently suppressed but to illustrate the theological possibilities of a queer interpretation of LDS doctrine. "This is not a reclamation but a resignification," he explains in the introduction (3). Perhaps, this approach suggests, a queer reading of Mormon texts will reveal an inherent queerness to the faith's fundamental principles.

Both theology and queer theory tend toward sentence-level inscrutability, making Petrey's clarity even more remarkable. The result is a book that draws readers through central tenets of Mormon theology even as it scrutinizes those foundational teachings through a poststructuralist lens. Petrey argues that while he does not offer an apologetic for historical Mormonism, with its "contextual values of patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism," he points the reader to unique characteristics of Mormon thought that allow for queer possibility (3). The irony, which Petrey discusses, is that a tradition that has recently become an outspoken critic of marriage equality for same-sex couples, LGBTQ rights, and modern feminism has a theological tradition ripe for non-heteronormative interpretations.

Petrey organizes his book around major themes in Mormon cosmology, introducing readers to the religion's core principles. The first chapter provides an overview of how queer theorists approach the concept of kinship. Petrey credits queer of color theorists with presenting a particularly expansive definition of kinship that exceeds biological constraints. That definition of kinship offers a new way of interpreting Joseph Smith's teachings about the human soul's proximity to God (as "intelligences" that were coeternal with God or that were God's direct offspring). "My contention," Petrey offers, "is that such a god described in Joseph Smith's legacy . . . is a god in relationship—in kinship" (23). Here, as throughout the book, Petrey illuminates a key insight from queer theory, applies that insight to Mormon theology, and explains how and why kinship emerges as the bridge between the two.

Subsequent chapters examine LDS theologies of the Godhead, Heavenly Mother, creation stories, embodiment, and polygamy. Petrey complicates Mormon teaching, noting inconsistencies in Smith's teaching, differing theories among Smith's successors, and debate among scholars of LDS teaching. For instance, in his discussion of kinship in relationship to the Godhead (God, the Eternal Father; His Son, Jesus; and the Holy Ghost), Petrey finds an "unstable" set of teachings that play with the idea of divine oneness. While some Church leaders find in this divine unity a model for cisgender male-female marriage, Petrey finds homoerotic overtones as well as divine love and divine beings unbounded by the categories of male/female and homosexual/heterosexual (34). He identifies references to the idea "that God experiences and is moved by emotion," a characteristic that depicts "the Father in feminine, emotional terms" (46). In that analysis and in a subsequent discussion of the Heavenly Mother, Petrey explores how a theology that presumes the materiality of the spirit does not necessarily imply biological literalism. Often by emphasizing Joseph Smith's early teaching over the modifications of Brigham Young and other

subsequent LDS leaders, Petrey finds opportunities within Mormon theology for queer kinship that exceeds reductive associations with human reproduction.

The book's longest chapter, "Gender Fluidity and Kinship in the Creation," is also its most compelling. Petrey breaks down the two (conflicting) stories of creation in Genesis and in canonical LDS texts—the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham, both of which reinterpret the Genesis chapters through a Mormon lens. He finds here, as in other chapters, that LDS ideas about kinship, spiritual materiality, eternity, and gender fluidity complicate contemporary Mormon citations of their sacred texts as proof of their faith's commitment to biological complementarity and heterosexual marriage. Taken together, Petrey concludes, these creation stories undercut the idea of biologically rooted heterosexuality: "None of the creation accounts supports the idea that there are two distinct genders that are eternally distinct" (80). Instead, it is kinship, Petrey finds, not sex differences, that unite these explanations of humanity's origins.

So much content is packed into *Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos* that this reader wanted to restart the book as soon as she reached its conclusion. Its project of resignification—of exploring the alternative meanings that queer theory allows LDS doctrine to produce—will almost certainly provoke controversy. Whether or not a reader agrees with Petrey's conclusions, his thorough, thoughtful approach to both theology and queer theory demonstrates that no serious student of the Mormon cosmos should ever doubt the significance of kinship to the faith's central beliefs.

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