

Review of Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014). 424 pp.

Abstract: Terryl Givens' masterful work Wrestling the Angel takes on the daunting task of examining the history of Christian belief while also examining the worldly philosophies which shaped its scriptural interpretation. As in the biblical story of Jacob's struggle with the angel, we all must forge our own testimonies while confronting a secular world including godless philosophies. Sometimes testimony wins, and tragically sometimes the world wins and a testimony is lost. In dealing with this intellectual "matter unorganized," interpretation of the secular philosophy becomes the key. With the right interpretation, philosophies deemed "secular" or "godless" can be seen as helpful and even providentially provided by the Lord to help provide a philosophical grounding for a testimony instead of destroying it. Aspects of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant can be seen as laying a groundwork for much of contemporary American philosophy, Continental philosophy, and a possible basis for interpretations of these philosophies, which help rather than hinder the spread of the gospel. Kant's concept of the synthetic a priori, for example, can help us understand how humans organize our individual ideas about reality from "matter unorganized," perhaps in a way similar to how our "human" God organizes our world. Kant's philosophy had vast influences, arguably resulting in a new way to see the relationship between God and mankind, which is compatible with the gospel. Finally I examine Givens' view of humanism and how it can be interpreted as helpful rather than hindering the gospel.

Wrestling the Angel by Terryl Givens is a work of great importance describing a comprehensive view of the development of Mormon theology. Volume one in a planned two-volume series, it is extensively researched, detailed, and referenced so even in cases where some ideas are mentioned only in passing, Givens provides references to facilitate [Page 66]further study. A planned second volume will follow the same encyclopedic approach to Mormon practices and will include an exhaustive index to both volumes.

This must-have book for anyone with an interest in the development of Mormon thought is designed to be read both as a topical reference, one section at a time or as a cover-to-cover overview of how social and cultural forces affected the development of Christian (not just Mormon) theology, culminating in those forces in the nineteenth century which influenced Joseph Smith in the Restoration of the gospel.

A fascinating though unstated implication of Givens' position is that twists and turns within the history of philosophy itself appear to have provided early Mormonism a proper historical and philosophical setting for the Restoration, a thesis I later examine in more detail.

Givens' topical arrangement of the volume has both strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it allows encyclopedic study of a history of a topic or doctrine from the beginning of Christianity through the nineteenth century, but doing so at times makes it difficult to see how each topic relates to the others in a historical milieu. Had the book been arranged chronologically, it would have lost its strength topically. For example, if a reader wants to review Origen's views on several topics — since the book sees him as a watershed thinker — it can be done, but with some difficulty, by flipping through the various topics. But decisions must be made, and clearly the author's decision was to present the material topically, and indeed, that is the best way to use this volume. The objective of the book is not to provide comprehensive summaries of a given thinker's views but rather summaries of the history of a given Christian doctrine or belief. The companion volume, an exhaustive index yet to be published, should make this first volume and its companion perhaps the greatest tools for general research of Mormon theory and practice ever published. But until that time, volume one is most likely best used as a doctrinal study encyclopedia, and to my knowledge, it is the best of this sort of volume available to date.

Defining Mormon theology is no small feat, since many Mormons insist that Mormon theology does not exist. Such a view is remarkable for those not acquainted with the this book's thesis, though that view has quite a long and well-argued history as a defensible position.

The very premise behind the need for a restoration is that revelation is not complete and that continuing revelation is an ongoing part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For that reason, Mormons believe the Bible, [Page 67]though scripture, to be incomplete and doctrinally insufficient. Givens states:

The Bible, in other words, was depicted as neither complete nor accurate. Nor was it sufficient. As Parley Pratt would later develop the concept with vibrant but controversial imagery, Mormon thought demoted scripture to the status of stream rather than fountain. Pratt conceded that “the scriptures are . . . useful in their place.” But, “they are not the fountain of knowledge, nor do they contain all knowledge.” Their greater value lies in the way “they point to the fountain, and are every way calculated to encourage man to come to the fountain and seek to obtain the knowledge and gifts of God.” God’s utterance preceded, and superseded, its incarnation as holy writ, tainted as it was by the flawed conduits of human understanding and fractured language. Even believing himself to be the Lord’s oracle, Smith would simultaneously deliver revelations in the voice of God and lament, “Oh Lord God, deliver us from this prison, . . . of a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.” And he would spend his entire life revising and recasting the words he gave his people as scripture, struggling to claw his way through irredeemably fallen human language to its perfect divine source. (30)

As Blake Ostler and others have argued, Mormons do not believe in “orthodoxy” but “orthopraxis,” placing the practical day-to-day concerns of living a spiritual life above the need for a comprehensive, systematic theology. Indeed this is the case: One can be a fully active Mormon who is seen as thoroughly devout, “true believing Mormon” by truthfully passing a “temple recommend interview” in which one must affirm that one is living the commandments and hold some basic Christian beliefs in the salvific sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the prophethood of Joseph Smith as the “restorer” of Christianity. Crucially, in that same interview one affirms that one has a “testimony” of these beliefs. In effect, this is an affirmation that one has had a spiritual witness or experience which one interprets as a direct personal revelation from God confirming these beliefs.

As in no other Christian church, Mormons are defined by their personal “testimonies,” which place at the core of personal belief a personal revelation from God that “the Church is true.” Mormons are repeatedly admonished that a member may begin on “borrowed light,” but everyone must eventually gain his or her own [Page 68]spiritual witness, or spiritual experience, confirming that the orthopraxis — the lifestyle chosen — is indeed God’s will for the person. The personal spiritual witness obtained by reading the scriptures, pondering, and praying is what confirms in the heart of each Mormon individual that the path chosen is the one God has shown to be “true”; it is the basis for the declaration that “the Church is true.”

Through this process, each individual is to become a “convert” to the Church, regardless of whether one was born into it or has become a true convert after being a believer in another religious discipline. It is no wonder that Mormons are suspicious of systematic theology, when Joseph Smith himself built this attitude into the Church. Givens goes on to state:

In the first generation of the Mormon Church, the picture is especially complicated, for several reasons. First is because Smith hated dogma and tests of orthodoxy. A revelation declared him “a seer, translator, and prophet,” but his calling as a prophet was some years morphing into the virtual *office* of Prophet. (The first was a function of his revelatory experience; the second was an institutionally defined position in an ecclesiastical hierarchy.) Joseph Smith was as likely to promote openness as to exert his authority. He severely rebuked his own brother Hyrum for performing unauthorized rituals. But in another case, he “did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine” when a council met to discipline Pelatiah Brown for speculating on the meaning of portions of the book of Revelation. “It looks too much like methodism and not like Latter day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be kicked out of their church. I want the liberty of believing as I please, it feels so good not to be trampled.” . . . A popular joke has more than a hint of truth to it that Catholics espouse papal infallibility, but no Catholic believes in it. Joseph Smith espoused prophetic fallibility, but no Mormon believes in it. (18–19)

The very assertion that one must confirm every principle by testimony and personal revelation is antithetical to the

idea of prophetic infallibility, yet we are to discipline ourselves in following the prophet, personally confirming his counsel. Furthermore, there may develop a tension between this simple spiritual witness that confirms the truth of Mormonism and the complexity of ideas and philosophies with which all contemporary human beings are bombarded — religious and atheistic, scientific and moral, faith-based and rational. The task for [Page 69]every thinking Mormon is to sort all this out, to construct a consistent worldview that accounts for all these apparently diverging philosophies, and to reconcile it with his or her simple spiritual experience and the scriptures.

Complicating the issue, Mormons are admonished to avoid “the philosophies of men, mingled with scripture”¹ and to keep their beliefs scripturally based, avoiding “the mysteries” that do not “apply to their salvation.”

Thus conflict is inevitable. We all live in a world saturated with irreligious patterns of thought. Ultimately, even scripture comes to us written by a human hand within a cultural context with all the influences of that culture embedded in the prophet’s choice of words and vocabularies. One cannot fully understand the Old Testament, for example, without understanding much about the culture and language in which it was written. Separating the “philosophies of men” from scripture completely is probably an impossible task, yet certainly with the proper attitude and a sense of discernment, one can extract the universal spiritual lessons to be found in at least some of the cultural context. Still, since revelation is not complete, where does philosophy end and scriptural interpretation begin? The answer for any thinking Mormon is not an easy one to always discern.

Indeed this is the task Givens takes on, and his approach may make some Mormons uncomfortable because indeed, in discussing the historical development of Mormon thought, he takes on precisely the task of analyzing the sources for those ideas, scriptural or otherwise. Such an approach is unavoidable in tackling the complex task he has set up for himself and which he has accomplished admirably.

This confrontation between the *subjective* personal spiritual witness of experiencing God and the ensuing objective act of *verbalizing* that “God is real” or “the Church is true” — and what all that could possibly mean — is the central confrontation of *Wrestling the Angel* and is indeed the question every theist must be able to answer at least for him or herself.

Tension between the rational and revelatory, faith and reason, the sophic and the mantic runs throughout book, symbolized by the concept of “wrestling an angel.”²

[Page 70]Without directly articulating the problem in these terms, these are the tensions Givens faces: between the historical and the spiritual, between scripture and its philosophical interpretation, and between unchanging truth and the evolution of theology. He handles these tensions masterfully.

Givens cites figuratively the task of Jacob in the Old Testament, who wrestles with the balance between the philosophies of men and revealed scripture.

The account of this struggle is one of the most cryptic chapters in all scripture, in which Jacob receives his new name from God, “Israel,” or “he who prevails,” after wrestling all night long with the angel, interpreted to be the Lord himself.

Scripture tells us that in this struggle, Jacob “prevailed.” But how can man prevail against God?

The only way is through consistent, diligent, humble obedience, which shows worthiness. Ultimately, this is the way Israel “prevailed” against the angel — by persisting in seeking a blessing despite being completely humbled.

The story tells us that Jacob held fast to the angel and would not allow him to escape, leaving the angel no alternative but to dislocate Jacob’s hip. Jacob/Israel had lost the fight, yet Jacob still would not release the angel, insisting that the Lord give him a blessing. The angel ultimately agreed and gave him his blessing. So in the long run, Israel “prevailed” through surrender to God and an unwavering commitment to do what was necessary to receive God’s blessings. By any objective measure, he limped away from the battle a defeated man, yet God pronounced that Jacob, now “Israel,” had prevailed by his persistence and ultimate surrender to God’s will. By

struggling well to do what God ultimately desired of him, Jacob was blessed and became favored of God. The endowment of blessings resulted in God's changing Jacob's name to "Israel," "He who prevails with God."

For Mormons, as "children of Israel" we may apply this story to our own personal struggles in weighing the philosophies of men against scripture. Though we have no systematic theology, each of us has to become his or her own systematic theologian in our own wrestlings with the angel, our own struggle to answer these questions to our own satisfaction. Literal interpretations appeal to some, and some literalists include positivism in their mental repertoire. To others, historical evidence is essential. To others the philosophy must gel perfectly with a scriptural interpretation. Still others see scripture as largely symbolic, [Page 71]figurative, and perhaps interpretable in terms of Jungian archetypes or Freudian projections. To faithful Latter-day Saints, all paradigms are possible as long as their lives are lived in orthopraxis under the principles of obedience and sacrifice and the keeping of sacred covenants. In short, each of us needs to take "matter unorganized" and organize it into a rational world that makes sense to each of us according to our personal needs.

And that is precisely what this wonderful volume helps us do — with benefit of the history of the ways others have organized their rational worlds and made sense of the questions that arise when wrestling an angel and the interpretations they have found for scripture. Thus we can learn from others' dead ends and false starts and also their triumphs in discovering the answers that have endured in the eternal battle of ideas — then using those tools to organize our own answers. Ultimately, like Israel, we will go through our faith-struggle with God, receive His blessing of a testimony, and limp away from the struggle triumphant in being blessed by the grace of His personal revelation.

Givens presents in each section of his book the theological development of Joseph Smith's thought, while sometimes seeming to ignore Joseph's prophetic call in favor of a more scholarly tone. Yet I find the overall purpose of the volume itself very faith affirming. By presenting Mormon thought in its cultural setting, Givens helps us to see the hand of God in turning the minds of his children to the thoughts of their fathers in setting up the conditions necessary for the restoration of the gospel.

This is where Givens's topical approach shines: he traces the development of major Church tenets one by one through their history, beginning early in primitive Christianity. His approach brings a remarkable clarity to the idea that what we think of as "Mormon" ideas are clearly expressed in early Christianity, thus giving greater credence to the notion that indeed Mormonism is a restoration of primitive Christianity.

Givens repeatedly expresses and gives evidence for the idea that until around the time of Origen, ideas we now think of as "Mormon" were clearly present in early Christianity. Origen seems to become a watershed figure for Givens, since Origen is seen as one of the last believers in the ideas of primitive Christianity as founded by the apostles.

Givens shows that St. Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and Clement affirmed that angels had bodies of "subtle material," a doctrine that can be identified with Joseph's notion of "spirit matter" as material, yet [Page 72]"more refined" than the coarser material that makes up the world as we know it. (58)

Givens notes that Irenaeus clearly articulated different roles for the Godhead, meaning that members of the Godhead operated independently yet found no need for a description of ontological unity (70), a belief paralleled in Mormonism which denies the Trinity of three persons united by one "substance," as defined by the Nicene Creed. Mormonism denies that the three persons of the Godhead have ontological unity as well; they are simply unified in purpose and love, much as a family should be unified.

Givens quotes Origen's understanding of a God who is capable of emotions, as human beings are, specifically in suffering (85). The implications of this position are vast: God becomes an immanent being capable of interacting with his children, as opposed to the Neoplatonic God of Aquinas, who is transcendent and unchangeable, beyond emotion, and yet paradoxically able to hear and answer the prayers of his children, which implies compassion for their changing circumstances. Givens joins his voice with Paulsen, Webb, and Tertullian himself in saying that the predominant understanding of God was as an embodied being, a doctrine that changed around the time of Origen

(91).

Givens spends a great deal of time discussing the doctrine of a premortal existence, tracing it from its biblical origins through philosophical history, its loss in the middle ages, and its return in the Romantic poets in the nineteenth century. He illustrates its New Testament origins in the story of Jesus questioned by his disciples about a man born blind. They asked whether the man or his parents had sinned in a premortal state, that he should be born blind. Jesus answered, “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). In other words, the man was foreordained to remain faithful despite his affliction, specifically to be healed by the Lord so that the works of God might be “manifest.” Givens also shows that Origen believed that the spirits in the nation of Israel were pre-existent (166), that fleshly bodies were not inherently degraded, as the Greeks believed (200). Givens goes on to note that Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria affirmed that for man to have joy, the body must be united with the soul (202), all doctrines that parallel Latter-day beliefs. Furthermore, Givens tells us that Origen also believed that hell was temporary; eventually virtually everyone would be “saved,” parallel Mormon beliefs (240).

[Page 73]In my opinion, the most important belief that Givens explores in detail is the idea of “theosis,” which means exaltation, or what Mormons sometimes call “eternal progression.”

In the vast panorama of Mormon thought, it is the destiny of mankind to progress from the state of premortal spirit to a “second estate,” where we have the opportunity to become incarnate so we may “fill the measure of our creation,” that is, to find our fullest potential as human beings. But this quest for continued human development and progress does not stop there; it continues into the afterlife, where the belief is that after eons of attempting to perfect oneself, one can begin to actually become like God himself. A large portion of the book is devoted to tracing the development of this belief and its roots; I will not attempt a summary here. Suffice it to say that Givens makes a convincing case that the early Church fathers were believers in theosis. He even quotes the somewhat controversial Platonic Dialogue Theaetetus, in which Plato uncharacteristically says that the greatest human goal should be “becoming as like God as possible” (257). This is one of Plato’s most troubling dialogues, however, and should not be taken as representative of Plato’s earlier and better known work. Givens also notes that Origen clearly believed in both a pre-existence and theosis (262).

The Eastern Orthodox believers also have had an affirmed version of theosis from early times and find sharing in the Divine Nature one of the greatest human goals to be achieved.

The idea that humans could become godlike became anathematized in the Middle Ages in the West along with the rise of the notion of man’s fallen nature and the degradation of all things physical, including the human body. Fallen man could not hope to approach the magnificence of a transcendent God. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, these were the times characterized by the phrase “the apostasy,” a time of lost light.

But in the eighteenth century, a new philosophy appeared, which helped set up conditions for a philosophical climate that would prove a receptive home for the revelations of Joseph Smith. Immanuel Kant was born in 1724, just 96 years before Joseph experienced his First Vision. Kant died one year before Joseph’s birth. Givens mentions Kant, but I think he misses Kant’s central importance to the restoration.

To call Kant “influential” would be a vast understatement. He became one of the most important of all philosophers and actually revolutionized philosophy. His influence in philosophy is comparable to the Copernican revolution, changing forever the way we see the world, especially if one includes all those he has influenced. Arguably, Kant [Page 74]laid the foundation for much of philosophy as we know it today, both in the United States and on the European continent. My purpose here is not to describe in detail his philosophy, only its ultimate importance to Mormonism.

One of Kant’s central insights involves a faculty of the mind he called the *synthetic a priori*. Before Kant, virtually all philosophers saw truths like those of mathematics as logically necessary eternal truths that could not possibly be dependent on humans for their structure. Kant revolutionized that idea by essentially holding that such truths, instead of existing independently of the human mind, were actually in a sense “created” by the human mind and

were the rules by which humans perceive the world. The world as we know it is essentially “organized” by the human mind. Perception does not “correspond” to the world outside but is framed completely by rules beyond which humans cannot know anything. Everything we know is essentially ordered and organized, that is, “synthesized” by human consciousness.

Robert Solomon, a noted Kant scholar, puts it this way:

To use one of Kant’s examples, my perception of a house from various perspectives could not be considered a perception of a *house* (or of any *object*) if the several experiences constituting this perception were not unified or *synthesized* as various experiences ... (of the house), but my synthesizing these experiences as experiences of a house. Because experiences alone can never give us objects, there can be no perception of objects unless there is a synthesis of the manifold of experience. Moreover, because we never perceive simply, or experience simply, but always perceive or experience *something* and because perceiving or experiencing something depends on synthesis, there can be no unsynthesized experiences. (We shall see this same major thesis become the central principle of Edmond Husserl’s *Phenomenology*, the philosophy which will give a major impetus to the methodological innovations of the twentieth century existentialists.)³

To me, this principle is the essence of the Mormon view that God does not “create” matter ex nihilo but indeed “organizes” from matter unorganized. Essentially the Mormon exalted human God is doing [Page 75]what each human him or herself does through human perception — organizing the chaos of streaming photons and vibrations in the air into a gloriously harmonious experience of a symphony orchestra.

Kant’s central idea that logical form can exist only within rational human activity influenced all the German philosophers who came after him, Phenomenology and Existentialism from Hegel to philosophers of language, and even Frege, Wittgenstein, William James, Kuhn, and much of Twentieth Century philosophy on both sides of the Atlantic — including Pragmatism. All these take as their central thesis the view, in one form or another, that reality as we know and speak about it is a product of the organizing abilities of the human mind, and there is nothing we can speak about or know outside what we are capable of organizing as humans. So it can be said that much of contemporary philosophy provides a background support for the notion that a human God, if such an entity could exist (and of course we know He does), would organize reality through the powers of his consciousness much as humans do every day of their lives.

I am further convinced that God allowed these philosophies to emerge at this time and place to provide fertile intellectual soil to allow thinking Mormons to see the Restoration in this light. Unfortunately, much of Mormon thought to date is still imbued with a sectarian perspective. In my view, there is much to overcome.

Givens is fully aware of the importance of this spirit of humanism for the Restoration and mentions it several times. Here are two especially relevant quotes:

Setting the fall of man into an even larger context, as we saw, was Smith’s doctrine of pre-mortal existence, in which those born into mortality successfully “kept” their “first estate.” These re-invented master narratives that span both dispensational and cosmic history convey a framework utterly incompatible with Calvinist readings of human origins or human depravity. At the same time, Mormon conceptions of a human nature unencumbered by original sin or inherited depravity comport perfectly with the nineteenth-century zenith of liberal humanism, with its celebration of human potential, sense of boundlessness, and Romantic optimism. But for Smith, those conceptions become grounded in a totally reconfigured human anthropology. As a consequence, he sees God’s plan— from the beginning— as being about human elevation rather than remedy, advancement rather than repair. In all this, Smith returns [Page 76]his version of Christian thought to a pre-Augustinian state, starkly different from most of the theology of his day. The early Christian rejection of Origen’s

doctrines of premortality and apokatastasis (restoration to one's primordial position), writes one religious historian, ensured the supremacy "of a Christian theology whose central concerns were human sinfulness, not human potentiality; divine determination, not human freedom and responsibility." (191)

This early twentieth-century reorientation from the communal to the individual, and from other-worldly bonds to this-worldly character formation, was further enhanced by important developments in the social context of the era. The key influence in this regard was the mania for progressivism that swept the period — a philosophy that emphasized the amelioration of social conditions and the blossoming of human potential through the improvement of technology, government, and education. Progress became the mantra across the social and cultural spectrum. As a prominent voice of the movement declared, "democracy must stand or fall on a platform of human perfectibility." "Human nature" itself, he argued, was improvable "by institutions." The convergence of such optimism about human potential with Mormon theologies of eternal progress was fortuitous, coming as it did on the heels of polygamy's abandonment. As Matthew Bowman has argued, "the early twentieth century was a time of rehabilitation for Mormons, when they worked to reinvent a religion shorn of polygamy and forced into American ways of being, and progressivism gave them the concepts, language, and tools to preserve their distinctiveness within adaptation." The practical consequence of these developments, in and outside the church, was a new emphasis on individual perfectibility. In Smith's thought, humankind's role in the process of sanctification centers on his submission to divine law. It is this submission, Smith declared, that makes Christ's freely offered sacrifice personally efficacious, allowing individuals to become "perfected and sanctified." For this reason, Mormons hold, "obedience is the first law of heaven" (307–308).⁴

[Page 77] So again we return to the beginning.

Just as Jacob in his wrestle with his angel was persistent in his struggle to receive a blessing and though injured in the process, still "prevailed" through submission to divine law, so too must we struggle in the organization of our world from matter unorganized and seek the Lord's blessing on our adventure.

And how are we to handle the use of scripture to tangle with the philosophies of men? Givens gives us a perfect example in this wonderful book.

We must place first the filter of what we know from the spirit on our discernment, and then see the philosophy for what it is — as faith promoting or not — and act accordingly. Too often we reverse the process, throw away the spirit, and proceed without guidance. For those unacquainted with philosophy, that can be a recipe for disaster.

Humanism can be seen as a godless interpretation of the world or, as Givens here demonstrates, as not only compatible with but part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the extent it is interpreted in the light of human progression and affirmation of the basic goodness of mankind. The question, as always, becomes one of choices we make in the way we decide to view the world.

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¹. Hartman Rector Jr., "You Shall Receive the Spirit," General Conference, October 1973.

². This is a reference to the account of Jacob, the son of Isaac, wrestling the angel, found in Genesis 32.

³. Robert Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism: the Existentialists and their Nineteenth Century Backgrounds* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 18.

4. See also Matthew Bowman, “Eternal Progression: Mormonism and American Progressivism,” in *Mormonism and American Politics Since 1945*, ed. Jana Reiss and Randall Balmer (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming). Indeed, Thomas Alexander has characterized the theology of Roberts, Widtsoe, and Talmage as “progressive theology”; see his “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine,” *Sunstone* 5.4 (July–August 1980): 24–33.