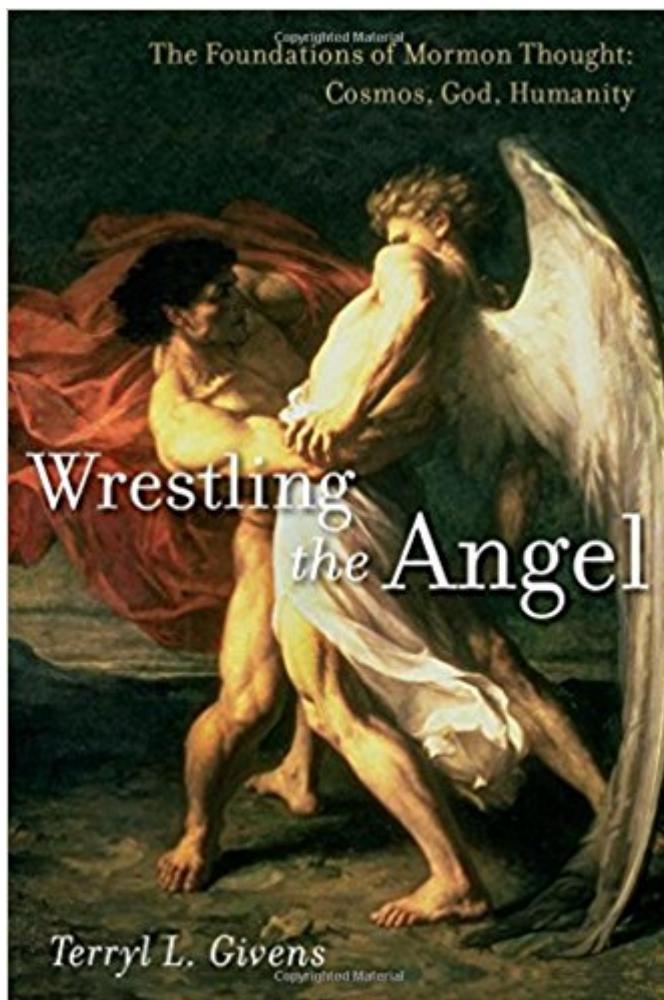


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# **Wrestling The Angel: The Foundations Of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity**



## Synopsis

In this first volume of his magisterial study of the foundations of Mormon thought and practice, Terryl L. Givens offers a sweeping account of Mormon belief from its founding to the present day. Situating the relatively new movement in the context of the Christian tradition, he reveals that Mormonism continues to change and grow. Givens shows that despite Mormonism's origins in a biblical culture strongly influenced by nineteenth-century Restorationist thought, which advocated a return to the Christianity of the early Church, the new movement diverges radically from the Christianity of the creeds. Mormonism proposes its own cosmology and metaphysics, in which human identity is rooted in a premortal world as eternal as God. Mormons view mortal life as an enlightening ascent rather than a catastrophic fall, and reject traditional Christian concepts of human depravity and destiny. Popular fascination with Mormonism's social innovations, such as polygamy and communalism, and its supernatural and esoteric elements—angels, gold plates, seer stones, a New World Garden of Eden, and sacred undergarments—have long overshadowed the fact that it is the most enduring and even thriving product of the nineteenth century's religious upheavals and innovations. *Wrestling the Angel* traces the essential contours of Mormon thought from the time of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young to the contemporary LDS church, illuminating both the seminal influence of the founding generation of Mormon thinkers and the significant developments in the church over almost 200 years. The most comprehensive account of the development of Mormon thought ever written, *Wrestling the Angel* will be essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the Mormon faith.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A sweeping survey ambitiously conceived, ably crafted, capable of unlocking new mental worlds. Wrestling the Angel finally puts a fair assessment of the 'Mormon mind' on full display...[A] magisterial project."--*Nova Religio*"Terryl Givens, an unusually creative and eloquent exponent of the Mormon thought he outlines in *Wrestling the Angel*."--*Journal of Religion*"[A] wonderful and capacious contextualization of Mormon theology...I found it a distinct pleasure to work through Givens's work and to witness the Mormon theological tradition emerge from those pages with the kind of complexity and integrity that it rightly deserves."--*Mormon Studies Review*"Givens successfully tackles a mountain of logistical, chronological, and topical challenges in an astonishing work of scholarship. This comprehensive and impressive volume is fundamental in the study of an important, multifaceted, and understudied piece of religious history." --*Library Journal* "Givens has given us a hugely impressive, erudite and systematic work. He shows us the vast and complex landscape of this most extraordinary and most American of religions. Through this monumental work we experience the sheer scale and audacity of Mormon cosmology and theology and how this transforms our understanding of divine nature and human nature alike." --*Simon Critchley*, Hans Jonas Professor, The New School for Social Research "Givens has provided the most thorough and expert accounting of Mormonism's place in the Christian thought-world. The book raises the bar for those who would challenge Mormonism's status as a Christian faith. For the rest of us, who simply want to understand Mormonism, it is a welcome gift of fine scholarship." --*Kathleen Flake*, Richard Lyman Bushman Professor in Mormon Studies, University of Virginia "We--general readers and scholars--need a lucid survey of the Latter-day Saints' complex doctrinal developments. We also need work that places the whole of Mormon theology in conversation with Western culture and historic Christian thought. We now have both in one remarkable, rewarding book." --*David Holland*, Associate Professor of North American Religious History, Harvard Divinity School "In a sweep of enormous scope Givens takes Mormon thought from the cultural world of its nineteenth century American emergence through theological debates on orthodoxy-heresy amongst the early Christian Fathers to Protestantism's heyday and to today's Latter-day Saint distinctiveness." --*Douglas J. Davies*, author of *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* "Terryl Givens' careful and detailed account succeeds admirably in its goal of presenting the origins and development of Mormon theology clearly. The book is particularly welcome for giving readers a solid sense of where Latter-day Saint theology aligns with, and differs from, the theologies of main Christian traditions." --*Mark A. Noll*,

author of America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln "Terryl Givens's scholarship is magisterial, yet this book brilliantly synthesizes key themes in Mormon thought in a way which is accessible and engaging for the non-specialist reader. An essential study of contemporary Mormon religious thought and its origins which should be read by any serious student of comparative Christian traditions." --Fenella Cannell, Associate Professor of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science "Givens, possibly the most significant voice in the field of Mormon studies, has previously explained Mormonism by way of scripture, history, and philosophy. Here, he turns his attention to theology, a more difficult proposition than it sounds, since Mormons tend to emphasize practical living rather than theological speculation and believe in continuing revelation...What emerges is a complex, nuanced picture of a dynamic faith." --Publishers Weekly "Wrestling the Angel not only succeeds in providing the most comprehensive and rigorous overview of Mormonism's theological tradition, but it is, in the end, a key contribution--perhaps the most important contribution in the last half-century--to that very tradition." --The Juvenile Instructor "Givens does the world a great service by formalizing a very informal theology through remarkable literary artistry. Whether you are interested in tuning into current Mormon studies or looking for a helpful missiological resource, Wrestling will serve you well."-- Kyle R. Beshears, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Wrestling the Angel is a masterful attempt to grapple with a challenging but fundamentally important topic: situating Mormon thought in the history of Christianity. I greatly look forward to the next volume."-- Journal of Mormon History

Terryl L. Givens is Professor of Literature and Religion and Jabez A. Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond. His books on Mormonism and American religious culture include By the Hand of Mormon, People of Paradox, Parley P. Pratt (with Matthew Grow), and Viper on the Hearth.

I highly recommend this book. It's nice to see that Mormon scholarship is reaching a level of maturity, capable of maintaining a dialogue with a broader academic audience, being able to look critically and openly at Mormon beliefs while also finding reason for the faith in them. It's also refreshing to have an intelligent conversation about faith and a relatively unobstructed view at the facts in question, rather than the simplified, polarized shouting match that often exists. At some level this type of book is not new; the journal "Dialogue" for instance has been publishing comparable stuff for five decades now, as has author Jan Shipps. But this book has the full package, in terms of scope, presentation, level of research, and accessibility (not too mention endorsements from notable scholars!). There is also the issue of timing; I think it's safe to say that the Mormon religion

itself is reaching a sufficient maturity that it can comfortably discuss the deeper issues in the mainstream rather than the fringes. My main complaint (which is also a compliment) is that I found the book too brief. Most of the chapters have a detailed historical build-up to the topic at hand, but then seem to wrap up as soon as they get off the ground. Especially for a book promising a "sweeping account" of the "foundations of Mormon thought", I would have appreciated a more systematic treatment rather than just the "main currents" (to use Given's term). The main text stands at about 300 pages; I think the narrative could comfortably fit another 100-150 pages without losing its momentum--and I highly doubt that Givens is lacking for source material. (That being said, a second volume is apparently in the works, so there is still time!) Also, for the record, I give a slight edge in favor of Given's other book "People of Paradox", mainly because it is richer in historical details, and because Givens allows himself a bit more interpretive license. But both are worth your time.

This book is an excellent resource in discovering the founding and formulation of many key doctrines, not just of Mormonism, but all of Christianity and even theology as a whole. It certainly focuses on Mormonism and how it relates to other belief systems, but the doctrines all discussed are crucial and are all tied together with great expertise. Doctrines such as temple worship, the nature of God, original sin, the problem of evil, anthropomorphism, sexuality, pre-earth life, soteriology, and theosis are all brought into historical perspective. If you are looking for a simple Mormon apologetic work, this is probably not for you. Often, I felt more explanation could have been given that would have put things in a better light. Nothing is whitewashed, but the history and the facts are all put out there as is for the reader to examine. Though in my humble opinion, even with all the good, bad and the ugly, Mormonism easily comes out on top, as the overwhelming evidence seems to show that Mormonism is a true restoration of very early Christianity. One thing that was made very clear to me is that most of the time, as the doctrines of Mormonism came to light, they were not immediately completely revealed in the form they are today. It was very much a process, line upon line, here a little and there a little as Joseph Smith and his successors were not simply given everything all at once. It seems that as doctrine was revealed, how to entirely apply it was not necessarily given at the same time and they were allowed to err until they worked things out or enquired for further clarification. But to be fair, it is also very clear to me that every religious tradition has gone through similar growing pains as doctrines were formulated and debated, formed and reformed resulting in monumental changes through the centuries. If you enjoy religious history and are not afraid of the truth, go no further.

A scholar looks at Mormon Thought (not Theology as some have pointed out.) Givens doesn't sound authoritative as he explains the development of Mormon thought in the context of Christian Theology as it evolved over the centuries. It seems Givens had sat in on a year's worth of classes in theology making notes of how and when they deviated from first century Christianity and American religious thought and then noted Smith changed things up. Smith comes across as a reformer attacking piecemeal--although I see the Book of Mormon as a whole expose from the hand of Mormon. I can't wait for Volume 2.

I'm only about two-thirds into it, but this is the book I've been looking for, something to really sink my teeth into about LDS theology. A major bonus is that Givens approaches it in an academic style, quoting about as much from early church fathers such as Origen and Augustine, and more contemporary theologians from the general era of Joseph Smith and before, circa the 1700-1800's plus, on many topics as much as he does from Joseph Smith, his contemporaries, and other LDS luminaries, giving us background on the theology of the times. Givens explores the concepts, arranged in topical order, in great depth and amazing insight. This is not light reading, and one of the few books I actually had to have a dictionary handy for, but yet was still accessible to a layman like me with a desire to expand my knowledge and understanding about this subject. Givens has got to be the foremost LDS scholar when it comes to post apostolic church history. Like Richard Bushman, we are so fortunate to have him apply his academic skills in exploring LDS topics in theology and religious history. Thank you so much Brother Givens, for what must have been a labor of great sweat and effort!

If only Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie had been able and willing to do work like this decades ago. How Prof. Givens ever finds time to read and write so much escapes me. Perhaps he sleeps only two hours a night.

this is a wonderful book, thought provoking, very well researched and notated, I thoroughly enjoy the insights and information presented in it. great job by Terryl Givens.

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