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Michelle Chaplin Sanchez

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Review Essays

Wrestling with Language: Exploring the Impact of Mormon Metaphysics on Theological Pedagogy

Michelle Chaplin Sanchez

Review of Terryl L. Givens. *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought—Cosmos, God, and Humanity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS* IS ONE OF THE MORE FAMILIAR of his dialogues, presenting several of the philosopher's most famous ideas. On the one hand, the *Phaedrus* would seem to contain ample evidence for the Platonic tendency to value the spiritual over the material, souls over bodies, and the eternal over the mortal. On the other hand, the context of the dialogue embeds such claims alongside an extended and complex discussion on rhetoric, persuasion, and whether writing is suited to teach: to induce a student along the path of recollection. In his wonderful and capacious contextualization of Mormon theology, *Wrestling the Angel*, Terryl Givens references the *Phaedrus* (among other sources) to provide a philosophical contrast to Mormonism's high valuation of embodiment, citing Plato's "wholesale condemnation of the bodily dimension of the self" (p. 201). Such a reading is hardly unique to Givens, but as

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a reader of Plato, I have often sided with those who argue against these kinds of interpretations (common as they are) on the grounds that the dialogue's overarching interest in the problematics of communication will ask a reader to look beyond what is stated and more closely to *how* it is stated. Attention to Socratic irony—or *how* Socrates teaches—will render claims differently than they might otherwise seem at face value. And on my reading, the rhetorical strategies in a dialogue like the *Phaedrus* present a more complicated view of the body.

As I paused to consider yet again if I agreed with the familiar negative assessment of Plato's view of embodiment, however, I began to realize that in the context of Givens's ambitious project—that of compiling and nuancing an account of Mormon theology—such interpretive questions point to a larger and much more interesting issue. Specifically, such comparative questions remind scholars of theology to consider how and to what extent fundamentally different metaphysical beliefs will affect the way words are used, arguments are offered, and teaching is undertaken. For even though I might quibble with the claim that Plato in fact should be read to offer a “wholesale condemnation of the bodily dimension of the self,” Givens shows beyond doubt that the Platonic tradition begins from radically different cosmological premises than Mormonism, and these differences will impact how an understanding of “the truth” must be communicated and enacted.

As a theologian who works primarily in the period of the Protestant Reformation, I routinely emphasize the importance of reading theology for more than propositional claims, and instead approaching theological texts as crafted forms of discourse designed to persuade a reader to think and live differently. This often involves the use of rhetorical strategies involving claims that may come to be understood very differently when one assumes a different perspective on the path of instruction. After working through *Wrestling the Angel*, however, I began to wonder how and to what extent this particular understanding of theology as a pedagogical discourse can be generalized, and to what extent it might rely on a fundamentally Platonic—or Augustinian—cosmology. In this review essay, I will attempt to think alongside Givens, who has done an

invaluable service both to scholars of theology and to scholars of Mormonism in producing this stunning comparative effort. I hope that my thoughts will begin to show the kind of engagement that Givens's work has made possible across these traditions and disciplines, and perhaps point to some avenues for future work at the intersection of Mormon and wider Christian theology.

First, let me say a bit more about what Givens offers in *Wrestling the Angel*. As a reader with expertise in theology but only a cursory prior knowledge of Mormonism, 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, addressed at least in part to a wider academic audience that has often treated Mormonism unfairly or ignored it altogether. Throughout this thoroughly comparative enterprise, the book successfully constructs a clear and exceedingly useful account of what it is that Mormons actually believe, and it does a fine job gesturing to what is at stake in these beliefs. The reader comes to understand not only that Mormons hold to a great many distinct and wonderfully bold metaphysical and soteriological commitments; she is also invited to appreciate the deep vitality and coherence of these teachings as well as the logic through which various teachings and practices have been negotiated and amended over time.

The book itself, which comprises the first of an eventual two-volume treatment of "the foundations of Mormon thought and practice," works methodically through Mormon beliefs from the greatest in scope to the smallest. Beginning with the cosmos and moving quickly to the Mormon doctrine of God, Givens opens his study by emphasizing the fundamental cleft between Mormon metaphysics and the basic view of the cosmos that has dominated the Christian West. Many currents of Christianity have been committed to an understanding of God as a trinitarian spirit who is transcendent, eternal, impassable, omniscient, omnipotent, and good; who created the time and space of our cosmos, along with human beings, out of nothing. For Mormons, according to Givens, the universe itself is both material and eternal; it is composed of a single substance

that organizes variously into intelligences, bodies, and the subtle matter of spirit. Within the universe, God is a superlatively realized intelligence who is subject to the laws and conditions of the universe (pp. 65, 99). As such, God is fundamentally the *organizer* of all things, rather than the creator of all things. The divine intelligence organizes itself in various ways—in a body, as ether, or as the highly refined matter of spirit (pp. 95, 125–27); as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (pp. 72–74); and alternatively as both Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother (pp. 106–11). God freely chooses the fullest relation to both the universe and its laws and to other intelligences (pp. 74, 88, 97, 103), and it is through this relationship that human beings may ultimately ascend to a fully embodied deification. Salvation is therefore the decision on the part of human beings to freely embrace the call of divine organization according to eternal laws and to live according to these practices—to fully realize the knowledge of God and the cosmos, and thus to become fully realized material intelligences in relationship to and alongside of God (pp. 312–13).

To ground his claims concerning Mormon beliefs, Givens relies heavily on teachings, publications, lectures, and letters from key founders and subsequent figures. Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Parley Pratt, and Orson Pratt are cited early and often, though their views and teachings are often accompanied by those of a wider array of past and present LDS voices. To shed additional light on what is at stake in these beliefs, Givens cites a truly rich array of non-Mormon theological teachings to highlight both the continuities and novelties that Mormon theology presents. He tends to locate positive resonances in some forms of ancient Greek philosophy, pre-Augustinian Christian theology, and some early modern European philosophies, as well as in the full range of nineteenth-century American thought: Transcendentalists, Pragmatists, Unitarians, Universalists, and Romantics. Contrasting examples are routinely drawn from varieties of Platonism, Augustinianism, and especially Calvinism and its later Puritan varieties in America.

As Givens's account progresses from the cosmos through the Godhead to views of human life and salvation, Mormonism's distinctive theological character stands out in its unparalleled willingness to engage

with aplomb radically divergent possibilities for the nature and meaning of reality. These possibilities are embraced, first and foremost, in response to a revealed project of restoration. As a scholar of the Protestant Reformation, I found Givens's discussion of the Mormon restoration in contrast to other projects of religious reform (chapter 3) to be utterly fascinating in itself, certainly deserving of further interdisciplinary engagement. Additionally, Givens texturizes the unique qualities of Mormonism in ongoing relation to the mores of its own time and American context, highlighting the positive relationship Mormonism has historically assumed with respect to scientific inquiry and innovation (pp. 14–15), its wholesale embrace of the values of freedom and human choice (pp. 194–98), and its intrinsic commitment to the paradigms of law, organization, and hard work (e.g., pp. 155–61, 266–74, 299–300, 309). These last qualities—which might be summarized as commitments to materialism, voluntarism, and proceduralism—make for a fascinating comparison to the legacy of Calvinism and Reformed theology, which I will more fully address later in this essay.

Returning to my overarching interest in theological method—or how traditions give themselves to be *written*—there is no doubt that Givens faces a tricky task, though one not unfamiliar to scholars of many traditions known to distrust or disavow the legacy of theology. He acknowledges this early: “[Modern-day] Mormons have considered the very enterprise of theology to be largely a secular enterprise, a sign of true religion’s failure, and not an activity worth pursuing with any energy” (p. 6). He points out, however, that the early founders of Mormonism accorded a more positive role to theological teaching. According to Givens, “Theology is, as the etymology suggests, reasoned discourse about God, and one of Joseph Smith’s earliest projects was to organize a School of the Prophets and deliver there a series of ‘lectures on theology’” (p. 6). Invoking this etymology, Givens is able to tactfully recover a conception of theology as a more general form of discourse that is, in fact, never absent from any attempt to speak about divine things. To convey a belief, or the experience of a revelation, requires that one *reason* before another using perhaps all of the senses conveyed in

the Greek word *logos*, which can also be translated as “speech,” “word,” or “argument.”

Givens does not discuss the other possible, and quite common, rendering of the Greek genitive that combines *theos* and *logos* into “speech of God”: namely, the suggestion that *theology* is also meant to connote “God’s own speech.” The latent possibility that theology must also function as a transcendent or uniquely *divine* form of speech has perennially placed the problem of *analogy* at the center of debates over Christian speech. Analogy refers both to the similarity and the difference that obtains between two things that stand in some form of relation but are fundamentally different from each other. For many Christian theologians, this analogical difference is rooted in the belief that there is a vast ontological difference between God and God’s creation. As such, the majority of Christian approaches to theological writing have always had difficulty stabilizing any attempts to contain or define the single, proper form of theological speech and have often resorted to a wide range of literary and interpretive devices. One might think quickly of the *via negativa* or the use of both cataphasis and apophasis (saying and unsaying) when speaking of God in an author like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth century) or of the doctrine of divine accommodation as an interpretive principle in an author like John Calvin (sixteenth century).

Yet one does find Givens gesturing to the problem of transcendent language in one subtle but significant way—namely, his chosen title, “Wrestling the Angel.” This vivid image points to what his argument does not fully explore. Givens provides only one sentence (the book’s very first sentence) to explain his title: “‘Wrestling the Angel’ seems an apt image for any mortal attempt to capture in finite time and human language the essential propositions about the nature of God, his universe, and his creations” (p. ix). The suggestion that the borders of any comprehensive contextualization of Mormon theology are in fact circumscribed by a human being wrestling an agent of transcendence frames this book as a whole and hangs atop the left side of every page. This elicits the following question: in what way, and to what extent, does

this destabilizing feature of theological language impact our reading of the uniquely Mormon beliefs that Givens outlines with such care? Or, conversely, how do Mormon commitments concerning the nature of the universe and God render the problem of divine speech *differently*?

To unpack what I mean, let me return briefly to Plato's *Phaedrus*, which Givens uses to underscore Plato's low view of embodiment—a reading that may seem fair enough, given Socrates's claim that the highest and truest Being is “without color, without form, intangible, visible to reason alone . . . fed on intellect and pure knowledge”¹ and that a human being must rise above mere bodily activities in order to contemplate it. However, the dialogue itself is suffused with a debate over how words are properly used to guide a person to the path of the contemplation of the truth, and this debate often involves the recognition that within the unwieldy enterprise of teaching the truth, all boundaries are porous. Philosophy, for example, requires a love-induced madness that is both dangerous but also necessary to draw one beyond oneself; rational argument requires reliance on the use of myths that do not themselves conform to the rules of rational argument; and speaking the truth is not a straightforward endeavor, but one that requires the use of rhetoric for the purpose of persuasion. In both its content and its form, the *Phaedrus* relies on a variety of complex literary and rhetorical devices that not only situate its propositional claims but display the larger argument that philosophy can never attain its goal through the uncomplicated use of reason or language, but always requires things like madness, love, and myth to induce a student to the true contemplation of the gods.

As a result, several of the more blunt claims of the dialogue are undone in the course of the speeches and events that it recounts. This includes, I think, Socrates's statements concerning the body. Many of Socrates's negative claims about the mortal body analogically *rely* on a positive use of the material features of the mortal body in order to ground the activity of recollection itself. Socrates's own body, his bodily

1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246c.

actions, and his continued reliance on bodily metaphors and especially the embodied experience of desire are crucial to founding and figuring every argument he offers concerning the soul. Bodily desire, in other words, is the experience that anchors the possibility for the soul to adequately navigate what it means to desire the truth. It may be that the truth is immaterial, but it is not a truth that is unconcerned with a positive use and experience of the body. In this way, a text that rhetorically denies the goodness of the body might be read as performing a critical interruption of conventional attitudes for the purposes of radically heightening one's view of the *true importance* of the body.

This brief foray into the *Phaedrus* exemplifies a larger point: teachings that involve engaging ontological difference—or things anchored beyond the bounds of ordinary human representation—will often use propositional claims strategically to achieve precisely the opposite effect of what a reader or student might have expected. Ascertaining the face value of a theological assertion is thus always a task of critical importance, but so is ascertaining the full rhetorical effect of theological assertions in the context of more complex pedagogical aims. Givens does a masterful job of presenting a multidimensional account of Mormon theological assertions. Yet the question still lingers: how do these beliefs give themselves to be taught or communicated to others? How are they designed to shape a certain kind of religious life in relation to that which words cannot capture?

To explore this question more deeply in connection with *Wrestling the Angel*, let me return to the three features of Mormon theology that I named at the outset: materialism, voluntarism, and proceduralism. Givens provides a fascinating discussion of these three particularly in “The Fall” (chapter 18), “Embodiment” (chapter 19), and “Salvation” (chapter 20). In these chapters he also offers a rich exploration of the relationship between Mormon beliefs and their ethical and social implications. All three of these features also make for an especially fascinating contrast with Calvinism, not only because Calvinism is often presented by Givens as Mormonism's *bête noire*, but also because of the general scholarly consensus that Calvinism itself has done much to

shape Western, modern proclivities toward materialism, voluntarism, and proceduralism.

Givens opens these chapters by quoting Brooks Holifield: “A substantial part of the history of theology in early America was an extended debate, stretching over more than two centuries, about the meaning and truth of Calvinism” (p. 176), in particular citing resistance to Calvinist teachings on original sin, predestination, and the transcendent sovereignty of God over creation, judgment, and salvation. In some of his most explicit historicizing, Givens situates early Mormonism in relation to a broader wave of American intellectual movements that similarly repudiated Calvinism: “Mormon conceptions of 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” (p. 191). He argues, however, that Mormons differ from their Unitarian, Transcendentalist, Romantic, and Humanist counterparts in one crucial way—namely, *their unique metaphysical commitments* (pp. 191, 196). In other words, Mormonism’s cosmology provides premises that undergird a thoroughly holistic and consistent alternative to Calvinism. “Given God’s purported materiality,” Givens writes, “Mormonism endows an unequivocal value on the physical and bodily” (p. 199). Accordingly, God’s freedom of choice also entails that all intelligences both have and must make use of freedom of choice. The logic here is not one of analogy, but rather one of univocity.

This all leads to a fascinating possibility: that Mormon cosmology might in fact render Mormon theological language unique with respect to other Western theological traditions that rely on the fundamental distance between signification and the thing signified. If God is part and parcel of the universe to which human beings also belong, and if human beings are similarly preexistent and can be expected to attain a deified status, then perhaps the difficulties of analogy cannot be expected to haunt Mormon theological claims. Perhaps they function in an altogether different rhetorical sense—a possibility that, while intriguing, will also complicate any comparative project that relies on contrasting

theological claims. To get at what might be at stake in the possibility that Mormon linguistic assertions actually function differently, let me look at some examples drawn from my own field and its debates over the socio-political impact of Reformation theologies.

The case for arguing that Reformation theologies laid crucial intellectual groundwork for a uniquely modern, Western form of human subjectivity (for better and worse) has been made by a wide variety of authors including Max Weber, Marcel Gauchet, Charles Taylor, Michael Gillespie, Philip Gorski, Brad Gregory, and Roland Boer. In spite of their many disagreements, one will find a general consensus among these authors that Reformation teachings on divine transcendence, sovereignty, original sin, divine grace, predestination, and Christian freedom actually achieved a number of highly counterintuitive effects. And, as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, these effects can be traced to the ability of language to shape persons not by simply telling them the truth, but by causing them to approach ordinary things differently and thus orient their worlds and activities differently. As a result, arguments on these arcane matters of theology have often functioned to achieve the opposite of what they seem to say.

For example, the prospect of divine predestination, rather than paralyzing human agency, might in fact motivate a person to act *more* boldly as a purported agent of God's providential will; think, perhaps, of the logic of Manifest Destiny. The teaching that the divine will is not bound by any law, rather than sanctioning human anarchy, might in fact lead to new and unprecedented interest in forming a disciplinary society around law; after all, if religious subjects are no longer required to conform to one fixed rubric for church and society, the horizon for crafting an improved society becomes infinite. The assertion of a vast ontological distance between God and the world, rather than causing passivity, might in fact motivate unprecedented interest in ascertaining exactly how nature works on its own, thus eliciting new efforts to take mastery over nature without fear of transgressing some internal divine order. And finally, utter reliance on divine grace for salvation and good works, rather than undermining moral improvement, might in fact lead

to greater confidence in taking on radical or revolutionary change—in other words, the courage to act boldly in the name of what is perceived to be a just cause.

Givens repeatedly expresses puzzlement—both his own and the puzzlement of his documentary sources—over how the teachings of Calvinism could ever have made any sense (e.g., pp. 176–83, 222–24). How can God be creator, wrathful judge, and merciful savior all at once? How can total depravity do anything but undermine healthy human relations or attempts at moral improvement? These are sensible questions, if one reads univocally. But for me, as one who spends considerable time making sense of these claims and tracing their often-counterintuitive impact on the social landscape of the modern West, it seems beyond controversy that these propositional claims did—and were perhaps designed to—actually motivate materialistic, voluntaristic, and procedurally oriented human activity in oblique but discernible ways. But what does this imply about the more straightforward Mormon valuations of materialism, voluntarism, and proceduralism? If Calvinist claims of determinism are designed to foment a more radical form of human activity—or if the Socratic disparagement of the body is designed to draw increased scrutiny to the activities and desires of the body precisely because these are centrally important—are Mormon claims similarly counterintuitive?

After reading Givens's work, I do not think so. On my reading, Givens successfully shows that Mormon theological teachings tend to achieve what they aim to achieve in terms of their ethical and social force, without the need for complicated rhetorical artifices or oblique interpretations. But if this is the case, it is important to ask why, and furthermore *what* this has to do with the distinct way Mormons approach language itself. Ultimately, this will require assessing how Mormon cosmological and theological foundations actually impact the use and function of language. The radical difference in metaphysics that Givens emphasizes may complicate but also enrich our notions of what precisely is meant by "*Mormon* theology." And in the end, perhaps the place to begin unwinding this question is not in cosmology

but soteriology. If the logic of grace—the logic of the “gift”—has been crucial to the Western imaginary for understanding the operation of communication, knowledge, and salvation between the transcendent and the immanent—for Plato, but *especially* since Augustine—then a Mormon salvation that does not rely on the logic of the gift would point to huge implications. A gift, after all, reifies the notion that God’s own reason is not explicable according to the logic of a human economy, but always comes from an unexpected and radically nonreciprocal source. But while salvation is made possible by the gift of Christ’s atonement, Givens points out that the condition of being saved is not fundamentally a gift: “Eternal life, the kind and quality of life that God lives, is a natural and inevitable consequence of compliance with eternal principles” (p. 232). It may be that such principles, as a rhetorical form, are nothing more than univocal.

And yet Mormonism remains circumscribed by the account of a revelation—of wrestling with an angel. This carries implications too—implications that later scholars will have to pursue. I expect that delving further into the nuances of a Mormon theology of language will prove a fascinating project and may shed additional light on the conditions through which Mormon beliefs functioned to persuade, have shifted over time, and may continue to reveal unique and intriguing patterns of living. Givens’s study has performed an enormous service in allowing scholars of theology and Mormonism alike to continue to hone these kinds of questions.

Michelle Chaplin Sanchez is assistant professor of theology at Harvard Divinity School. She is currently working on turning her dissertation, “Providence: from pronoiā to immanent affirmation in John Calvin’s *Institutes* of 1559” (Harvard University, 2014), into a book. She is also preparing several academic publications on theological writing, theories of signification, and political theology during the period of the Protestant reforms.