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When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought

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Terryl L. Givens. *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

On October 13, 2011, BYU Studies sponsored a program reviewing Terryl Givens's important Oxford book on the idea of the premortal existence of souls in various lines of Western philosophy and religion. Because this first volume of its kind covers literature from so many different civilizations, the editors of BYU Studies saw no way to do this book justice without involving a panel of reviewers from several disciplines. After portions of Robert Fuller's forthcoming review in Church History were read, the program proceeded with reviews, responses, and open discussion. The following is based on that program.



**Review by James L. Siebach—
Philo, Augustine, and Classical Varieties**

When Souls Had Wings is an engaging, expansive survey of the idea of the premortal soul in the Western intellectual tradition. The book seeks to unfold the idea's "explanatory power" (5) in resolving certain problems in theology, in philosophy, and in human experience. In this review, I will rummage, by no means exhaustively, through the book's introduction and chapters 2 through 5, asking questions about the author's historiographic assumptions and about the potency of the explanatory power of preexistence.

In his introduction, Givens defines premortality very broadly. Versions of premortality range from a soul as "a fully self-aware moral agent" to merely "raw material" used in God's creation, yet Givens sets out to "encompass the entire range and variety of beliefs that trace the origins of individual identity to some kind of nonphysical state before birth" (4). Likewise, Givens attributes to the concept of the preexistent soul extraordinary philosophical and psychological power. "Such belief structures, like all enduring myths

and paradigms,¹ persist because of their explanatory power.” And, like all successful paradigms, the concept of preexistence can “rationalize the incongruities and traumas of existence” or simply explain “why things are the way they are.” It is clear that Givens endorses the view that the concept is enduring because it is “more effective than others in the interpretation of human experience.” The concept of a preexistent soul has been used throughout history to explain other difficulties, such as “the human yearning for transcendence and the sublime,” “the frequent sensation of alienation,” “the moral sense common to humanity,” “the human ability to recognize universals,” “unevenly distributed pain and suffering,” “the uncannily instantaneous bonds between friends and between lovers,” and “the necessary precondition for a will that is genuinely free and independent” (5–6).

As if resolving so many existential crises were not sufficient—can the concept knit a sweater?—the explanatory power of the idea of preexistence also resolves certain theological conundra. Givens explains, for example, that traditional Christian explanations of the soul’s origin at conception or birth are fraught with metaphysical and moral problems. “If the soul originates with the body . . . then why does it not perish with the body?” And, “If God creates the soul afresh in every human, how can it be imperfect, as a soul of fallen nature necessarily is? If it is created pure and innocent, how and when does it come to acquire the burden of Adam’s sin and guilt? And what justice can there be in immediately consigning a purely created spirit to the incubus of guilt, sin, and fallenness?” (2).

True, traditional Catholic or Protestant theological explorations of the soul’s origin are fraught with moral and metaphysical difficulties, yet the concept of a preexistence introduces other perplexities: Isn’t it still a problem that preexistent spirits from the presence of God enter physical bodies, yet humans are still so inclined to sin and fallenness? If a preexistent soul enters a body, why should parents, with power to create a body only, assume responsibility for anything other than bodily development? Why does a human person require so long a time to mature, the preexistent soul seeming so passive during early physical and cognitive development? Of course, clarifying such difficult questions—along with a persuasive articulation of how a preexistent soul influences the moral deliberation of the person—would make any book a bestseller.

1. Ordinarily, a single concept or belief cannot function as a paradigm. A paradigm is, most properly, a model of reality, and so implies a rich, structured network of beliefs. Givens doubtless intends, in calling the concept of preexistent souls a paradigm, to include the larger worldview logically associated with the concept, such as with Neoplatonic Christianity.

Chapter 2 is a useful review of early Greek views regarding the soul's always-existent, ungenerated, indestructible, and individuated "spirit entity." Givens's reading of Plato is subtle and sufficiently discriminating to note, for example, that Plato's own commitments to the various arguments he put forward for premortality are tenuous. He sometimes presented the idea in the context of a myth, and the doctrine was often merely instrumental in philosophical exercises. In Plato's *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*, belief in the soul's preexistence is useful in order to motivate human beings to live by the assumption that philosophical knowledge is attainable and that the philosophical life is the best of all possible lives.

It is debatable whether Plato continued to hold the same views about the soul's immortality. (Aristotle never found the idea persuasive.) The *Parmenides* is a dialogue in which Plato subjects his own metaphysics to relentless criticism. After this dialogue, historically, Plato's allusions to the soul's immortality and preexistence are sparse. To say that Plato found his earlier views regarding immortality bereft of explanatory power is not supported by the evidence, though one may still reasonably wonder why such fundamental views did not find more discussion in his later works. Nevertheless, Plato's early views have had an extraordinary historical influence on the idea of premortality, as chapters 3 through 5 unfold.

In chapter 3, Givens rightly emphasizes the extraordinary influence of Philo, an observant Jew living in Hellenized Alexandria in the first century BC. Philo's importance arises from his considered synthesis of philosophical thought—specifically Platonism, Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism, and Aristotelianism—and the revelation of God inscribed in the Hebrew Bible. Philo's synthesis is complicated by incompatible assumptions in two very different cultures: ancient Semitic culture and that of classical Greek philosophy.

Philo was conscious of contemporary Greek philosophers' relentless criticism of the divine interaction with humanity as depicted in the Hebrew Bible: Does God really become enraged at Israelite disobedience? Is God really anthropomorphic, walking and talking in Eden? Would God really command the Israelites to destroy entire nations? Philo's explanations of such representations introduce an important exegetical method: allegorical interpretation of scripture. Philo recognized that scripture has four different categories of sense—literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical—and the deeper significations of scripture resolve problematic literal representations of divine action. First and foremost an observant Jew,² Philo also

2. Philo scholars would not accept Givens's assertion (40) that Philo was equally devoted to the revelation of the Lord represented in the Hebrew Bible and to the philosophical tradition represented in Hellenistic culture.

found ways to circumscribe Athenian thought: he reasoned that Plato must have learned his metaphysics from Moses, else Platonism would not be so thoroughly discoverable at the allegorical level of interpretation. Although Philo “profoundly affected the development—and transmission—of the idea of pre-existence” (40), it is no longer clear what preexistence refers to in this section of the book—due partly to Philo’s Hebrew and Greek synthesis.

The discussion of Philo is not without other disruptions, particularly concerning a contentious problem in ancient thought: Was the world created and generated, or did it always exist ungenerated? And if generated, was it generated from nothing or from eternally preexistent matter? At this point, readers may get confused because the question is no longer about the preexistence of the human soul but the preexistent status of the world and its elements. Philo gives deference to the Genesis narrative that implies a kind of temporal sequence to creation, as well as to the classical metaphysical “necessity” of God’s eternally constant creative activity. Even Philo seems to recognize the apparent contradiction and regards his view as imperfect: the human mind, so removed from such a transcendent divine nature and activity, cannot understand or put into language such creative phenomena. Considering such complications, a longer summary and more judicious citations would have helped the reader contextualize the book’s discussion on Philo and creation.³

Chapter 3 also quotes many passages from the apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, and early Christian writers. While it would go far afield to explore the extent to which second temple Judaism, Rabbinical Judaism, and Essene writings were influenced by Greek thought in their discussions of preexistence and immortality, this chapter’s review of New Testament writers suggests that the influence is extensive. Chapter 4’s discussion on Neoplatonism and the Church Fathers continues this theme, showing that the influence of Greek thought is not without criticism by those writing in the first few centuries after the death of Christ. Chapter 4 also suggests ways that

3. An expert on Philo, David Winston charitably seeks to maximize the cogency of Philo’s argument, reasoning that Philo believed God created the world entirely outside of time, meaning the world, though created, was eternally so. Perhaps one of Givens’s least judicious readings arises when he characterizes Winston’s effort as “intellectual calisthenics” (334) to explain away preexistence. Far from denying preexistence, Winston seeks to prove that Philo undeniably asserts the preexistence of matter. Winston clearly has no agenda but to attempt to reconcile contradictory passages in Philo’s own convoluted accounts. For more detail on the creation, David Winston has a useful introduction, as Givens notes on page 334, in *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*, trans. David Winston, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1981).

Christianity in turn transformed an understanding of Plato, Aristotle, and the Greek tradition.⁴

Chapter 5 surveys the crucial role of Saint Augustine in the waning theological status of the idea of preexistence. Givens rightly notes (112–14) that Augustine, as a younger Platonist, believed that the soul (*anima*) preexisted its incarnation in an individuated person. When precisely Augustine gave up this idea is disputed, and a few scholars argue that Augustine never surrendered the belief. As late as *The Confessions*, Augustine meditates on the soul and concludes that its creation is still an open question and certainly a mystery. In such works as *On Free Choice of the Will* and *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine defines the highest of all wisdom as the aspiration to know God and one's own soul; knowing one's own self is on a par, almost, with knowing God. When Augustine was made Bishop in Hippo, he felt less liberty to speculate on philosophical matters and a greater obligation to defend the Magisterium. Thus, Augustine devoted considerable time to refutations of Pelagianism, and those refutations undermined the idea of premortality.

Givens's account of Augustine's rethinking is generally reliable. However, one might defend Augustine by noting that if explanatory power—solving theological and metaphysical problems—recommends the concept of a preexistent soul, by the same criterion the idea may lose persuasive force, for it can *create* theological and metaphysical problems as well. Augustine thought, with good reason, that premortality was nonbiblical and contradicted the doctrine of original sin, which doctrine was interpreted by the church in Augustine's day to have been taught by Paul. He also felt that an eternally existent soul impinging upon God's divine omnipotence and absolute sovereignty, because such a soul could by moral effort, theoretically, secure its own salvation and thus not be indebted to Christ's saving work; thus premortality diminishes, theologically, the scope of Christ's Atonement. Givens seems to suggest that Augustine's revisions are less persuasive because they are the result of problem solving. Yet Augustine ultimately decided the idea of premortality introduced more problems than it solved (119). Thoughtful reflection on theological problems should not discredit a theological discovery, as Givens's own tradition demonstrates—with Joseph Smith, theological discord precipitated revelatory discovery.

As to the work in general, *When Souls Had Wings* will be well received by those who share Givens's metaphysical commitments. If readers already agree that the concept of preexistence has explanatory power, the book will

4. In accomplishing this, however, Givens should not rely, except when compelled, on translations over a century old. The work of Edwin Hatch and Adolph V. Harnack, being late nineteenth century, ought to be considered outdated.

fortify their commitments. Less sympathetic readers will require more persuasive arguments to convince them. Likewise, an audience less familiar with the primary texts will be satisfied with fewer supporting citations and more general interpretations. When the audience is more familiar with the original sources, however, the interpretive burden upon the author increases proportionately.

For example, when Givens briefly discusses Homer's *Iliad*, it should be remembered that this epic is a weaving of different and older oral narratives by different authors. Within the *Iliad* are at least two words (*thumos* and *psyche*) translatable by the word *soul*. The concepts signified by these two words are not synonymous, and even the same word for soul may have different shades of meaning in the text. Thus, a scholarly discussion of the concept in the *Iliad* must carefully specify which word and meaning is under consideration so that readers may adjust their understanding accordingly. Givens forthrightly avers doing the philological work necessary to satisfy strict evidentiary demands.⁵

Professor Givens rightly notes that the concept of soul is "possessed of a long, complex history of meanings." He follows by clarifying that he "will use the terms soul and spirit interchangeably unless the original or present context requires differentiation" (328). Given the shifting ideas among the writers surveyed, contextual differentiation is required more often. For example, Augustine's concept of soul changes over time and differs significantly from Philo's concept of soul. Eliding these fundamental distinctions can potentially distort the understanding of their views. A broad definition of soul may also impede the author's purpose to establish the explanatory power of premortality. Can the concept have great explanatory power while tolerating the possible metaphysical varieties of preexistent souls? For example, it follows that the concept of a preexistent soul with moral intelligence has more explanatory power than a preexistent soul that does not. Least potent of the concepts would be a preexistent soul composed of some sort of inert metaphysical stuff out of which God forms souls before injecting them into bodies.

Another illustration of philological importance appears in the matter of translating ancient Hebrew words into Greek. In Psalm 16:10, the Hebrew word *nephesh* seems to refer to the entirety of a person's life. "Thou wilt not leave my life (*nephesh*) in Sheol." In the Septuagint, *nephesh* is

5. One notes for example, a number of fundamental grammatical errors in the discussions of Greek thought. The plural of *eidos*, meaning "form" or "essence," is *eidê*, not *eidoi* (72, 104). The concept of "becoming like God" should read as *homoiosis theôî*, not *homoiosis theoi* (37).

translated into the Greek word for soul, *psyche*. By the second century BC, those Greeks influenced by Platonism assumed that the *psyche* survives death. Thus the phrase “thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol” acquires a different theological dimension—that an immortal soul will be rescued—that is absent in the Hebrew.⁶

The Sadducees justified their denial of the resurrection, even into the first century AD, by noting that the Pentateuch nowhere teaches resurrection or even immortality. No text in the Hebrew Bible clearly asserts the immortality of the soul or its continued life after the death until much later in Daniel 12. These concepts often were read back into earlier books of the Hebrew Bible, particularly after Alexander the Great conquered the Near East and began the Hellenization of Hebrew culture.⁷ Givens himself notes the indispensability of care in translation to avoid progressive excision—removing objectionable ideas by mistranslation (15). But, as Givens knows, one must also avoid progressive insertion—importing by mistranslation, because one finds them compelling, ideas clearly not in the original passage. Of course, Givens’s survey intentionally includes influential readers who import the premortality of the soul into texts as well as those who would excise the concept. However, it is not always obvious that Givens observes the distinction between the sense of the original text and later interpreters.

Finally, I would have been delighted with some theological and philosophical explications of premortality’s explanatory power with respect to the problems of innocent suffering and the many difficulties of human existence. To illustrate, in Numbers 31, the Israelites are commanded by God to slay every Midianite man and woman. “Keep alive for yourselves,” says the Lord, only those women who “have not known a man by lying with him” (verse 18). The text taken as literally true presents the reader with an apparently insurmountable series of perplexities. In searching for a solution, one might affirm some version of the concept of a preexistent soul. Now suppose that preexistent soul has moral autonomy and foresight and agrees to enter into mortal life as a Midianite. Does a former agreement to suffer genocide effectively explain God’s justice or assuage those who see genocide as evil? Ought a preexistent soul to make such an agreement? How can the concept of a preexistence console the surviving Midianite virgins?

6. For many more examples of this phenomenon, see the helpful surveys of N. T. Wright, in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), chapter 4, and *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), chapter 6, upon which this discussion relies.

7. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Of course, to say that a text does not exemplify an idea, is not to say that the author did not believe the idea. The claim made here is textual only.

Doesn't the concept of premortality intensify the guilt of perpetrators? Can the explanatory power of a preexistence paradigm resolve such problems?

Historically, Christian theologians and philosophers have not seen how to resolve these issues and have at the same time put forward compelling arguments for doubting the preexistence of souls. In faulting Augustine for following these doubts, does Givens think there are dispositive rebuttals? Can the presence of self-sustaining eternal beings that are coequal with God (at least in respect to necessary, noncontingent existence) be convincingly explained? Can Givens calm the doubts of suspicious Christian theologians? Asking for such an argument is a substantial demand, but Givens whets the readers' appetite by asserting the concept's explanatory power.

When Souls Had Wings is something of an impressionistic work, the story of an idea through millennia. Insofar as it does not intend to demonstrate systematically the explanatory power of an idea, it should not be considered a formal philosophical exploration using the precision of specialized scholarly analysis. Nevertheless, readers sympathetic to the broad cluster of ideas regarding preexistence will find the reading illuminating and engaging.

Terryl L. Givens's Response to James L. Siebach

I appreciate the questions Professor Siebach has raised, and I appreciate his belief that I have "whet[ted] the readers' appetite." I think the principal issue he raises has to do with audience and the writer's purposes. Mormon scholars often negotiate a narrow channel between Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand is the danger of injecting Mormon presuppositions into an academic discussion. On the other is the contrary danger, that in shying away from Scylla we careen on the rocks of Charybdis. In our zeal to protect against provincial assumptions and cultural insularity, we see them where they do not exist. We think a Mormon's use of Jeremiah or Job will surely be apologetic, or, as in the case of Siebach, we suspect that a book on preexistence written by a Mormon is going to be an argument for preexistence.

Siebach says that my book "will be well received by those persons who share [my] metaphysical commitments." I would respond that my metaphysical commitments are beside the point. Not a single non-Mormon reviewer of the text has presumed to know what those metaphysical commitments are or felt they were in any way relevant to the book's thesis. My point is not that I believe the preexistence resolves theological dilemmas, but that it was employed by myriad theologians because *they* felt it did.

Let's take the soul's origin as a case in point. In the early Christian church and to this day, three theological positions explain the soul's origin.

Creationism is the Catholic view that God creates the soul at the moment of conception, quickening, or birth. Traducianism is the Lutheran position that parents create the soul at the moment of procreation. Mormons alone persist in believing the soul has an eternal, indeterminate origin before birth. Siebach has taken me as criticizing both non-Mormon positions as “fraught with metaphysical and moral problems.” Perhaps they are, but I did not intend (or need) to use Mormon theology to show it. This book is not an apologetics of preexistence any more than Arthur Lovejoy’s *Great Chain of Being* is an apologetics of the great chain of being. Lovejoy’s metaphysical commitments were irrelevant to his appreciation for how powerful that paradigm was for two thousand years of cultural history. It would be inappropriate to challenge him on how his concept of the chain of being would explain the English Civil War, because he was tracing the history of the way that idea was employed, how it changed through time, and how and why it self-destructed in the eighteenth century.

In my case, I am tracing a wonderfully rich and contentious history of debate and controversy over the soul’s origin. I quote Tertullian, an early defender of Traducianism, as saying it has the merit of explaining the conveyance of original sin logically and simply. If original sin resided in Adam, and original sin is a spiritual condition, then Adam could have reasonably passed it on to his posterity the same way he passed on his dimple or his brown hair, “assuming that he literally fathered the spirits as well as the bodies of his children.” That is Tertullian’s defense of its merits, not mine.

By the same token, I haven’t any idea if my spirit is innately capable of creating a baby spirit, but I do trace how the Cambridge Platonists denied that capacity. At the same time, they believed that God would be complicit in rape if he effectively sanctioned conception by creating a spirit to make such an act fruitful. I am not sure if I find their arguments persuasive or not, but I do know their frequent appearance in the literature of the Cambridge Platonists explains one reason why the Cambridge Platonists rejected both Traducianism and Creationism, turning to the only alternative they saw, which was preexistence.

One should not assume that because I am LDS, I must be writing with the intention of mustering arguments on behalf of an LDS theology. If that were indeed the case, I would have failed entirely. For in the entire history of the idea of a premortal soul, virtually no version matches Joseph Smith’s conception or shows evidence of having influenced his own.

I will conclude with a response to one more comment by Professor Siebach. He says, “I would have been delighted with some theological and philosophical explications of premortality’s explanatory power with respect to the problems of innocent suffering and the many difficulties of human

existence.” Let me give just one of many examples where I have done that. In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato tells the story of Er, a kind of guide to spirits about to enter mortality. In this account, spirits are given a choice of the lives they will lead: royal or impoverished, crippled or sound, beautiful or ugly. However, they are admonished to choose carefully, being reminded that the purpose of life is the acquisition of virtue. They should consider “a life worse if it leads the soul to become more unjust, a better if it leads the soul to become more just.” As a consequence, Plato emphasizes, “The responsibility [for the conditions of life entered into] lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none” (32).

For those who accept such mythology, there is tremendous power to address exactly what Professor Siebach calls for: an example of the idea’s explanatory power, from a philosophical and theological point of view, not only with respect to the problem of innocent suffering, but with respect to the “many difficulties of human existence.” For Plato and those under his influence, this conception of preexistence was powerful theodicy.



**Review by Dana M. Pike—
Ancient Near Eastern Traditions**

Oxford University Press recently published *When Souls Had Wings: Premortal Existence in Western Thought*, by Terryl L. Givens, professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond in Virginia. Givens wrote this book for an educated but general audience, focusing on the intellectual history of premortal existence as it survives in documents over the past 2,400 years of Western thought.

Givens claims in his introduction that the idea of preexistence “appears to have more than one point of origin, and influence and inheritance are in any case notoriously difficult to establish with certainty where the history of ideas is concerned” (4). Chapter 1, titled “Ancient Near Eastern Traditions,” is thus exploratory in nature. Givens sees a number of elements in ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Hebrew Bible, which, when taken together, eventually mix into a sort of theological stew, contributing to the development of the concept that humans were once premortal spirits. Givens rightly indicates, however, that there is no passage in any ancient Near Eastern text, including the Hebrew Bible, that explicitly communicates the premortal existence of all humans.

Accordingly, this chapter presents a variety of ancient Near Eastern texts that provide potential leads and “intimations” (9) for the development of the idea of preexistent human spirits. Cited passages in Mesopotamian

texts and in the Hebrew Bible relate to four broad areas: Mesopotamian creation myths, divine assemblies, divine election, and what Givens terms “populous heavens” (16), the belief that a host of beings populated that realm. Givens is wise to focus on texts dealing with these four topics, for any hints of preexistence found in the ancient Near Eastern texts will most likely occur in relation to these areas.

However, chapter 1 would have been even stronger, I believe, if it had included a brief statement of methodology explaining why some passages are included and others not. Along with Mesopotamian and Israelite texts, Givens might also have cited Egyptian or Hittite texts in his discussion, which are also part of the ancient Near Eastern literary tradition.

Questions about methodology also arise when Givens uses the writings of Origen to help explain the meaning of a verse in Deuteronomy (15). Origen, a Christian author who wrote in the first half of the third century AD, accepted the premortal existence of human souls; but using Origen’s views to support the inclusion of Deuteronomy 32:8 in a chapter on ancient Near Eastern traditions may be construed as a form of eisegesis. Origen’s views would more naturally be included in a chapter on early Christian thought. Conversely, Givens makes no mention in his first chapter of Proverbs 8, in which Wisdom personified claims to have been created by God before the creation of the earth, but he does include this passage in his third chapter when discussing later apocryphal texts in the biblical tradition.

Givens, whose expertise is in texts of more recent centuries, is generally dependent upon the work of other scholars in preparing the early chapters dealing with ancient traditions. This is not to imply that he is largely misguided in his choice of texts or in his assessment of them; he is not. Dealing with textual material from so many centuries and cultures would be a daunting challenge for any author. The fact that Givens does so well in this endeavor is a tribute to his extensive research and his intellectual abilities.

The exploratory nature of Chapter 1 will likely elicit some questions and quibbles among scholars about the passages he includes as evidence of early foreshadowings of the concept of preexistence. What, after all, constitutes these “intimations that the soul is traceable to a pre-mortal existence?” (9). To illustrate the challenge of such an undertaking, I will evaluate four texts that Givens provides as intimations of preexistence.

First, in his discussion on divine election, Givens highlights the prologue to Hammurabi’s law collection, dated to about 1755 BC, which relates how “in the distant past” the god Marduk was granted powers, and Hammurabi was chosen before he was born to be the great king of Babylon. Givens rightly observes that the apparent purpose of this passage is “to endow Hammurabi with authority and prestige, . . . not to propound an anthropology of

the human soul” (13–14). This is the only Mesopotamian text of which I am aware claiming the divine election of a human before the person’s birth. This passage does qualify as a hint or foreshadowing of preexistence.

Second, Givens cites Jeremiah 1:5: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (14). This verse unambiguously claims that Yahweh “knew” Jeremiah even before his conception, although what that implies is not clear in the Old Testament itself. Functionally similar to the Hammurabi text, this passage is most often interpreted as part of a report designed to imbue Jeremiah with greater authority. No one of whom I am aware, other than Mormons, currently understands this verse as support for the personal preexistence of Jeremiah. Most people dismiss the words in Jeremiah 1:5 as figurative. However, I believe this passage is an obvious choice for inclusion in Givens’s quest for early intimations of the idea of preexistence.

Third, Givens discusses Psalm 139:15: “My frame [*’otsem* / “bone, skeleton”] was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.” This passage, “while not as clear in its language, similarly suggests a pre-mortal origin to humans.” Givens correctly observes that the Hebrew word *’eret*, “earth,” does, in conjunction with Akkadian and Ugaritic cognates, sometimes designate the “underworld” in addition to commonly referring to the earth itself (see Ex. 15:12; Jonah 2:6). “Psalm 139 therefore evinces the belief that the human soul was created in a different, under- or otherworldly sphere to which it will someday return” (14). I fail to see a demonstrable reference in Psalm 139 to the “otherworldly” existence of spirit or soul, nor a reference to a soul returning to that world.⁸ Modern commentators generally understand the whole pericope of Psalm 139:13–18 as a metaphoric comparison between a mother’s womb, specifically mentioned in verse 13, and the depths of the earth (with the powers of creation and judgment ascribed to Yahweh). Job 1:21 is often cited as a conceptual parallel to Psalm 139:13–18: “[Job] said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there’” (NRSV). True, a few commentators have theorized that earlier mythological remnants lurk behind the present form of these poetic lines in Psalms;⁹ but with no solid textual

8. Surprisingly, Givens does not quote Robert Moore, who claimed that Psalm 139:15 suggests the concept of preexistence. Moore notes that some authors have used Psalm 139:15 to support preexistence in the underworld, but Moore provides no citation to document his claim. Robert Moore, “Pre-existence,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, 12 vols. (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 10:238.

9. See, for example, Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150, A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 516–17.

support, such arguments remain speculative. Givens's purposes might have been better served by quoting the next verse as an intimation of preexistence: "Your [Yahweh's] eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed" (Psalm 139:16, NRSV).

Fourth, Givens refers to the portion of the Atrahasis Epic that relates the creation of the first human. This epic is attested from about 1700 BC, the late Old Babylonian period. In it, the god Enki commanded that a mixture be made of clay and the "flesh and blood" of a lesser god to be slain for the purpose of creating humans. Enki further instructed: "Let there be a spirit [*etemmu*] from the god's flesh. Let it proclaim living [man] as its sign. So that this be not forgotten, let there be a spirit [*etemmu*]" (10). In his discussion of this text, Givens cites Tzvi Abusch, who states that the divine killing of the lesser god provided the "soul that imbues the individual [human] with life and consciousness" (11). I hold a different view than Givens and Abusch (and Jean Bottéro, whom Givens also cites). Contrary to the claim of Abusch, the slain god's spirit is never mixed into the substances used to create the first human. It is only said to continue as a "sign" of how people first came about. Certainly, the Atrahasis account indicates that human creation involved divine as well as earthly "stuff,"¹⁰ but I do not see any indication that provides, as Givens claims, "a window into the emergence of the idea of the human soul, its genesis in the heavens, and its ambiguous status in the universe" (9–10).

These four examples illustrate the challenge of determining which texts do, or do not, contain "intimations" of the idea of human preexistence. Whatever one thinks of any particular text, Givens's book is stronger because this chapter on ancient Near Eastern traditions is included in it. His point is valid that there were ancient Semitic conceptions that foreshadow the idea of preexistence, that this idea was not just a Greek phenomenon that impacted Judeo-Christian texts. I also appreciate that Givens ventured beyond the Hebrew Bible by referencing Mesopotamian and Ugaritic texts. I commend him for finding in ancient Near Eastern texts some stirrings of premortal existence, rather than just beginning with later Greek and Jewish claims that date from the last few centuries BC and in which the notion of preexistence is clearly stated, albeit in a variety of forms.

10. Although different in details, divine and earthly "stuff" are likewise combined in the creation of the first human according to Genesis 2:7: "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (NRSV).

It will be helpful for readers to think about how and why and where, from a historical point of view, the idea of preexistence got started. Chapter 1 serves as an important preface to Givens's grand overview of a fascinating topic. I recommend this book.

Terryl L. Givens's Response to Dana M. Pike

I appreciate Dana M. Pike's review and want to respond both generally and specifically. The general problem Pike raises concerning methodology relates to the hazards of cross-disciplinary studies. The contemporary impetus for cross-disciplinary research is evidence of a far-reaching recognition that we as a body of scholars have overspecialized ourselves to death, to the detriment of broader perspectives. The discipline of intellectual history often strives to see the grand sweep of an idea across time and culture. Intellectual history of this kind relies upon a certain amount of generosity and forbearance from specialists, as well as their willingness to accept intellectual interlopers in good faith and without fear of colonization.

For this reason, I am only too willing to recognize the limitations of my own expertise. In a work that encompasses traditions from Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Palestine, Greece, Italy, Ancient Rome, England, Germany, Poland, Russia, France, Spain, and America, it should be clear that I often relied on the scholarship of others in my work. The question such cross-disciplinary endeavors invite is twofold: Are there any advantages to be gained by such ambitious attempts, and is the academic community supportive enough of these grand forays to make them feasible?

Claude Lévi-Strauss was an anthropologist, but when he brought his own disciplinary training to the study of mythic literature, he detected patterns and ways of constructing meaning that played a key role in the development of a new critical school of theory called structuralism, which had tremendous impact on a discipline not his own. Sometimes, a fresh perspective can prompt useful discoveries and connections. Professor Pike once told me there were no preexistent motifs in Babylonian literature. Later, I came upon the Atrahasis creation narrative. Judging by his review, Pike now acknowledges this passage as at least relevant to the discussion; perhaps my trespass into his discipline has borne some fruit. True, Pike has expressed doubts before about the significance of the Atrahasis narrative, wondering if the passage conveys belief or just inventive creative effort. However, I trace the employment of preexistence as a motif that does important work of many kinds: aesthetic, cultural, psychological, theological—and creative. Whether Mesopotamian references to a preexistent soul were taken literally by the populace is immaterial to my case.

I think it is also important that, when evaluating work from a “generalist” disciplinary orientation, scholars don’t always presume that a specific and tightly confined “specialist” methodology is useful for all purposes. Pike wonders about my methodology when I cite Origen, a third-century Christian, in my chapter on ancient Near Eastern traditions. I would find this methodologically problematic only if my interest were confined to some kind of historically circumscribed philological examination of a biblical text. Tracing certain textual motifs and interpretations through four millennia of readings, misreadings, borrowings, and adaptations is the essence of intellectual history. The accuracy (and century) of Origen’s reading may be germane to Pike’s field of Old Testament studies, but it is not as relevant to the kind of intellectual history *Wings* sets out to be.

Professor Pike also disputes my reading of particular biblical passages. For example, he challenges my interpretation of Psalm 139:15 as having reference to some kind of preexistent creation. While my reading may not be the dominant interpretation among experts in the book of Psalms, yet Pike acknowledges that a few authors do agree with me, so I am therefore not unique in making the connection. I also welcome his constructive addition of Psalm 139:16 to the discussion.

Professor Pike points out that only Mormons use Jeremiah 1:5 to suggest personal preexistence. Certainly, being Mormon doesn’t make a reading right, but it shouldn’t make it suspect, either. And to clarify, *When Souls Had Wings* is not so concerned with Mormon interpretations. On page 14 of the book, I point out that “this passage could merely suggest foreknowledge,” and I repeat subsequently that most biblical allusions to preexistence are plausibly read as referring to God’s foreknowledge, not personal preexistence. Certainly there is a danger that a Mormon would read Mormon theological presuppositions into the text, and Pike is wise to point this possibility out to *BYU Studies* readers. Interestingly, non-Mormon reviewers thus far have not noted any such presuppositions.

Surely there are areas where my readings could have benefitted more from Pike’s important work in the Old Testament. Although I was not successful in my attempt to connect with Pike, I was able to have six other scholars with expertise in the literature and languages of Mesopotamia review this chapter, in addition to other scholars in Hebrew studies. Of course, no one of them is responsible for what errors may remain, but all made significant contributions in reviewing and contributing to the chapter. Though Pike and others may disagree with the readings of Bottéro and Abusch, there are trained scholars today who support me in citing these readings.

In conclusion, my general plea is that we as writers and scholars, in order to contribute to a common enterprise of greater understanding of the

past, look for opportunities to make our various disciplines mutually supportive, realizing that we are often asking different kinds of questions and using different methodologies. I hope that this exchange has moved in the direction of facilitating that kind of greater understanding.



**Review by Jesse D. Hurlbut—
Middle Ages**

In his latest book, Terryl L. Givens undertakes the fascinating project of surveying historical attitudes and teachings regarding the premortal existence of the soul. Limiting his review to the Western tradition, he also demonstrates the inextricable associations of this fairly narrow topic to such broad concepts as the nature of human existence, the purpose of life, and even the attributes of God. The author admirably maintains academic distance and objectivity throughout the book. Nevertheless, LDS readers especially may find their interest piqued (and their objectivity challenged) by numerous indications that what they sometimes hold as proprietary to LDS belief has recurred in the writings of philosophers and theologians throughout the ages.

Givens's treatment of the Middle Ages is almost completely limited to the theological positions established in the fourth and fifth centuries, and which then stood essentially unrefuted for most of the next thousand years. Givens's thorough investigation into the Platonic and Neoplatonic antecedents prepares the way for him to present the decisive role of Augustine in establishing orthodoxy on the question of premortality. The book points out, however, that even Augustine approached this question with only the greatest hesitation. After reciting the possible views on the origin of the soul, the Bishop of Hippo commented: "It would be rash to affirm any of these. For the Catholic commentators on Scripture have not solved or shed light on this obscure and perplexing question" (109). Augustine's early writings seemed to favor the idea of a premortal soul, and he may have been content to leave the question unanswered for lack of sufficient insight, had it not been for the controversial ideas of the British monk Pelagius.

Givens presents a clear account of how the greater question of whether salvation comes by grace or by free will forced Augustine to take a position against the preexistent soul. The extreme view of Pelagius that free will alone sufficed to lead mankind to salvation undermined the role of Christ and his grace. "It is not that Pelagius promoted the particular unorthodoxy of preexistence," writes Givens, "but that . . . an emphasis on human preexistence comports quite comfortably with a celebration of humanity's primal

purity, inherited innocence, and divine potential” (175). In order to refute these heretical teachings, Augustine argued to the opposite extreme in favor of grace and against premortality. Givens carefully teases the subtle interwoven arguments out of the historical record, thus revealing how an uncertain concept becomes doctrine as the unintended casualty of a struggle for orthodoxy in weightier matters.

In the chapter entitled “Middle Ages to the Renaissance,” Givens seems content to accept the Augustinian position as the dominant theological stance. He briefly cites a number of authors who contribute nuanced arguments to the discussion in later centuries, including Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Hildegard von Bingen, and Julian of Norwich. The strength of this chapter, however, is in the discussion of the Jewish teachings from the (premedieval) Mishnah and Midrashim, and the ensuing Kabbalistic texts appearing in the thirteenth century. Givens then skips to the seventeenth-century writings of the Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme.

Even though Givens discusses the role of angels in the Creation as well as in relation to the soul in both the Christian and the Jewish traditions (notably, in Pseudo-Dionysius and in the *Zohar*), he foregoes the opportunity to discuss the war in heaven and the fall of Lucifer and the rebel angels—a theme that frequently appeared in late-medieval art and drama. Even though some treatment of the subject appears in his later discussion of Milton, this chapter would have been the appropriate place to establish the roots for this tradition. Because of the breadth and extent of his project, Givens is certainly entitled to editorial omissions, but since he frequently opens the door to nontheological teachings and even folk traditions, leaving out the deep-rooted cultural artifacts of Saint Michael slaying the dragon and even the dramatic allegorical debates of Justice and Mercy that precede the Creation seems more like a lacuna.¹¹

Notwithstanding the limitations of his treatment of the later Middle Ages and the early Reformation period, Givens has produced an impressive volume. The detailed examination of classical and early Christian writings

11. In addition to the countless depictions in painting and sculpture of Saint Michael slaying a dragon or a devil, there are a number of representations of the fall of the rebel angels. See, for example, folio 64v in the *Très riches heures du duc de Berry*. Several late medieval passion plays represented the history of the world from Creation to Apocalypse in a series of plays that took several days to perform. Frequently, a short prologue featured a debate between the allegorical characters of Justice, Mercy, Truth, Peace, and Wisdom. God the Father supervises the debate, and a plan that meets the needs of each party is devised in which Christ is sent as a savior for mankind. Arnould Gréban, *Mystère de la Passion*, ed. Gaston Paris and Gaston Raynaud (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1878), 3–8.

on the origins of the soul provides the necessary foundation for understanding how Augustine and others finally took the dogmatic stance that they did. This understanding constitutes the springboard for comprehending later intellectual and theological developments.

Terryl L. Givens's Response to Jesse D. Hurlbut

A continuing challenge in writing this book was the selection of what was relevant. First in priority were actual discussions or illustrations of a *human* premortal existence. Second were treatments that directly influenced or grounded subsequent developments. Hurlbut and others may wonder why I include the epic describing the war in heaven by John Milton but not those accounts and traditions from the Middle Ages. After all, Milton himself does not represent the war in heaven as directly involving human participants. Unlike other versions of a heaven populated by numerous and at times hard-to-situate beings, Milton's treatment is generally straightforward: God, Satan, and angels fill the pre-earth realms. I include him, nonetheless, because a number of imitators, some self-acknowledged, modify his representations to include human participants. Some believed that Milton's poetry was good but his history was not, insofar as there actually *was* human involvement in the events he described.

Abel Evans, for example, published *Pre-Existence: A Poem, in Imitation of Milton*. In it, Evans retells the story of the war in heaven but turns the rebellious angels into premortal humans. As I describe in my book (178–80), “in imitation” turns out to be more a matter of “in correction.” The poem depicts a scene in heaven after the defeat of the rebellious angels and their dispatch to hell. Not all dissenters, in this version, meet the fate of the eternally damned. For upon returning to heaven, the victorious hosts find there a suppliant throng of repentant rebels, “troops less stubborn, less involv'd / In crime and ruin.” These plead so persuasively for clemency that God softens. Eventually, he decrees, they may again “emerge to light,” but only after a penance described in terms so harsh as to certainly deter any future rebellion. They shall expiate their crimes upon “a dusty ball” even then taking shape—the earth.

But like the ancient writer Basilides, Evans believes that God in his mercy caused us to forget our origin as rebellious angels. (Remember that Dante said the greatest torment was to remember bliss in the midst of present pain.) So God imposes by way of preparation for their descent, long draughts of the river Lethe. The resultant human condition is one that dulls the shock of such a cataclysmic decline in fortune but at the same time torments the soul, Tantalus-like, with reason and memory alike that feed but cannot satisfy an inarticulate longing for home. The beauty of Evans's re-creation of premortality is that it

explains the pain of the human condition, God's justice in our suffering, and our inarticulate sense of loss as we make our way on earth.

A century after Milton, a would-be historian of Masonry takes a similar position. Laurence Dermott describes a project he undertook to go beyond conventional histories of his brotherhood, in order "to trace Masonry not only to Adam in his sylvan Lodge in Paradise, but to give some Account of the Craft even before the Creation." In other words, he is going to trace the origins of Masonry to its foundations in premortality. He completed a volume in which he describes what he refers to euphemistically as the heavenly "transactions of the first Grand Lodge, particularly the excluding of the unruly Members." That story, he notes, was already recounted by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.¹²

It seems to me that if I had chosen to extend Milton's genealogy backward, by discussing medieval versions of the war in heaven, that would have only been relevant to my topic at two generations removed. As for Professor Hurlbut's comments on Augustine and subsequent medieval orthodoxy, I think he is exactly right. Augustine is the hinge on which the entire history of preexistence turns. That preexistence persisted so pervasively as a motif, in spite of the eventual opposition by Christianity's most influential theologian, is proof of the idea's immense and almost irresistible appeal.



Review by David B. Paxman— Romantics, Transcendentalists, and the Modern Age

Terryl L. Givens is one of the most respected Latter-day Saint scholars and one of the most successful in publishing with a top-tier press, having published previously *The Viper on the Hearth* (1997), *By the Hand of Mormon* (2003), and *People of Paradox* (2007) with Oxford University Press. In *When Souls Had Wings*, he addresses a doctrine that often separates LDS from orthodox Christian belief. Before reading, I had not grasped how heretical most Christian traditions now consider the proposition that we had individual existence as spirits before this life. Givens succeeds in demonstrating that (1) the concept of premortal existence has a history as old as Western thought, both in theology and secular philosophy; (2) early Christian theologians had declared the concept heretical; and (3) in spite of its supposed heretical status, the concept has persisted into the twentieth (and

12. Laurence Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon, or A Help to a Brother; Shewing the Excellency of Secrecy and the First Cause or Motive of the Institution of Free-Masonry* (London: Laurence Dermott, 1756), v.

twenty-first) century because it offers such powerful advantages in explaining the nature of the human soul and God's justice in placing people in such radically different, and sometimes miserable, circumstances on earth.

In advancing these lines of thought, Givens is aware of the paradox of origins: by tracing back to early expressions of preexistence and to the ultimate origins of the human soul, many more foundational questions arise, such as what came before human premortality and what caused the whole preexistent state of affairs to come about in the first place? Still, the book effectively challenges the rest of Christianity, if not philosophers, to rethink their opposition to this important account of our state of being before mortality.

My review will concentrate on the chapters that cover from the late seventeenth century through the twentieth century. Here, as in earlier sections, the book demonstrates that religious thinkers opposed preexistence not because they had scriptural evidence against it, but because it did not square with creedal orthodoxy concerning God's eternity and omnipotence: "To posit preexistent souls can be construed as an affront to God alone as eternal and a diminishing of the distance that separates Creator from created" (285). Proponents insisted that the injustices of mortal life were standing challenges to belief in God's justice, a problem that was resolved if we lived in a prior state in which we made choices that affected conditions in our earthly existence, or if in that state we assented to come to earth under any circumstances. Secular philosophers in the modern era had their own qualms about directly postulating preexistence. They employed its conceptual advantages while exploring problems of knowledge and identity, but they often hedged and placed the idea of preexistence in the abstract lest they appear to follow Plato, rely on religion for solutions to philosophical issues, or assert what could not be demonstrated.

The chapter entitled "The Cartesian Aftermath" explores a century in which primarily a philosophical exploration rather than a religious inquiry kept the concept of premortality alive. René Descartes posited that some ideas, those that seemed to be innate, could not be accounted for by external sources or by the mind's making them. While John Locke attacked such a proposition, his contemporary Gottfried Leibniz also made innate ideas central to his philosophy. Givens is especially adept at noting the "double-speak" of these philosophers, who invoked various concepts of preexistence without overtly affirming them. Leibniz walked a tightrope, eschewing the Platonic realm of the soul and the religious pre-earth life as well, yet postulating a conceptual preexistence. Thus one scholar called his preexistence "the centerpiece of his metaphysics" (196), even though Leibniz embeds the concept in some curious and imaginative postulations. Among these is the idea of monads—self-existing, self-defining entities

that exist eternally, exist solely in themselves, but also exist fully in their relations to all other monads.

Givens devotes two chapters to the nineteenth century, one on “Philosophy and Theology, 1800–1900,” and the other on “Romanticism and Transcendentalism, 1800–1900.” In the first, Joseph Smith appears as “one of the few Christian thinkers to develop notions of preexistence that do not derive from or rely upon the standard Platonic precedents” (216). Among the notable features of Smith’s teachings are that premortal spirits were essentially innocent rather than inherently corrupt, that intelligences preceded even the premortal existence of humans as spirits, that pre-earth life featured some form of familial organization, and that the spirit has material properties, though finer than earthly physicality. Givens notes the potential redundancy of this last formulation: if spirit is matter, then why the need for the physical? “Exactly what purpose is served by sheathing a pure form of matter in an impure form is never explained in Mormon doctrine” (218). Givens does not emphasize Joseph Smith over other figures—a tactical choice, I suspect, made to avoid a book with an LDS partisan feel. Still, readers might well have appreciated a discussion on how Smith and other Latter-day Saints resolved the problems of divine justice that nonorthodox theologians escaped by positing a fall and evil choices in the premortal realm, or how (and if) the spiritual creation of all things in Moses 3 differs from the creation of our spirits.

Further along in the chapter, Smith can be contrasted with his contemporary Edward Beecher, whose *Conflict of the Ages* comprises the “last fully sustained effort to win theological legitimacy for pre-mortal existence in the American tradition” (231). Beecher, a prominent Boston minister and son of a famous orthodox Protestant family, was convinced that “almost two millennia of efforts to reconcile faith and fairness, dogma and intellect” had failed to settle the debate over how a just God could create a race of depraved sinners and hold them accountable before him (223). Beecher thought he had discovered the missing piece: before this life, human spirits were created and given freedom and opportunity. Many failed in that state of existence, and those spirits went to earth for a second chance. Thus, mortal life on earth, this “vast moral hospital,” offers another opportunity to master the self and choose truth. Beecher’s theology is part of a mosaic of the decline of Calvinism in nineteenth-century American religion.

The other prominent advocate in this chapter is the German Julius Müller, who was led to believe in a preexistent state by the problem of sin and how to account for it. Premortal existence appeared to Müller as “a paradigm with compelling power to solve the dilemma of free will and also to explain those aspects of the human condition that fall under the domain

of otherwise indecipherable intuitions and sentiments” (235). In his theology, spirits and, by extension, humans cannot be held accountable unless they are given a moment of free choice where alternatives are equally balanced—and in that moment choose evil still.

In the chapter “Romanticism and Transcendentalism,” Givens takes his readers through the much-loved poets Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, as well as Victorian poets with less overt expressions of preexistence such as Tennyson. Most of these poets found preexistence imaginatively and poetically compelling without overtly affirming a religious dimension to belief in the soul and divine creation. The chapter points out that no translation of Plato’s complete works existed in English until 1804, so a rediscovery of Plato at this time may explain the resurgence of thinkers and poets pondering on the soul’s endowments. Blake was the “most unabashedly mystical and the most unapologetic in his embrace of Platonic preexistence” (243). Wordsworth’s great “Immortality Ode” is probably the best known and most haunting expression of preexistence in poetry. The lines beginning “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting” have led many readers to construct a belief system out of his poetry, though the poet himself resisted expressing personal beliefs of this kind. American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Amos Bronson Alcott, constrained by fewer religious inhibitions than theologians, were much more positive in their vision of the “heritable component” that human souls brought with them. These writers endorsed preexistence because it explained the divine in man and supported the expansive versions of human prehistory (263–64).

In “Preexistence in the Modern Age,” Givens lays out several vigorous twentieth-century assertions of preexistence that were made before the concept again retreated from orthodox theology and philosophy. Nicholas Berdyaev, a prominent Russian philosopher, was perhaps the last to argue for it unambiguously and at length. He believed that preexistence was the only viable alternative to “the terrorist and servile doctrine of everlasting hell” (279). Considered a heresiarch by the Greek Orthodox Church, he nonetheless held that “the kind of freedom preexistence makes possible outweighs the dangers of traditional constructions of God’s sovereignty” (281). Theosophists such as Madame Helena Blavatsky also kept preexistence alive, but with theosophy we move out of mainstream philosophy and religion into peripheral religion and art. “As the motif disappeared from religious discourse, so did it decline in artistic representation as well” (291). It is found in the poets Robert Frost and Wislawa Szymborska (I enthusiastically recommend her poem “A Version of Events”), the dramatist Sam Shepard, the film *Wings of Desire*, as well as in pop culture and parascience, such as in the pre-birth experiences (BPEs) many mothers have had of prospective children.

Givens thoroughly succeeds in showing the long history of, and opposition to, the concept of premortality, its advantages in religious and philosophical contexts, and the orthodox rationale for resisting its adoption. LDS readers will learn that a long line of theologians have battled the doctrine not so much on its merits—orthodox arguments are “almost invariably logically inferior” to it—but because it clashed with already-adopted ideas of God’s eternality (6). From my perspective, Givens clearly intends his book as a challenge to orthodox Christian thought. I hope it succeeds in drawing theologians of other faiths into thinking again about where we come from and how that relates to why we are here.

Terryl L. Givens’s Response to David B. Paxman

I appreciate Paxman’s point that I do not explore the full details and ramifications of LDS belief in premortality. This was a deliberate decision on my part that has surprised and dismayed some readers. To explain, I wanted to situate Joseph’s teachings on the topic without judgment or special favor. It turns out his teachings had striking resonance with some contemporary developments in German theology but were otherwise almost entirely disconnected from a nineteenth-century context. As it has been noted, the early nineteenth century was awash with a rediscovery of Platonism, which was the principle inspiration for almost every version of preexistence from antiquity to the present time. Joseph’s pronouncements, by contrast, occur in a kind of conceptual vacuum, resonant with Semitic precursors but with nothing Platonic.

Even so, if I were to write the chapter on Joseph Smith today, it would be very different because two very exciting discoveries occurred several months after my book was finished, involving two revelations that were originally planned for inclusion in the Doctrine and Covenants but were left out. They would not only have given us a different provenance for the Mormon idea of preexistence, but they also would have connected the idea with some Platonic and Neoplatonic currents. These documents can be found in the revelations and translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*.¹³ Two of them, surprisingly, involve preexistence, though perhaps obliquely.

In March of 1832, Joseph Smith received a sample of pure language that gave the name of God as Awman, or “the being which made all things in all its parts.” The “children of men,” it went on to say, are “the greatest parts of Awman.”¹⁴ Now, this phrasing might not by itself suggest anything

13. The history behind this series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* is introduced in a special feature of *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 5–91.

14. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds. *Manuscript Revelation Books*, facsimile edition, Revelations and Translations series

to do with a premortal genealogy; however, together with a subsequent revelation dated February 27, 1833, the text points quite clearly to a conception of spirits as *emanating* (that's a very Neoplatonic concept) from God. Little is known of the context in which this second revelation was received. An undated broadside of a poetic rendering of the revelation indicates it was "sung in tongues by Elder D. W. Patten . . . and interpreted by Elder S[idney] Rigdon." So it has the distinction, I believe, of being the only revelation in the revelation book where Joseph Smith played no part, which may be why it was later excluded from the Doctrine and Covenants. Recorded in the hand of Fredrick G. Williams, it had connection with the prophecy of Enoch, which had been recently revealed at the time. In this song, Enoch "saw the begining the ending of man he saw the time when Adam his father was made and he saw that he was in eternity before a grain of dust in the ballance was weighed he saw that he emenated and came down from God."¹⁵

The likelihood that the Awman revelation and the Enoch hymn were together pivotal in concertizing a Mormon concept of preexistence is supported by the fact that when W. W. Phelps published in the Church paper a poetic celebration of preexistence in 1833, it bore the marks of these two sources. Smith unambiguously affirmed the eternal preexistence of human spirits in early May 1833 with a revelation Latter-day Saints are familiar with: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:29). Tellingly, Phelps published his poetic declaration based not on that revelation but on the hymn of Enoch: "Before the mountains rais'd their heads, / Or the small dust of balance weigh'd. / With God he [Enoch] saw his race began / And from him emanated man, / And with him did in glory dwell / Before there was an earth or hell."¹⁶ The importance of the Awman and the Enoch texts as founding the first clear understanding of preexistence is further evident in the fact that Parley P. Pratt relied on those same two texts, invoking the language of the Enoch hymn and the imagery of the Awman revelation in his 1838 linkage of theosis and premortality: "The redeemed will return to the fountain and become part of the great all from which they

of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2009), 265; Sample of Pure Language, circa March 1832, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/sample-of-pure-language-circa-march-1832>.

15. Jensen, Woodford, and Harper, *Manuscript Revelation Books*, 509.

16. W. W. Phelps, "Age after Age Has Rolled Away," *Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 12 (May 1833), 8.

emanated.”¹⁷ I was unfamiliar with these two revelations at the time I wrote *Wings*, so it does not include them.

Even so, my section on preexistence and Joseph Smith was restrained (and would have remained so even with these two revelations) because I did not want to create the impression that other treatments in the history of that idea were necessarily inferior to or preparatory for Joseph’s definitive treatment. In some ways, his was actually the sparsest of all treatments. Unlike his peers, he did not arrive at the idea of preexistence as the solution to a problem. It’s as if he knew the answer but wasn’t aware that there was a question. He did not invoke the idea of preexistence to make sense of God’s justice, spiritual intimations, love at first sight, freedom of the will, or a dozen other problems that the idea might have elucidated.



Question and Answer Session (Moderated by John W. Welch)

Welch: The mention of these two revelations brings up a question that arose as I read the book, which is, How many more of these kinds of texts are there—not just from Joseph Smith but in the Western tradition? What did you include and what did you exclude? I’d like to know what’s in the scrap pile.

Givens: Everything I found is in the book. Everything! There are no scraps left (*laughter*).

Welch: But seriously, are any of you aware of other texts that could have been included? Should there be another project in the future? I hope this is just the beginning of looking at these texts and finding more sources out there.

Givens: There are some German sources not included. There was a real flowering of the idea of preexistence where theology and philosophy intersected in early nineteenth-century Germany. The idea mostly arose with the notion of sin from a theological point of view and the notion of freedom from a philosophical point of view. And these thinkers were all coming to the same conclusion, as expressed by a contemporary Cambridge philosopher named John McTaggart, who said, “Look, it’s common sense! If God created the human spirit, then he’s responsible for our sins.”

The same argument was made by Immanuel Kant; in fact, he clearly defends preexistence three times, in three completely different contexts, in three separate arguments. One of his contemporaries complained that

17. Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled* (New York: 1838), 27.

Kant was dogmatic about insisting on human preexistence, and yet in modern textbooks on German philosophy, you can hardly find even a footnote on the idea. Julius Müller wrote a two-volume work on the doctrine of sin and said that preexistence is the only possible theological foundation upon which God can hold us accountable for our choices. There were many more obscure German philosophers writing about preexistence, and they are probably the largest single group that fell by the wayside.

Welch: So, there is more.

Givens: Yes, there's more.

Welch: One might also want to read more about the “Hymn of the Pearl,” an early Christian text that *BYU Studies* has published an article about.¹⁸ Also, I was recently in the museum in Lyon, France, looking for Roman antiquities. I walked into a room dedicated to Louis Janmot, who was a native of Lyon. From 1836 to 1855, he worked on a poem called “The Poem of the Soul,” and he also painted a whole series of large murals that would fill this room. The first mural is called the *Generation of the Soul*, which depicts the soul as a babe in the arms of God, along with a lot of other preexisting souls gathered around God's throne. The second painting [see the back cover of this issue] is called *The Passage*, where an angel delivers a baby to a mother. *Spring Time* depicts a growing boy and his feminine counterpart; throughout the poem they have a platonic and eternal relationship. In *The Recollection of Heaven*, they go forth in life, and even though they have a veil drawn over their memory, there's still a distant recollection that they came from some preexistent realm. These murals are heavily influenced, artistically, by Catholic images—but obviously this artist didn't read Augustine very carefully (*laughter*).

Givens: And that first Janmot mural would have made for a more authentic book cover illustration. The illustration that I used by William Blake looks like it depicts the preexistence, but it actually doesn't have anything to do with it. It's about the third temptation of Christ.

Welch: Well, maybe the second edition can have the Janmot mural as the cover.

Givens: However, Blake did personally believe in the preexistence. Actually, his is my favorite defense of the preexistence. He said to his friend, “Obviously, I acquired my talents in the preexistence. Look, do you really think

18. John W. Welch and James V. Garrison, “The ‘Hymn of the Pearl’: An Ancient Counterpart to ‘O My Father,’” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 127–38.

I could have become this much of a genius in just the thirty years that I've lived here?" (*laughter*).

Welch: Very good. Let's now turn to the audience for questions.

Audience question: Blake also illustrated a poem called "Brave" in 1809. There, Blake depicts preexistent souls, both male and female, coming to earth, then being resurrected as male and female as they move on to the next life. Blake's songs are filled with poems about children who are abused in this world—taken away from the purity they enjoyed in the presence of God. Mormonism has defended the innocence of children about as strongly as any religious tradition I can think of. An idea blossoms in multiple places at the same time, concurrent with the Restoration of the gospel, affirming the preexistence. Augustinianism, which had held sway for centuries, was suddenly repudiated. So the question this all implies is, How does the idea of preexistence change the way we think about children and the character of mortality that grows out of that childhood?

Givens: Jean-Jacques Rousseau is usually credited with being the father of this idea, the innocence of children. But there's an antecedent to this in the seventeenth century among the Cambridge Platonists, which Mormons should really know more about. Here we have a group of clergymen at Cambridge teaching the innocence and purity of children, denying original sin, teaching preexistence, and affirming the deification of humans. So it seems that one has to repudiate original sin in order to establish that kind of connection between preexistent memories and the innocence that is shaped from those memories. Such a connection is natural and is made by Wordsworth and by the Cambridge Platonists.

Audience question: You mentioned the newly discovered Awman revelation and the revelation about spirits emanating from God. Augustine and, later, the Calvinists rejected the notion of premortality because they said that the concept of coeternal man detracted from the absolute omnipotence of God. Today, some complain that Mormons overemphasize the independent nature of premortal spirits and thereby diminish the power of God. If we bring together these newly discovered revelations and D&C 93, we have a story where spirits or intelligences are both eternally independent *and* at some later point emanate from God—probably through a spirit birth process. To me, this is an incredibly elegant way of grappling with the questions concerning the omnipotence of God versus the agency of man. Your thoughts?

Givens: Well, I think in some ways that's a nice compromise. You can have preexistence without detracting from the supremacy of God

himself. Orson Pratt, for example, would have been very amenable to this approach. You know, there's one huge complication in the Mormon history of preexistence that I'll be dealing with in my forthcoming theology book. The problem is this: the idea that we are literal spirit progeny of Heavenly Parents is nowhere present in the teachings of Joseph Smith. That development takes place with Parley P. Pratt. Orson Pratt gets it from Parley, then Brigham Young quotes the Pratts, and every prophet since then quotes Brigham Young. But in the King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith clearly describes an adoptive model. There are all these preexistent entities, whether you call them intelligences or spirits, they are the same thing to Joseph. And then God the Father adopts them into a kind of fatherly relationship.

Audience question: Are you saying that the emanation *from* God is actually the adoption *in*?

Givens: Well, an adoption sounds much closer to what Joseph taught. God is not giving birth so much as God is gathering a kind of divine matter that already fills the universe.

Welch: Or the emanation could be some sort of coming forth, which takes place after the adoption.

Givens: It could be that as well.

Audience question: While researching, did you find any evidence of thinkers who were influenced by Hindu or Buddhist traditions?

Givens: Yes. The influence is extremely pronounced among the American transcendentalists: Emerson, Alcott, and that whole generation. The Transcendental Club launched a journal called *The Dial*, and they were vigorous proponents of preexistence. In their writings, they often linked to and borrowed from Eastern traditions.

Audience question: Does the idea of premortal life show up in folk culture?

Givens: In the second-to-last chapter of *Wings*, I give contemporary folk examples, where stories are passed along that are essentially the opposite of near-death experiences—a prospective mother has an encounter with a premortal spirit right before conceiving, and so on. This is prevalent not just among Mormon communities but in other cultures as well.

Audience question: Professor Jesse Hurlbut has enlightened us concerning many medieval murals depicting a premortal war in heaven. What are the origins and traditions behind these paintings?

Givens: Well, the idea itself of the war in heaven is biblically based. Mormons aren't the only ones who read the book of Revelation and, of course, the harrowing of hell is a very old theme. And Catholics have been

celebrating Michaelmas for centuries, which is a celebration of Michael's victory in the war in heaven.

Audience question: As a missionary, I taught an MIT professor of planetary science who knew several languages, including Sanskrit. When we taught him about the premortal existence, he went and grabbed his translation of ancient Hindu scripture from Sanskrit and said, "What you just taught is what I've translated here." The passage in question had been interpreted by Hindu scholars as an explanation for the transmigration of souls. The professor said that the scholars simply got it wrong. The scripture says, in Sanskrit, that there was a premortal existence. I'm wondering, did you find anything like that in other sacred texts from your study?

Givens: Not from any Eastern traditions, and the whole problem of reincarnation and transmigration of souls gets mixed up with preexistence all the time. In my book, I tried to describe why I was separating the two concepts. One can believe in reincarnation without a premortal existence and vice versa. Even Plato at times talks about a linear progression and at other times talks about the cyclical nature of incarnation. So I tried to confine the book to just preexistence.

Welch: This begs the question, will there be a sequel? The subtitle is "Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought." What about a book on Eastern thought? Maybe that's coming.

Givens: Well, not from me. I think I was overly ambitious enough the first time (*laughter*).

Audience question: I'm interested in your approach. You write to a non-Mormon audience, but your books clearly have very Mormon themes. What are you trying to accomplish in these various communities of readers, Mormon or otherwise?

Givens: Well, in many ways, I'm trying to do what BYU theologian David Paulsen is trying to do. He's working to insinuate Mormonism into a broader theological discussion. He's saying, "Look, there are very important elements you're overlooking, and you can't tell the whole story unless Mormonism is a part of that conversation." In terms of audience, all of my books have been written and directed at non-Mormons, but they tend to have an impact, as far as I can gauge, among Mormons who are either at the peripheries of orthodoxy or who are just more interested in thinking of Mormonism in very broad terms.

My personal model comes from D&C 49:8. The Lord gives a revelation concerning the mission to the Shakers, where he says that the world is under sin, "except those which I have reserved unto myself, holy men *that ye know not of.*" So I get this sense early on in the revelations to

Joseph that there are these other people, and perhaps these other ideas and communities, that are inspired and have important pieces or fragments of the Adamic gospel.

After all, Joseph was very much an eclectic thinker, and if I have any kind of agenda, it would be to encourage Mormons to be as open-minded and generous as Joseph Smith was, to take him seriously when he said, “We take truth wherever it is.” Too often, when people today discover that there are, for example, striking similarities between Masonic rituals and the Latter-day Saint temple, they lose their heads, right? But Joseph Smith was essentially saying, “Well, that’s how I’m going to operate.” Augustine observed that the problem with the pagans was that they had all the gold of the Egyptians, but they didn’t know the context of that gold. Likewise, we need to take our materials and put them back into this comprehensive, vortexlike understanding of the gospel.

Welch: No small agenda (*laughter*). Well, I think this would be a perfect place for us to end. We thank everyone, thank our panel, and especially thank Terryl for taking time with us this afternoon (*applause*).

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