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Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism and Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism

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Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow. *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Gregory K. Armstrong, Matthew J. Grow, and Dennis J. Siler, eds. *Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism*.
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Reviewed by Edward A. Geary

Parley Parker Pratt (1807–1857) was among the most talented and influential figures in the formative period of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Apostle, missionary, theologian, poet, polemicist, prisoner, explorer, polygamist, and finally, in the view of many, martyr. Pratt was born in central New York State to Jared Pratt—a weaver thrown out of employment in his trade by the Industrial Revolution—and his wife, Charity. Like the Prophet Joseph Smith, who was two years his senior, Parley P. Pratt grew up in a family on the margins of the rural economy. Jared Pratt moved from place to place as a landless itinerant laborer whose “means to educate his children were very limited,” although they did have access to what Parley later termed an “excellent system of common school education.”¹ Notwithstanding their limited opportunities, two of Jared and Charity Pratt’s five sons, Parley and his younger brother Orson, would become distinguished among the first generation of Latter-day Saints for their intellectual and rhetorical powers. Parley compensated for the deficiencies in his formal education through an early and avid appetite for reading: “I always loved a book; . . . a book at every leisure moment of my life.”² Prominent among these readings was the Bible, which Pratt began to study at the age of seven under the direction of his mother.³ From this literary self-education, Pratt derived a broad and ready general knowledge and an uncommon facility in writing and public speaking.

Following his 1830 conversion to the Latter-day Saint faith (characteristically, through reading the Book of Mormon), Pratt devoted the remainder of his life to Church service. Although he was frequently absent from Church headquarters on numerous missions in the United States, Canada, Britain, and Chile, he still managed to play a prominent role in many of the key events of early Latter-day Saint history: the establishment of a body of Church members in the neighborhood of Kirtland, Ohio, in 1830; the settlement of Jackson County, Missouri, in 1832, and the forced expulsion the

following year; the Zion's Camp relief expedition; the crisis attending the collapse of the Kirtland real-estate bubble and the failure of the Kirtland Safety Society in 1837; the Missouri troubles of 1838–39 (as a consequence of which Pratt was imprisoned for eight months, a longer period than any other Church leader); the leadership crisis following the assassination of Joseph Smith in 1844; the expulsion from Nauvoo in 1846; and the westward migration to the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1847. Most importantly, Pratt's active pen generated a series of books and pamphlets that included the first and most influential systematic statement of Latter-day Saint beliefs (*A Voice of Warning*, 1837), the defining Mormon persecution narrative (*History of the Late Persecution Inflicted by the State of Missouri upon the Mormons*, 1839), and the foremost nineteenth-century theological treatise (*Key to the Science of Theology*, 1855).

Even though Pratt's missionary and theological works have fallen out of common use among the Latter-day Saints, his influence continues. His restorationist and devotional hymns hold a prominent place in the current Church hymnal, which opens with his ringing declaration, "The morning breaks, the shadows flee." His posthumously published *Autobiography* (1874) has remained in print almost continuously, and numerous books and articles treat aspects of his remarkable career. Perhaps most significantly, Latter-day Saints today frequently employ concepts and language derived from Pratt without being aware of their source.

Two recently published books offer substantial additions to our understanding and appreciation of Parley P. Pratt the man, his career, and his continuing influence. One is a collection of new essays, *Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism*, edited by Gregory K. Armstrong, Matthew J. Grow, and Dennis J. Siler. This book grew out of a conference held in Fort Smith, Arkansas, in 2007 to commemorate the bicentennial of Pratt's birth and the sesquicentennial of his death. Four of the eleven essays in the volume deal with Pratt's murder in Arkansas and its aftermath, including an examination by Patrick Q. Mason of the actions and motives of Pratt's killer, Hector McLean, in the context of an overriding concern with personal honor and a frequent recourse to extralegal violence in the antebellum South; a survey by Matthew J. Grow of responses to Pratt's murder among the Mormons and in the national press; a refutation by Assistant Church Historian Richard E. Turley Jr. of Will Bagley's claim that Pratt's murder had a significant influence on the massacre of a company of mostly Arkansan emigrants in southern Utah the following year; and an account of (unsuccessful) efforts by Pratt's descendants to exhume his remains and move them to Utah in keeping with his dying request.

The other seven articles address more directly the topic announced in the volume's title: Pratt's contributions to "The Making of Mormonism." Worthy of special note among this group are David J. Whittaker's analysis of Pratt's central role in the development of a Mormon print culture, David W. Grua's examination of Pratt's influence on the Latter-day Saint "memory of persecution" (169), and Jordan Watkins's exploration of Pratt's contributions to the development of the doctrine of theosis (human divinization).

With the publication of *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism*, we now have a comprehensive scholarly biography that does justice to the stature of its subject: a man who was, as the authors declare, "after Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the most influential figure in shaping early Mormon history, culture, and theology" (4). The authors, Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, are well qualified by scholarly background, personal interest, and literary skill to deal with the multifaceted Pratt. Givens is a widely recognized intellectual and cultural historian whose previous books include *When Souls Had Wings: The Idea of Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford, 2010) and *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford, 2007). Matthew J. Grow, in addition to his contributions to the other volume under review here, is the author of the award-winning biography "*Liberty to the Downtrodden*": *Thomas L. Kane, Romantic Reformer* (Yale, 2009).

The Givens and Grow biography goes beyond Pratt's *Autobiography* most importantly by providing an intellectual and historical context for his activities and by incisively analyzing the substance and implications of his writings. And so, while the *Autobiography* gives a succinct and entertaining account of Pratt's youthful quest for religious truth and personal salvation, Givens and Grow unfold the historical background of religious ferment in the early decades of the nineteenth century, a time when numerous "seekers" kept themselves apart from established churches while they sought for a restoration of the forms and practices of New Testament Christianity.

The Book of Mormon served as a powerful instrument in Parley P. Pratt's conversion because it answered questions that had persisted despite his acceptance of the "Reformed Baptist" beliefs of the Campbellites. He found in the Book of Mormon both a fulfillment of biblical prophecies and a source of additional prophecies pertaining to the latter days, including a restoration of apostolic authority and spiritual gifts, culminating in a literal Millennium. It also confirmed his belief that the American Indians were a remnant of the House of Israel. Pratt's devotion to the Book of Mormon was a hallmark of his ministry. Givens and Grow point out that he regularly "preached from its pages" (91) at a time when few other Church leaders did

so. Furthermore, he edited and published the second edition, to which he affixed his own testimony in addition to those of the original witnesses.

Givens and Grow note that in the first few years of the Church's existence, "little besides the Book of Mormon existed to ground Mormon theology or expound doctrine" (114). Early adherents were attracted by the personal influence of Joseph Smith, by the testimony of a missionary, or, like Pratt, by reading the Book of Mormon. But even after these believers were converted, there was no comprehensive statement of beliefs or first principles to which they could refer. Joseph Smith's ongoing revelations, as compiled in the Book of Commandments and the Doctrine and Covenants, tended to be topical rather than systematic in nature. Sensing the need for a concise doctrinal statement while he was serving a mission in New York City in 1837, Pratt in two months composed a slender volume entitled *A Voice of Warning and Instruction to All People, Containing a Declaration of the Faith and Doctrine of the Church of the Latter-day Saints, Commonly Called Mormons*. Givens and Grow declare, "Next to the Book of Mormon itself, Pratt's book soon became the principal vehicle presenting Mormonism to the Latter-day Saint faithful and the general public alike, and it was elevated by both to near-canonical status" (103–4). The popularity of *A Voice of Warning* continued throughout the nineteenth century as it went through numerous editions, was translated into several languages, and sold tens of thousands of copies.

Noting that this book, once so popular, "seems to modern readers remote in its worldview, emphases, and style" (104), Givens and Grow propose three contexts for understanding the style and content of *A Voice of Warning*. The first they term "Baconianism," referring to the rise of scientific thought with its "focus on experimentation, facts, and the rule of experience" (104), with the added influence of "Scottish commonsense philosophy" (105). In "Pratt's appropriation of biblical literalism to a scientific age," revelation "is as real . . . as any other process subject to natural laws and empirical verification." Pratt, therefore, "framed his presentation as a 'positive demonstration' of such irresistible logic that none would be able to 'gainsay nor resist'" (105). He began the demonstration with "forty pages of prophecy already fulfilled" before moving on to "prophecy yet future" (106).

The second context is the "rampant millennialism" (106) of the time. Some religious thinkers had adopted a "spiritualized," rather than literal, understanding of the Millennium. Others were "post-millennialists," believing that the Millennium would develop gradually through an improvement of human society, with the Savior appearing only at the end. Pratt, by contrast, was a firm "premillennialist," insisting that the Millennium is a literal future event that will be dramatically initiated by the Second Coming.

Through the lens of millennial expectations, Pratt “interpreted the past, made sense of the present, and planned for the future” (106). While noting that Mormons were millennialists from the beginning, with Joseph Smith’s first visions, Givens and Grow claim that “Pratt’s *Voice of Warning* proved the more influential and enduring testament to this principle” (108) and that Pratt “initiated a scheme of world history that Mormons embrace to the present day, one in which political and religious developments alike are both providential and preparatory to the gospel’s restoration” (109).

The third context is the rhetorical influence of antebellum American oratorical culture. The quest to develop a suitable “Democratic Eloquence” (113) for the nation produced a style that vacillated between simplicity and extravagancy. Pratt had absorbed these stylistic influences, and “*Voice of Warning*, as in all his works to follow, contains a peculiar admixture of blunt, common idiom, with eruptions of Ciceronian ornateness and Gibbonesque grandiosity” (114).

For a second edition of *A Voice of Warning* in 1840, Pratt wrote an introduction “enumerating the first principles of the Restored Gospel in language that would later find a close echo in several of Joseph Smith’s 1842 Articles of Faith” (172). This instance of Joseph Smith freely incorporating Pratt’s doctrinal formulations is an example of a process that Givens and Grow trace throughout the biography: a kind of cross-fertilization wherein Pratt would take ideas from Joseph’s revelations, discourses, and private conversations and elaborate them into a more fully developed form that the Prophet would later adopt or modify. “No Mormon thinker, Pratt included, would exceed Joseph Smith’s own audacity as a Christian iconoclast. Positing heavenly councils, preembodied spirits, Gods who were once human, and humans who could attain to godhood—these and other doctrines blasted asunder the creedal conceptions of God and humans alike.” However, “if Smith instigated Mormonism’s essential beliefs, Pratt organized, elaborated, and defended them in a manner that gave them the enduring life and complexion they have in the church to this day. Pratt was, in this sense, the first theologian of Mormonism” (169).

Givens and Grow trace this process in substantial detail. In a tract published in 1838, Pratt articulated the doctrines of human perfectability and literal theosis later preached by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse. These writings “represent in embryo the collapse of the ontological distinction between God and man that would result in Pratt’s later succinct declaration [in *Key to the Science of Theology*] that ‘God, angels and men are all of one species’” (127). In his “Treatise on the Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter,” written in a Missouri jail and published in 1840, Pratt explicitly rejected creation *ex nihilo*, declaring, “Matter and spirit are of

equal duration; both are self-existent,—they never began to exist, and they can never be annihilated” (169). God’s creative power derives from his mastery of eternal laws that govern both spirit and matter. “For Pratt, God’s perfect compliance with eternal law both constitutes his own supreme power and indicates the path whereby humans can become his full heirs and genuine ‘partakers of the divine nature’” (170).

Pratt first encountered Joseph Smith’s teachings on the eternal potential of the family relationship during several days they spent together in Philadelphia in January 1840, when Joseph “lifted a corner of the veil”⁴ and “taught him ‘the heavenly order of eternity. It was at this time that I received from him the first idea of eternal family organization, and the eternal union of the sexes’” (174). These teachings were a prelude to Pratt’s embrace, three years later, of “Mormonism’s most radical social doctrine, plural marriage” (198). After some initial resistance, Pratt would become one of the most zealous and vocal defenders of polygamy, not only in voice and pen but through ultimately marrying twelve wives.

According to Givens and Grow, Pratt’s 1844 essay titled “Intelligence and Affection” is “the fullest flowering of Mormonism’s celebration of divine physicality” (213). While his essay sometimes went beyond what Joseph strictly taught, Pratt’s theological reasoning was so convincing that Latter-day Saints generally accepted his doctrine. Here Pratt rejected entirely the Platonic dualism of body and spirit, mind and desires, and insisted that “the direction and cultivation of the passions, not their repression, is God’s intention for humans. And foremost among these human affections is the reciprocal sexual desire of a man and his wife” (213). Pratt thus envisioned a “domestic heaven” in which eternally united husbands and wives will be “capable of exercising all those pure emotions . . . which fill our hearts with such inexpressible delight in this world” (213) as they advance to “their eternal destiny to participate in ‘the organization of new systems of worlds . . . over which we may reign as kings’” (213).

In addition to Pratt’s theological contributions, Givens and Grow emphasize his influence on Latter-day Saint worship beginning with his contribution of fifty hymn texts for a hymnal published in 1840 in Manchester, England, for the use of British Saints. While the Nauvoo hymnal compiled under the direction of Emma Smith “retreated to a more conventional Protestant hymnody,” the “Manchester Hymnal, inspired by Pratt’s millennialism and restorationist fervor, was redolent with themes more calculated to resonate with a Mormon congregation, such as gathering, priesthood, and the Book of Mormon” (181).

It is all the more remarkable that Parley P. Pratt produced his most important intellectual works under the severe duress of persecution,

dislocation, imprisonment, and an unremitting, grinding poverty. He was constantly in debt, frequently compelled to depend on gifts and loans for housing, clothing, travel expenses, and even food for his growing family. His poverty was not the product of any incapacity or reluctance to engage in physical labor. Pratt's wife Agatha called him "one of the busiest and hardest working men I ever knew" (267). In similar terms, John Pulsipher described him as "a strong healthy man and a very hard working man, one of the best men I ever worked with" (280). Pratt's best opportunity to set his financial house in order came in 1849 when he was granted the right to construct and operate a toll road through Parley's Canyon and Parley's Park (now the Snyderville Basin) at a time when the California gold rush was bringing many travelers through Salt Lake City. This route, which today continues to be the main eastern gateway to the Salt Lake Valley, could have become a profitable franchise, but early in 1851 Pratt was called on a mission that took him to California and eventually Chile. He left five wives (four of them pregnant) and thirteen children "in an unfinished home and in a precarious financial position—as usual" (293). Upon his return in late 1852, he managed to complete a two-story adobe house but still subsisted close to the bone, complaining in a letter to his brother Orson that he "lacked money to buy bread" (324). On one occasion, a visitor who had been converted through the instrumentality of Pratt's *A Voice of Warning* discovered his gospel mentor "threshing beans before his door . . . barefooted, in shirt sleeves, and a home made straw hat." Pratt paused in his mundane labors to deliver to his visitor a message that led him to marvel, "Never in all my life had I heard such a discourse so full of inspiration and prophecy concerning the great work of the Lord in the latter days" (324). En route to another mission in California in 1855, Pratt lamented that "he was 'far below the youngest members of the quorum [of the Twelve] in point of means, and of houses, lands, Cattle, food, and Clothing'" (342).

The book's subtitle labels Pratt as "the Apostle Paul of Mormonism." Givens and Grow argue that Pratt, like the ancient Apostle, "was called at the dawn of a new dispensation, when the fertile core of a revolutionary gospel awaited the hand of a master missionary, who could expand its doctrine, expound its meaning, and extend its reach" (393). In further points of comparison, both Paul and Pratt had "a deep sense of the divine importance" of the apostolic calling (5), revealed "in opposition and persecution" (8), and preached and wrote in "a bold, blunt, outspoken style that led to frequent controversies" (5). It is possible to grant the validity of these parallels between the ancient and modern Apostles but still find the similarities somewhat strained and unsatisfactory. It is also possible that Oxford, with a national audience in mind, recommended a subtitle that would give those

unfamiliar with Pratt some frame of reference. My own feeling is that such a comparison diminishes rather than enhances the distinctive contributions of Parley Pratt to the Latter-day Saint faith and the unique qualities of his mind and personality. I would have preferred an earlier working subtitle that appeared on Givens's website: "A Cultural and Intellectual Biography." This, I believe, is a more accurate representation of the true character of this study. Still, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* deserves a place among the finest Latter-day Saint biographies.

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1. Parley P. Pratt Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Embracing His Life, Ministry, and Travels, with Extracts, in Prose and Verse, from His Miscellaneous Writings*, 1874, reprinted with a foreword by Richard Lloyd Dewey (Arlington, Va.: Stratford Books, 2005), 1.

2. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 2.

3. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 2.

4. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 262.