



1-1-2017

## John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*

Reviewed by Paul Harvey

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Harvey, Reviewed by Paul (2017) "John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*," *Mormon Studies Review*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol4/iss1/14>

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This is only natural. And Givens and Neilson's volume stands as a testimony to the fact that the church and its affiliates recognize the changing landscape of Mormon studies and seek to participate in shaping it productively and collaboratively. What's more, I can raise my (relatively small) concerns about this volume because of its overall strength and promised usefulness for students and scholars who seek an archival entrée into the rich and complicated history of the LDS Church. As such, the volume's limitations actually provide springboards to fruitful conversations—drawn from the carefully curated source material and the expertly crafted annotations—that will allow the many courses for which this volume will serve as the primary anthology to explore what it has historically meant to be a Mormon and what it means to study Mormonism today.

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John G. Turner. *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

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*Mormon Studies Review*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 137–42

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/msr.2017.0113> Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18809/mimsr.21568030>

THIS BOOK IS NOT so much a biography of the Mormon Jesus as a full-length answer to the questions posed in the introduction concerning the relationship of Mormonism and Christianity:

How, then, should scholars classify Mormonism? Because Mormonism emerged within the context of American Protestantism, is it one of those many “species” of Protestantism? Or is Mormonism its own separate “genus” of Christianity? Or its own “order” within the larger framework of Abrahamic religions? Or, because Mormon scriptures speak of a plurality of gods and the possibility of human deification, is Mormonism its own “class” of religion?

Turner’s answer is that the LDS Church is “a new genus of Christianity rather than a new religious tradition or a new world religion.” It is not Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, but a new “Christian course” (p. 17). The Mormon connection to Christianity has been solidified in recent decades by the church’s increasingly visible allegiance to Jesus, or, to put it more technically, its Christocentrism.

At the same time, particular practices set Mormonism apart and give it some “ecclesiastical space” from other Christian churches, including “additional scriptures, ongoing revelation through current prophets; a belief that God the Father and Jesus Christ are two separate, material, embodied divine beings; the belief that certain rituals are required for human exaltation to godhood; and the performance of proxy rituals to save and exalt the dead” (p. 18). All of them have antecedents in Christianity, but nowhere do they come together as a group as they do in Mormonism, hence the place of Mormonism squarely within but distinctively set apart from other versions of the Christian tradition.

In short, this book might be titled something like “What Is the Relationship of Mormonism and Christianity in General, and What Do Mormon Ideas about Jesus Have to Do with That?” Or for those who don’t want their answers phrased in the form of a Jeopardy question, it might be called “Why Mormons Are Distinct from Other Branches of Christianity, but Why Mormonism Nonetheless Should Be Classed as a Branch of Christianity, and Why the Mormon Conception of and Faith in Jesus Clearly Point to Such a Classification.” That’s a subtitle or chapter descriptor that would have made any nineteenth-century reader happy.

The chapters follow a distinct and similar structure. Turner begins with a narrative or a notation about some distinctively Mormon story

or practice. He proceeds to examine the history of that belief, story, or practice within the *longue durée* of Christianity. He also looks at how that practice has developed (or in some cases effectively died out) in the first century or so of Mormon existence and then suggests how contemporary Mormons deal with this issue. The theme throughout is the constant theological and social invention of Mormon pioneers in the nineteenth century, and then the consolidation of Mormonism as a tradition with clear boundaries and orthodoxies in the early twentieth century. Some of the themes covered are obvious choices (polygamy, the place of the Book of Mormon and other sacred texts, and distinctive Mormon beliefs about the exalted family), while some get into the finer technical details of the history of Christian theology. Throughout, the voice is one of absolute calm and reasoned dialogue from someone who (as far as I can tell as a nonexpert) knows his stuff cold. Given that Turner is the author of the best full-length (and most certainly warts-and-all) biography of Brigham Young, that is not surprising.

An early example of Turner's careful historical method has to do with the plentiful Mormon visions of the nineteenth century and why they are relatively more absent or private in the more contemporary world. Early Mormons longed for visions but distrusted them, especially those of other people, as is the case with many other branches of Christianity. For who spoke the truth, and who was deluded? There's the rub, always. Brigham Young "echoed the concern of Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards that it was difficult to differentiate between visions from God and deceptions of the devil." Yet Young himself had visions, including seeing Joseph Smith in dreams, and thus visions "remained important parts of mid-to-late-nineteenth-century Mormonism" (p. 80). Believers in the present day are encouraged to keep their visions private, if indeed they have any.

Turner places great stress on James E. Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*, a central text in the early twentieth century in terms of clarifying what would be officially approved LDS doctrine and what would remain speculative or outside the boundaries of orthodoxy. Talmage functions in this book as the Council of Nicea did for fourth-century Christians.

For example, while “the belief that humans are God’s spirit children who have the potential to become like their Heavenly Father” became part of Mormon belief and practice, other ideas of Joseph Smith gradually fell by the wayside. Talmage codified these doctrinal groundings.

During the early years of the faith, Turner argues, “Smith did more than ape Masonic rites. In his attempt to create new forms of earthly and heavenly society, the prophet Mormonized what he found attractive in Freemasonry” (p. 195). Later in the century, Brigham Young “democratized Smith’s endowment.” Achieving the full degree of glory “depended in large part on one’s participation in the newly introduced rituals. Men and women could not be exalted without sealing, with the endowment,” particularly in the spring of 1846 just before the departure from Illinois and the trek westward. By the early twentieth century, Turner argues throughout the book, “the LDS Church had firmly retethered itself to the Christian savior” (p. 180). And they had brought Jesus squarely into the most sacred ceremonies of the church.

Another of Turner’s most carefully laid-out chapters explores an interesting contrast: while American Christians generally stopped viewing “passages of ancient Jewish scripture as straightforward depictions of or prophecies about Jesus Christ,” Mormons moved in the opposite hermeneutical direction (p. 205). In Mormon writings, “it was Jesus Christ who appeared to Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and other ancient patriarchs.” Once again, Talmage’s 1915 *Jesus the Christ* helped to settle the welter of theological confusion and discussion that continued through the late nineteenth century. In doing so, Turner argues, Talmage resurrected “earlier Christian interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures” by arguing that Jesus “was the creator who revealed himself to Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses.” God and Jesus were two separate divine and corporeal beings: “the postmortal, immortal, and exalted Father and the antemortal Jesus Christ” (p. 206). Over time, Brigham Young’s speculations on Adam as Jehovah diminished in importance, and the church “identified Jesus Christ as Jehovah. Going forward, Jesus-as-Jehovah became a clear point of Mormon doctrine.” Turner traces the growing importance of “Jehovah as the premortal Jesus Christ” in the endowment ceremony (p. 207).

A favorite chapter of mine was “The Great White God,” which appears late in the book. Here Turner draws from the work coauthored by Edward J. Blum and myself, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014) but expands (and improves) on it greatly. Perhaps most significantly, he shows that while in contemporary Christianity images of Jesus, once so ubiquitous, have declined in number and significance, they have retained a central and visible presence in Mormon “meetinghouses, visitor centers, homes, and temples,” reflecting the growing Christocentrism of contemporary Mormonism. The LDS Church’s *Gospel Art Book* from 2009 contains 137 images approved for use in Mormon settings, 50 of which depict Jesus. Because of the effective church process of correlation over many decades, “there is a uniformity of architecture, worship, and publications in Mormon meetinghouses across the United States and around the world. Visitors and worshippers see the same artwork, the same Jesus” (p. 248). Usually that Jesus is visibly male, white, and masculine, a consequence of a long-held concern among some Mormon leaders for what they saw as overly feminized images of Jesus Christ in art.

The conclusion reiterates that “the figure of Jesus Christ both inextricably connects the Latter-day Saints to broader and longer currents of Christian thought and practice and carves out a distinctively Mormon place within them” (p. 292). And in recent decades, church leaders have emphasized a more irenic vision than in earlier periods of Mormon history, stressing what they hold in common with other versions of the Christian faith, especially through the figure of Jesus. In a variety of ways, the church has taken a Christocentric turn over several decades. As another scholar has put it, “Christian Mormonism has largely superseded ‘Mormon Israel’” (p. 293). And thus for Turner, and contrary to well-known arguments by Jan Shipps and others, “Mormonism is a vibrant new branch of Christianity, one in which temples, ordinances and prophets have taken their place alongside a Jesus who is both utterly Christian and distinctively Mormon” (p. 294).

I can well imagine a “postscript” chapter to this book reflecting on Mormonism’s international future and more generally on the kinds of

Christianity that are attractive in the Global South (Pentecostalism and Mormonism being two notable examples) versus those which are not growing domestically or internationally (including much of mainstream American Protestantism, and even some conservative branches of Protestantism such as Southern Baptists). The most successful offshoots of Christianity abroad are full of the kinds of visions, apparitions of Jesus and the saints, and local prophets such as characterized early Mormonism, as well as ecstatic practices (faith healing, speaking in tongues, and others) such as pervaded early Pentecostalism. It certainly raises the question of how Mormonism's largely successful attempt to mainstream itself (continued sniping by some other Protestant groups aside) will or will not play in the Global South.

And for the longer-range future, the diversification of the Mormon body of believers surely will, one would assume, eventually result in the diversification of its leadership class, which at present remains a solid phalanx of older white men. If Turner is right, Mormonism appears poised to continue as a branch of Christianity, a sort of denomination on steroids. If that is the case, one may ask how that will play out in the areas (including the Global South) where it has experienced considerable growth? How much of Mormonism's distinctiveness will be muted, in a way that follows a pattern of many other denominations? And to what degree can the LDS Church's "correlation" effort continue to have its remarkable effect of enforcing such a uniformity of beliefs, rituals, buildings, hymns, and cultural practices? That would take another book, or twenty, to answer. For now, I am grateful for Turner's extraordinarily careful parsing of the questions he raises in this book.

**Paul Harvey** is professor of history at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs. He is the author, coauthor, or editor of eleven books, including most recently *Christianity and Race in the American South: A History* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).