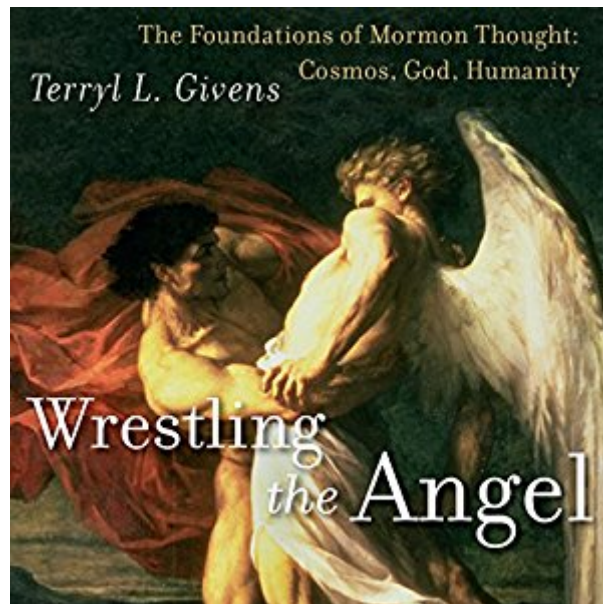


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# Wrestling The Angel: The Foundations Of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity



## Synopsis

In this first volume of his magisterial study of the foundations of Mormon thought and practice, Terryl L. Givens offers a sweeping account of Mormon belief from its founding to the present day. Situating the relatively new movement in the context of the Christian tradition, he reveals that Mormonism continues to change and grow. Givens shows that despite Mormonism's origins in a biblical culture strongly influenced by 19th-century Restorationist thought, which advocated a return to the Christianity of the early Church, the new movement diverges radically from the Christianity of the creeds. Mormonism proposes its own cosmology and metaphysics, in which human identity is rooted in a premortal world as eternal as God. Mormons view mortal life as an enlightening ascent rather than a catastrophic fall, and reject traditional Christian concepts of human depravity and destiny. Popular fascination with Mormonism's social innovations, such as polygamy and communalism, and its supernatural and esoteric elements - angels, gold plates, seer stones, a New World Garden of Eden, and sacred undergarments - have long overshadowed the fact that it is the most enduring and even thriving product of the 19th century's religious upheavals and innovations. *Wrestling the Angel* traces the essential contours of Mormon thought from the time of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young to the contemporary LDS church, illuminating both the seminal influence of the founding generation of Mormon thinkers and the significant developments in the church over almost 200 years. The most comprehensive account of the development of Mormon thought ever written, *Wrestling the Angel* will be essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the Mormon faith.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is apparently aimed at a highly-educated audience who is not Mormon - at least, it does not assume you know about Mormonism. This is college-level reading with rich, scholarly language. In addition to concepts like "theosis" and "dualism" and "radical materialism," you will also encounter "ovism" and "homooousios" and "traducianism." There's even a little Latin. (Also, go ahead and look up the word "entail," if you don't know it, because you will see it many times.) For me the effort has been richly rewarded, a banquet for my mind. I am learning a lot about my own religion. It turns out Mormonism is a pretty deep and fascinating thing even for a devout, life-time member like me. In that respect this book, whether intended or not, also serves as an apologia. A typical chapter takes a point of theology, first stating the traditional Christian view. Next, alternate views held by Christians and others in the past are touched on - views which Mormonism also agrees with. Next, a discussion of varying understandings of the doctrine by early Mormons. Finally, the "settled" doctrine of the current Mormon church is explained (or maybe the current doctrine is presented as not fully settled). This book shows how initially Joseph Smith revealed many things when he re-established the church of Christ. Then later Mormon prophets added to and clarified those doctrines. I'm not sure I agree with all the Givens' statements or their reasoning. I will be pondering this book and reading it again in the future. Some statements are too definite for my comfort. I don't think any of us can say the last word on God and the universe at this point. (I think the Givens would agree with me.) As Isaiah says, God's ways and thoughts are not ours. Other statements I thought left out an important consideration, even in a scripture passage they had just quoted. Other times I didn't think they stated a doctrine entirely accurately or completely, according to my understanding. For example, on the origin of the human soul, I wasn't fully satisfied with the analysis of "intelligence" in relation to "spirit." One thing this book makes clear: there is still room for opinion and interpretation in Mormonism. Some Mormons will be uncomfortable with this. But the Givens remind us that Joseph Smith didn't want to be limited by creeds. Mormons believe in personal growth. This life is God's school. We also believe in continuing revelation from our modern prophets. As Joseph Smith said, "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." Our church and its doctrines will evolve and progress. Just as Einstein subsumed Newton in science, we expect God to continually expand our definition of religious truth in the future. Should we be surprised at the Givens' book, when it shows this same process has occurred from the founding of the church until now? The basics have always been clear: love God and your neighbor; develop faith, hope and charity; forgive and repent; learn to submit to God. These are what really matter during our mortal

lives. Plenty to keep us busy. But for doctrines broad and deep, which this book addresses - those we will understand better over time, depending on our readiness and our obedience. Thanks to the Givens for further illuminating the path with their scholarship. Overall, this book is like a wide vein of gold. To continue the metaphor, there is much to mine and process here. One nugget, speaking of Joseph Smith the founder-prophet of Mormonism: "A recent biographer of the great philosopher Spinoza wrote, 'He rejected the orthodoxy of his day not because he believed less, but because he believed more.' Smith had a similar propensity to range widely and freely in appropriating truths as and where he found them...." "Mormonism, as he saw it, was about removing rather than imposing boundaries...." "....Smith was always pushing in the direction of expansive addition rather than contracting reduction: 'we don't ask any people to throw away any good they have got we only ask them to Come & get more.'" This catalog of his liberal statements on religious truth suggests that Smith's prophetic practice was neither the unstudied and erratic plagiarism of his caricaturists nor always the epiphany-driven receipt of 'vertical revelation' imputed to him by his devoted followers.... "Smith ... viewed himself as both revelator and inspired synthesist, pulling truths not only from heaven but also from his culture, his background, and his contemporaries...." Another nugget: "[God's] ... disappointment ... at the course of events ... can only mean they are not consistent with his will. We are here at almost the furthest remove imaginable from the God of Augustine and Calvin, who predestines even the inheritors of eternal damnation. Mormonism's God, by contrast, does not control events, predetermine outcomes, or effect a universe totally in harmony with his will." "It might be true, as Smith learned ... that 'the works, and the designs, and the purposes of God cannot be frustrated....' But but those works, designs, and purposes include the guarantee of our moral agency, not of our role in such plans...." "In his omniscience, [God] has made provision for the eventual triumph of his plans. But no actor in the script is indispensable. God reserves the right to appoint replacements for those who fail, even as he can turn setbacks and afflictions to gain." Another favorite quote: "If there was one prevailing sense in which Joseph Smith was a child of his age, it was in the avidity with which he reflected this dynamic, fundamentally Romantic view of the world, an orientation that suffused his cosmology, his human anthropology, and even his doctrine of deity." (I love the Romantic Age.) I imagine any serious student of philosophy or religion will find value here. Even if you don't care about Mormons this book may serve as an exercise in comparative religion. One way to understand a thing (your own beliefs, perhaps) is to learn what that thing is not. Mormonism is different. Note: I bought the Kindle version, which became available a month or so before the hardcover.

A popular primary childrens song for Mormons contains the refrain, "Follow the prophet. Follow the prophet. Follow the prophet. Don't go astray. Follow the prophet. Follow the prophet. Follow the prophet. He knows the way." Growing up Mormon, it was easy to infer from songs like these, teachings from lay members and other sources that our modern prophets are always right. Even as the potential for a prophet's fallibility became clear in readings found in the Book of Mormon (Nephi, Moroni), the Doctrine and Covenants and many other prophetic statements, it was still hard to shake the idea that a prophet is always right. As my knowledge of LDS doctrine and history began to expand, and I recognized some of the apparent differences in doctrine and belief between the early church leaders and church leaders in my life-time, I found it difficult to reconcile my thoughts and feelings. When you read something from Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, Parley Pratt, Orson Pratt, etc., then find a different attitude or idea on the subject from the prophets who lived closer to today (or even disagreements between the above), and you're taught to believe that a prophet will never lead you astray, it can be a harrowing, faith-trying experience. If they differ or contradict each other, they can't all be right, can they? That's where *Wrestling the Angel* really shines for me. As far as I am aware, it is the only comprehensive work of it's kind that concisely and accurately bridges the gap between the time of the restoration and the present, giving context to how and why key points of doctrine have evolved, developed, been dismissed, etc. Don't get me wrong, there are still many things that can't be answered, but I've found a great deal of peace, consolation and insight through reading what is available to know, as organized and made available in this book. Thank you, Terryl, for this great work!

Really great history of religious concepts (e.g. God, Jesus, Trinity, etc.) that have been argued over for centuries. Givens reviews historical discussions, then presents the mormon views as they started with Joseph Smith then evolved over time since. Views originated with Brigham Young and others are also treated and discussed. Easy reading (e.g. the usual theological impenetrability is removed), and where a theological term is kind of necessary, he explains it. Great book for Mormon scholars and more advanced readers. A bit of a handful for the naive, I think, but written with clarity for most readers with an interest in theology, Mormon or otherwise.

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