

*The Pearl of Greatest Price:
Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture*
By Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid

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Reviewed by Richard Lyman Bushman

The Pearl of Great Price is the least intentional of Latter-day Saint scriptures. When British mission president Franklin Richards pulled together a fifty-six-page assemblage of miscellaneous writings in 1851, he showed no signs of thinking that it prefigured an addition to the canon. He thought the items would be useful for instructing missionaries and members in gospel doctrine. The writings were widely distributed as a pamphlet but not considered scripture until canonization was proposed, almost casually, in 1880, in the same meeting where John Taylor was sustained as Church President. Unlike the Book of Mormon, which arrived as another Bible and was instantly treated as scripture, and the Book of Commandments, which was adopted as canonical immediately upon publication, the Pearl of Great Price crept in from the sidelines. Yet when it was proposed, it was adopted without opposition. Within twenty-nine years, it had become a treasured collection that the Saints loved and used.

In this extraordinary commentary on this least likely of scriptures, Terryl Givens argues that among all our canonized books, the Pearl of Great Price is the richest source of distinctive Latter-day doctrines. Pound for pound, the much longer Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants pack less of a theological punch. Doctrinally, the Book of Mormon did not go far beyond the Bible; it was believed and accepted precisely because it corresponded so closely. The Doctrine and Covenants is studded with doctrinal gems like section 76 but is preoccupied with organization and Church administration. The Pearl of Great Price, in a much briefer span, provides a broad scriptural basis for the theology that distinguishes the Latter-day Saint gospel from its Christian antecedents.

At the same time, this rich source is a book rent with controversy. No single historical issue has sparked more debate—and disaffection—than the discrepancies between Joseph Smith’s book of Abraham and the scholarly translations of the scrolls. Purchased from Michael Chandler in 1835, the parchments were lost after Smith’s death and thought to have burned, but scraps of the original had made their way into the collections of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and were acquired by the Church in 1967. Latter-day Saints were shocked when the scholars who undertook a modern translation identified the scraps as parts of a commonplace Egyptian funerary text, nothing like the Abraham narrative that Joseph Smith translated and published in 1842.

Givens’s review of the response of Latter-day Saint scholars is the best single account of the controversy I know. He gives due weight to the apologists’ various explanations: (1) the scraps are not the text Smith worked from; (2) the translation may not correspond to the scrolls but miraculously contains bona fide Egyptian material; (3) or, as the Church’s website puts it, the scrolls were not literally translated, but “catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham” (180). After examining all sides of the question, Givens acknowledges that “in the case of the facsimiles [Smith] was apparently wrong, and in the case of the Book of Abraham narrative he may have been as well” (180). Believers may be forced back on the catalyst explanation of the translation. But for Givens, this is not a regrettable admission. The impasse on the question of historical authenticity is not the end of the road; it is rather the beginning of a much more productive inquiry into the nature of a seer’s mind. “Instead of evaluating Smith’s work by looking back through the lens of contemporary Egyptology, we may learn the workings of Smith’s prophetic imagination” (180).

Givens is fascinated by Smith’s conception of seership: his “voracious appetite to recover, reconstruct, and reconstitute lost worlds and celestial realms alike” (184). At the heart of the book is an explication of Smith’s grand cosmic narrative of God and his human children, “a mythological expansion that reached from premortality to human theosis” (271). This is the familiar “plan of salvation,” rooted in the books of Moses and Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price, beginning with the council in heaven and the war between Michael and Lucifer, extending to the Creation, earth life, family formation through temple sealings, and finally exaltation. In its totality, Givens argues, it is the masterwork of Smith’s seership.

Givens enjoys explicating grand themes, but he is also a close reader of manuscripts. The book of Moses grew out of Smith's larger project to revise the Bible. Givens astutely analyzes the myriad alterations in the King James Bible to point out the governing principles behind them. Smith was not haphazardly changing incidental phrases that struck him as in need of repair. He was reshaping a book to conform more fully to lost doctrinal truths.

Through close analysis, Givens also detects hints about Smith's method of revelation. How did inspired language take form in his mind? Similar elements in section 29 in the Doctrine and Covenants and Moses 1–6, received about the same time, offer clues. Phrases like “give me thine honor,” “foundation of the world,” and “agents unto themselves” turn up in both texts. The difference is that section 29 is “a pastiche of seemingly unrelated fragments” and abrupt digressions, “proceeding almost like a stream of consciousness,” while Moses is “a discretely packaged and polished cosmic narrative.” The two are “essentially the same revelation” but in “two distinct moments or phases” (91–92). “So a process that commenced in September 1830—with moments of insight, spontaneous glimpses of past worlds and events, fragmentary irruptions of God's voice, and inspired pronouncements—passes through a period of incubation during which Smith's prophetic imagination sorts out, synthesizes, and weaves the scattered fragments into the mythic narratives that constitute his most important revelatory texts” (93). These “workings of the prophetic imagination” appear in the book of Abraham as well. “These twin documents present us with the closest thing we have to a window into the process by which—at least in some prophetic moments—Smith transforms fragmentary glimpses across cosmic time into holistic, narrative theology” (93).

Givens's major achievement, in a book full of insight and illuminating research, is demonstrating how radically Smith's stories of eternity stood out against the traditional Christian culture from which they emerged. The simple sentence “worlds without number have I created,” for example, upended the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. Orthodox doctrine made Creation the beginning of all things—time, space, matter. In the traditional Christian account of Creation, there was nothing, and then God made everything. In the first chapter of Moses, God makes one world after another within an established universe. He is the author of worlds, not the totality of the universe. This meant that God was not the Creator in the traditional sense but “an organizer and artificer” (130).

Moreover, the God who weeps over his children's cruelty to each other in the writings of Enoch governs a universe that is not "fully conformable to his will and desires" (129). This amounted to a full "assault on the sovereignty of God" (129). He was neither the traditional Creator of the universe nor in complete control. Givens thinks that the Catholic Church was accurate in its official pronouncement that "the differences are so great that one cannot even consider that this [LDS] doctrine is a heresy which emerged out of a false understanding of the Christian doctrine. . . . The teaching of the Mormons has a completely different matrix" (129).

The book of Abraham trespassed the bounds of Christian orthodoxy even further with its depiction of a council of gods creating the earth—gods plural plus a council of creators, not a single supreme being. As Givens puts it, "Smith was not tinkering around the edges of Christian theology and ecclesiology. He was remaking Christianity from the bottom up" (124). His remade Christianity included "a covenant theology that put preexisting human souls alongside heavenly parents as members of a divine family" and a priesthood through which they were "fully incorporated into an eternal chain of belonging, with bonds both horizontal and vertical, equal parts anthropocentric and theocentric" (124).

Smith's radical departure from Christian norms is a source of pride to many Latter-day Saints. They will delight in this account of their prophet's originality and creativity, reinforcing Harold Bloom's view of Smith as a masterful religion-maker. Others may find the extremes unnerving. The everyday worship of Latter-days Saints today is much more conventional than the religion depicted in Givens's *The Pearl of Greatest Price*. We feel the attractions of reasonable religion: living at peace with our neighbors, enjoying family life, being of service, following Christ. Most Sunday School classes and sacrament meetings focus on faith, repentance, and listening to the Spirit. The Pearl doctrines remain in the background. For one thing, they are hard to work out in detail. At the edges, they blur off into confusion and the "mysteries." Some seem outlandish. Latter-day Saints are skittish about the claim that we each will have a planet of our own to manage. On the Church website, the Pearl doctrines are stated moderately and modestly (see "Creation" and "Premortality").¹

1. "Creation," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/creation?lang=eng>; "Premortality," The

But hesitant as some modern Latter-day Saints are to delve into these doctrines, the restraint does not erase the influence of Smith's grand narrative. These stories are immensely powerful. Once known, they are not forgotten. As an indelible part of Latter-day Saint culture, they irresistibly affect Latter-day Saint attitudes toward life. In exhibiting the splendor and the extravagance of Joseph Smith's Pearl doctrines, Givens reminds us how much they remain part of Latter-day Saint thinking. Modern belief may be a milder version of the original faith, but the radical elements persist, buried deep in the Church's spiritual DNA.

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Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/premortality?lang=eng>.