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Garrett R. Maxwell

Review of Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *All Things New: Rethinking Sin, Salvation, and Everything In Between* (Faith Matters Press, 2020). 188 pages. $12.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *Fiona and Terryl Givens once again deliver a book worthy of the comparatively wide readership they have gained within Latter-day Saint circles. Their orderly treatment of individual gospel concepts in this book can rightly be seen as a distillation and unification of their previous work, boldly attempting to awaken us from our ignorance of the sheer novelty and vitality contained in the Restoration vision of God and humanity. They convincingly argue that the historically wrought semantic baggage that comes with the most basic religious vocabulary we use must be consciously jettisoned to fully appreciate and articulate the meaning of the Restoration.*

The work of Fiona and Terryl Givens — dynamic duo and lay theologians of the Restoration — reaches its apogee in this new volume, ambitious in title and in scope. But one might ask, what need is there for a "rethinking" in the restored gospel? Has not sin, salvation, and everything in between already been rethought and rearticulated in the revelations of Joseph Smith? This volume is the Givenses' effort to energetically answer in the affirmative but also to move beyond a mere affirmation to outline and illuminate the ways in which the Restoration has indeed made "all things new."

Referring to the poignant observation of renowned Christian theologian Freidrich Schleiermacher, they write:

> [He] describes the situation well. He wrote that one can believe and teach that "everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth" and yet that redemption can be "interpreted in such a way that it is reduced to incoherence." His diagnosis is the subject of this book. (3)

The "incoherence" the Givenses seek to rectify here has much to do with a dilemma nearly as old as Christianity itself: how do we reconcile the idea of a loving, benevolent Father in heaven portrayed in some parts scripture with the despotic, tempestuous, and violent God portrayed in other parts of scripture? How can a God intent on saving His children and desirous to "wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4) also damn them to eternal punishment? This dilemma has sometimes taken the form of pitting the Old Testament against the New Testament, or as Marcion of Sinope (85–160 AD) thought, a malevolent demiurge pitted against the real, higher God. Others such as famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung perceived a temporal development in God, who, after being morally bested by Job, became incarnate as man in order to catch up with His creature who had surpassed Him in consciousness and morality.[1]

No 188-page book could think to solve this issue once and for all, and in reality there is no way to harmonize the dizzying variety of the accounts of God given in scripture. It never was and was never intended to be a homogenous corpus. Rather than attempting to take this head on, the Givenses are instead proposing a new hermeneutic — the hermeneutics of a good God, built on Restoration ideals. Their experience with the youth and young adults of the Church across the globe has convinced them that there is a looming problem with the words we use to talk about, as the title would suggest, sin, salvation, and everything in between. It is not that the words themselves are the problem — discarding or swapping them out would be nigh impossible. The problem lies in the thousands of years' worth of baggage they have accumulated over Christian history. The English language was thorny soil to begin with, and the Givenses propose that careful attention is needed to keep the life-giving abundance of the Restoration from choking on the words that inevitably mediate its message.

For them, it was the "double catastrophe" of Augustine and the Reformation that burdened these words (salvation, heaven, fall, obedience, sin, justice, repentance, forgiveness, atonement, grace,

1. See C. G. Jung. *Answer to Job*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 43.

worthiness, judgment) with meaning that has continually been injurious to both the greater Christian worldview and to individuals of faith. In the Givenses' estimation, an Augustinian (and by extension Lutheran and Calvinist) God has been deeply codified in the most basic of our religious vocabulary, the prevailing characteristics of these theologies being the utter depravity of the human race and the utter sovereignty of God — at the expense of his love (see Chapter 2).

A pertinent example to Latter-Day Saints is the discussion in Chapter 13 of Atonement theology. As it stands, the word *atonement* is heavily couched in what is called the "penal substitution model." In this model, Christ is a shield, an animal for slaughter, standing between the human race and the implacable wrath of a God offended at our vileness. Conceived in this way, criminality and punishment become the overriding concerns of Atonement. There is no place for healing in this model, only fear and guilt. Not only this, but the Father and the Son are at odds in this model. Carl Jung found this idea of Atonement so absurd that it made more sense to him for the Atonement to be a "reparation for a wrong done by God to man."[2]

While the noxious weed of Original Sin may be a prevailing Christian orthodoxy, it is not in keeping with the Restoration recapitulation of the Fall and its much more ennobling depiction of Eve and human nature (see Chapter 7). And while a God untouched by human misery and devoid of "body, parts, or passions" is codified in the Protestant creeds, it is not in keeping with the character of God revealed in the Restoration: the God who weeps (Moses 7). If, then, these most fundamental concepts of religion — the nature of humankind, the nature of God — are completely at odds, then the task of extricating ourselves from the vocabulary inherited from our forebearers is both necessary and urgent.

Why all the fuss about words though? As Robert MacFarlane so succinctly puts it, "language does not just register experience, it produces it" (front flap). In Chapter 4, the Givenses elaborate on this:

> What we believe to be true of our deepest nature, and what we believe to be true of God's nature, has real-world consequences. How we understand God, and the quality of Their love, conditions our own ability to receive and reciprocate love. Conceptions of human sin and worthiness profoundly impact every relationship into which we enter. Confidence — or lack of confidence — in the destiny toward which Heavenly

2. Jung, *Answer to Job*, 56.

> Parents are guiding us cannot help but to determine our levels of joyfulness or anxiety. How we understand words like *proving* and *testing* infuses our lives with a sense of adventure or of dread, of beauty or of scrupulosity. (77)

Citing the undeniable reality of a rising generation staggering under the weight of rampant depression, anxiety, OCD, and a host of other mental health problems (see p. 50–56), and considering this together with the growing scholarly realization that Augustine may very well have single-handedly reinvented Christianity, the Givenses conclude that the last thing the Saints need is more reasons to continue down ever prevalent paths of pathological self-degradation and self-hatred that plague the human race. After all, "men [and women] are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25).

The twin dangers of this inherited religious vocabulary are on one hand the inevitable stultification of human potential via shrunken horizons imposed by a pessimistic anthropology and on the other (which we now see in record numbers), mass exodus from organized religion. Again citing problematic Atonement theologies, the Givenses echo a growing number of scholars who are acknowledging the growing "embarrassment among Christians" at these doctrines in modern times. These religious concepts, determined as they are to indict the human race and turn God into a capricious monarch, are increasingly failing to resonate with people's deepest yearning and sentiments in modern times. Christian Wiman asks the striking question:

> Does the decay of belief among educated people in the West precede the decay of language used to define and explore belief, or do we find the fire of belief fading in us only because the words are sodden with overuse and imprecision, and will not burn? (77)

This book would side with the latter option. The language needs renovation, renewal … restoration. A brief look at this volume's chapter subtitles will give a glimpse into how our vocabulary might be reconceived in the womb of the Restoration:

> Salvation: From Rescue to Realization
> Heaven: From "Where" to "with Whom
> Fall: From Corruption to Ascension
> Obedience: From Subject to Heir
> Sin: From Guilt to Woundedness
> Justice: From Punishment to Restoration

Repentance: From Looking Back to Looking Forward
Forgiveness: From Transactional Love to Absolute Love
Atonement: From Penal-Substitution to Radical Healing
Grace: From Declaring Righteous to Becoming Righteous
Worthiness: From Merit to Miracle
Judgment: From Court to Waystation
Apostasy: From Total Eclipse to Wilderness Refuge
Restoration: From Ex Nihilo to Out of the Wilderness
Church: From Reservoir of the Righteous to Collaborators with Christ

It is clear that Fiona and Terryl are driven by a high anthropology, substantiated by the Latter-day Saint regeneration of the Eden story and its heroic Eve, alongside the stunning doctrine of our eternal existence as intelligences alongside God. This scripturally warranted vision of human potential is gracious and magnanimous. It is encouraging and exulting. But their strong universalist bent may leave some readers uncomfortable with some of their conclusions. Universalism holds that eventually the entire human race will be reconciled to God and that all will eventually be saved (or better, healed). For them, as with Origen, other early Christians, and in our day Eastern Orthodox theologians like David Bentley Hart, none will be left in hell. Eternal punishment for sins, as traditionally understood, is an incoherent idea according to the tenets of universalism. Hell, if it exists, is non-eternal and remedial, more akin to purgatory.

Visions such as these can be breathtaking, but to some can feel quite hollow when confronted with the hinterlands of human evil. If one were to read Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* or Elie Wiesel's *Night* followed by this book being reviewed, the dissonance would be deeply felt and deeply real. How could the whole human family possibly be reconciled after the recent horrors of the twentieth century? The only answer we can attempt to give to the Auschwitzes of human history might simply be the concomitantly terse and voluminous *never again*. Humanity's horrors are without a doubt the results of malevolent and depraved ideas about the inherent worth of humans that are "Other," whether they be Jews, Rohingyas, Tutsis, or otherwise. The ideas that possessed men in power were carried out to their horrifically bloody ends.

Thus, it stands to reason that rehabilitating the ideas in circulation can have a profound impact on the course of human destiny. Offering a new theodicy can go only so far. At the risk of passing over the dark

side of humanity in silence, the Givenses focus instead on this side of the historically vexing coin. What kind of vision of humanity and God might facilitate the maximal flowering of human potential, goodness, and healing? That the Restoration provides this is their contention.

This optimistic vision of final and ultimate reconciliation is admittedly not readily self-evident in the scriptures, insistent as they are on the endless durations of final states. While the Doctrine and Covenants ultimately unveils a plan of salvation more generous than anything before it, opening the doors to all those who have come before, its soteriological picture differs from that of the Book of Mormon, not to mention the rest of the canon. In other words, the general tenor of this book will not always feel like it matches the tenor of the scriptures. But then again, the tenor of the scriptures can change like the tide. A more universalist vision does shine through on occasion (1 Timothy 2:3–4, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Romans 5:18, Romans 11:32, D&C 76, D&C 137).

Here the Givenses' most radical move comes in. But it is not a novel move, they carefully explain; it is a move grounded in the élan of the Restoration. Given the intractableness of scriptural inconsistency, the "plain and precious" things lost (1 Nephi 13:32), and the nature of Joseph Smith's revelatory prophethood, one thing becomes abundantly clear: we do not believe in scriptural infallibility, or *sola scriptura*. They cite Joseph Smith's striking comment that there are "*many* things in the Bible which do not … accord with the revelation of the holy Ghost to me" (66), as well as C.S. Lewis in one of his moments of brilliance: "The ultimate question is whether the doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of scriptures is to prevail when they conflict. We think the doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two" (68). This is the hermeneutic through which the Givenses have done all their work. It is also the assent to or dissent from this hermeneutic that will determine the response readers have to this book.

It is a jarring proposition. We are much more keen to attempt to harmonize inconsistencies or justify Biblical genocide than we are to think twice about the nature of scripture. But does not the very fact that it is only on Restoration grounds that this hermeneutic can be built speak to its merit? *Sola scriptura* is not our only option. If scripture was sufficient, then the Restoration was merely superfluous.

The more difficult question then arises. Even if the Bible is understandably flawed, what about the Restoration scripture? Does it not have a higher degree of metaphysical purity and stability? The authors and I would answer in the affirmative. But these are ponderous questions

and to what *degree*, neither the Givenses nor I pretend to have the final say on the matter. They quote Brigham Young, who once remarked that

> I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be re-written, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation. According as people are willing to receive the things of God, so the heavens send forth their blessings. (71)

As for what this might mean, it is a loose end. The thrilling metaphysical pathos of an "ongoing restoration" is captured in part by these thoughts. After all, what is the Restoration if not a rebuttal of revelatory finality: "For my works are without end, and also my words, for they never cease" (Moses 1:4).

What this book does persuasively elucidate is a powerful insight into religious psychology and practical discipleship. Cognitive scientists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris became famous for their Invisible Gorilla experiment,[3] testing what is called "selective attention." Participants were asked to watch a video of two teams passing a basketball to each other while milling around in the same small area, one team in white shirts the other in black, with the goal of counting how many passes were made by the team in white. While the correct answer is fifteen passes, Simons and Chabris discovered that half of the participants did not even see the costumed gorilla that walked on screen, beat its chest, and nonchalantly strolled off. The insight provided by this experiment and many others since is that we most readily register that which we are looking for and are sometimes blinded to that which we are not. Our intuitions can deceive us.

To put it more concretely, given our proclivities for "selective attention," might it not be ultimately more productive and more Christian to direct that attention to weal rather than woe? If we understand the Atonement to be the ultimate aim of God's creation, the literal at-one-ment or one-ing of the human family rather than a brutal confrontation between implacable divine wrath and human defilement, might we not more readily expend our mortal energies toward this aim of mutual reconciliation rather than channeling it toward pious self-interest? If we understand heaven to be exalted relationality rather than a final destination to be achieved, might we not more readily

3. See Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2009).

cultivate our relationships here and now, exalting each other along the way to our heavenly home?

There is far more going on in the world than any individual could possibly register and comprehend. There are more stimuli than there are senses with which to process them. The human eye is only designed to take in 0.0035% of the light spectrum, being completely blind to the rest. The question continually put to us as striving Christians, then, is to what spectrum we will choose to attune our religious eyes? What will we look for in the world and in others? Will we look for human depravity or nobility? Will we look for a vindictive and violent God or a compassionate Father in Heaven? Ideas matter. Words matter. We act out the ideas that possess us. We act out the ideas that occupy the top spot in our moral hierarchies. This book is a welcome invitation to let the more benevolent ideas take the reins, to see the world with more generous and compassionate eyes, and to see the image of God in others. In other words, to see the world through God's eyes, if we are to believe that God is good.

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