Adam S. Miller. *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology.*
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Reviewed by James E. Faulconer

Adam Miller is a professor of philosophy and the director of the honors program at Collin College, McKinney, Texas. He is the author of at least five books in Mormon studies and three in philosophy, as well as serving as editor of a collection of Mormon studies essays.

As one of several young Mormons not only doing theology but also asking *how* it ought to be done, Miller offers us a thoughtful and readable collection of essays. *Future Mormon* approaches theology with ideas and methods that most Latter-day Saints may not be familiar or comfortable. After all, theology is often a different animal than doctrine and devotional religion.

In dialogue with contemporary philosophical thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Alain Badiou, Jacques Lacan, and Giorgio Agamben, as well as the novelist Cormack McCarthy and the LDS thinkers Terryl and Fiona Givens, Miller proposes that we consider a Mormon theology that radically rethinks transcendence, denies the standard atomistic understanding of what it means to be an individual, insists on agency "all the way down" (105), relies heavily on a notion of covenant, asks us to reconsider what we mean by terms like *sin* and *redemption,* and suggests that our experiences with the supernatural are relatively rare in our lives because God intends us to put our attention on "the earth and the sun and the trees at hand" (77). As Miller makes these arguments, he demonstrates that we do theology best via a careful—and in his case, often innovative—reading of scripture.

A brief overview of the book's introduction and thirteen chapters will give readers a taste of Miller's insightful and sometimes restless approach.

The introduction, "A Future Tense Apologetics," explains that these essays are meant "to proactively gather for future Mormons [specifically

his yet-to-be grandchildren] tools and resources that may be useful for them as they try, in the context of their [hypothetical] world, to work out their own salvation" (xi).

Chapter 1, "A General Theory of Grace," argues that, rather than the *what* of creation, grace is the *how,* and sin is the suppression of undefined and uncontrollable grace in favor of what is defined and controllable.

In chapter 2, "Burnt Offerings: Reading 1 Nephi 1," Miller offers a close reading of scripture that focuses on the prayers and—Miller argues—sacrifices that Lehi makes at Jerusalem and in the wilderness (1 Ne. 1:5–6). His conclusion is that Lehi and Nephi learn that "God's redemption doesn't involve an elimination of all suffering but a transformation of our relationship to that suffering such that the suffering itself becomes a condition of knowledge and favor" (24).

Chapter 3, "Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms: Reading Jacob 7," is another close reading of scripture, this time using psychoanalytic ideas to think about Jacob's encounter with Sherem and the meaning of the doctrine of Christ, namely that Jacob's brothers are not necessarily lost forever.

In chapter 4, "Early Onset Postmortality," Miller reflects on Agamben's interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans and Agamben's argument that "God's call to each of us is to accept a messianic vocation, . . . to take up whatever secular predicates already define us (tall, teacher, male, Caucasian, father, Mormon, whatever) *in a new and peculiarly messianic way*" (42; italics in original).

The chapter "*The God Who Weeps*: Notes, Amens, and Disagreements" is, as its title suggests, a review of Terryl and Fiona Givens's book, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Ensign Peak, 2012). Miller writes a respectful but critical review of the book. Among other things, he disagrees with their description of faith as a choice, arguing that we ought not understand our relationship to God in terms of satisfying desires. He worries that the Givenses' way of thinking about preexistence may "devalue the present world by anchoring its true meaning and substance in another" (49). He is concerned that, though the authors give credence to evolution, they may not do so strongly enough, and he is concerned that they misunderstand agency.

Chapter 6, "A Radical Mormon Materialism: Reading *Wrestling the Angel,*" is a book review of Terryl Givens's *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought—Cosmos, God, and Humanity* (Oxford, 2014). Miller is very much in agreement with Givens's radical materialism, but argues that in spite of himself Givens's thinking is latently an

idealism. Miller's alternative is "a theory of grace that explicates salvation not in terms of the coincidence of a material subject with an ideal law" (63) but in terms of a Pauline understanding of grace and salvation.

In chapter 7, "Reflections on President Uchtdorf's 'The Gift of Grace,'" Miller takes it upon himself to argue that President Dieter F. Uchtdorf's 2015 talk about grace does not go far enough. Miller understands President Uchtdorf to teach that "works only become righteousness when they are the *product* of God's grace as that grace works its way out into the world through our hearts and hands." But, according to Miller, "the problem . . . is that this approach still implicitly frames grace as a response to sin. . . . It leaves intact the impression that God's original plan really was for people to bootstrap themselves into righteousness by way of obedience and that then, *when this fails,* God steps in with his grace as the key to our salvation" (66; italics in original). Miller offers an alternative that intends to leave intact the import of President Uchtdorf's teaching while extending it so that "grace is not God's backup plan," to quote the title of another book by Miller.

For those interested in Miller's understanding of what theology is and can be, chapter 8, "A Manifesto for the Future of Mormon Thinking," may be the most important essay of the book. "Thinking can only be fearless when it is conducted as an act of love," he says. "And thinking can only be conducted as an act of love when it traverses the position occupied by the enemy, transfiguring in the process myself, the truth, and the enemy" (73). If we take secularism as Mormonism's contemporary enemy, this means that we "shouldn't start, as many seem to do, by taking a secular premise—that religions is, essentially, the not-secular—as the key to understanding religion itself" (74). Rejecting secularism's definition of religion, Mormonism must then answer the charge that it "boils down to fuzzy feelings and wishful thinking" (75), that it is just in our heads. If we engage with that charge seriously, we discover quickly that heads are inseparable from bodies, which are inseparable from the physical world. It will turn out "that a fearless investigation of this subjective position, driven as it is by a love for its enemy, may simply coax into the open something that should have already been obvious to those whose hearts and minds are woven into the world by way of Mormonism: the truth that religion is not, fundamentally, about supernatural stuff" but is about reality (77).

Chapter 9, "Network Theology: Is It Possible to be a Christian but Not a Platonist?" is indirectly a response to Nietzsche's charge that Christianity is Platonism for the masses (1885 preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*). Of course, Miller believes that Christianity without Platonism

is possible, and he uses network theory to argue his position. Out of that theory he asks several questions: What if God is not a king but is instead a servant, as Jesus describes himself? What if truth is an ongoing process rather than a static product? What if grace is immanent rather than transcendent? And, what if the soul is a network rather than something like an atom?

Though it is not obvious from the title, the next chapter, "Jesus, Trauma, and Psychoanalytic Technique," continues to deal with themes Miller has already introduced: the necessity of grace, the kenotic nature of Christian life, and the need for something to disrupt our habitual understanding of things. The surprise is that he uses the terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis to do so.

Chapter 11, "Every Truth Is a Work, Every Object Is a Covenant," further fleshes out Miller's earlier claim that truth is a process by insisting that everything is an agent, not necessarily a conscious agent, but an agent—a being that creates effects—nonetheless. On such a view, the Book of Mormon is an agent: "The Book of Mormon is a basin of attraction. . . . We are free to denounce it, discount it, or make truths out of it—but, to the extent that our paths intersect, we are not free from the hazard of its pull" (106). Relying on Doctrine and Covenants 84's description of the Book of Mormon as a covenant (D&C 84:57), Miller says that "the Book of Mormon exemplifies what it means, in general, to be a truth. Every object is an agent, every agent is a coalition, every coalition is a truth, and every truth is a covenant" (107). These admonitions follow: "Don't assume that the Book of Mormon is or isn't historically true. History is not one thing. *Make* the Book of Mormon historically true in as many times and as many places and to whatever degree you're able" and "Can you turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers? Can you use it to keep the children from being cast off forever? Can you adapt and extend and strengthen the promises made to the fathers? Will you allow the book to claim you and counter-claim it in return?" (111).

"The Body of Christ" chapter, barely more than two pages long, argues that rather than asking whether the institutional Church is true, we might ask "Is this the body of Christ? Is Christ manifest here? Does his blood flow in these veins? . . . Is faith strengthened here? Is hope enlivened? Is charity practiced?" (114).

The title of chapter 13, "Silence, Witness, and Absolute Rock: Reading Cormack McCarthy," may suggest that the essay is incongruous with the rest of the collection, an interpretation of a contemporary novelist's work rather than an essay in theology. But the incongruity can be resolved;

Miller analyzes McCarthy's work to show its theological import. Three kinds of persons show up in the novels: "(1) the dreamer who wants to reduce the world to its shadow by *replacing* things with words and maps, (2) the mute who wants to *deny* that the world casts any shadow of meaning, and (3) the witness who, *echoing* the world's heart-silence, allows meaning and joy to peripherally accrue" (118). Though Miller doesn't say so, it is hard not to conclude that the third is the one with which he feels the most kinship.

At first glance, this collection of essays may seem slightly haphazard: a couple of book reviews, an interpretation of a collection of novels, several essays giving close readings of scripture, an essay on Lacanian psychoanalysis, and so on. But a closer look shows that haphazard character to be only apparent. This is a collection of essays from different occasions, not a book with a tightly controlled argument from start to finish. Nevertheless, the same themes run from beginning to end: grace, materialism, kenosis, ... Miller's theses are bold, insightful, and provocative, and they are laid out in clear language and arguments. In almost any text, a turn to the thought of Lacan, Badiou, or Agamben means a turn to nearly impenetrable prose, but that isn't so for Miller. He is judicious in his use of the philosophers and other thinkers to whom he turns, and he explains their ideas clearly and carefully. His prose writing is very good, and it doesn't falter when he explains difficult ideas.

The result of Miller's good writing and insightful thinking is a book full of "refrigerator quotes," messages you'll want to share with others as you read. It is also full of ideas that will make you think beyond mere appreciation. Perhaps you'll reconsider ideas you've long held. Perhaps the book will goad you to argue with its author. Either way, those interested in Mormon theology must read this book, and many others ought to.

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