



When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought

By Terry L. Givens

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The idea of the pre-existence of the soul has been extremely important, widespread, and persistent throughout Western history--from even before the philosophy of Plato to the poetry of Robert Frost. *When Souls Had Wings* offers the first systematic history of this little explored feature of Western culture.

Terry L. Givens describes the tradition of pre-existence as "pre-heaven"--the place where unborn souls wait until they descend to earth to be born. And typically it *is* seen as a descent--a falling away from a happier and untroubled state into the turbulent and sinful world we know. The title of the book refers to the idea put forward in antiquity that our souls begin with wings, and that only after shedding those wings do we fall to earth. The book not only traces the history of the idea of pre-existence, but also captures its meaning for those who have embraced it. Givens describes how pre-existence has been invoked to explain "the better angels of our nature," including the human yearning for transcendence and the sublime. Pre-existence has been said to account for why we know what we should not know, whether in the form of a Greek slave's grasp of mathematics, the moral sense common to humanity, or the human ability to recognize universals. The belief has explained human bonds that seem to have their own mysterious prehistory, salved the wounded sensibility of a host of thinkers who could not otherwise account for the unevenly distributed pain and suffering that are humanity's common lot, and has been posited by philosophers and theologians alike to salvage the principle of human freedom and accountability.

When Souls had Wings underscores how durable (and controversial) this idea has been throughout the history of Western thought, the theological dangers it has represented, and how prominently it has featured in poetry, literature, and art.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Givens could make a reader stop and think twice about a joke on a LaffyTaffy wrapper. Imagine what he could do with a concept as deep, rich, and personal as the preexistence of the soul...For a greater appreciation for (and understanding of) the idea of preexistence, this unique book is a must-read." --Association for Mormon Letters

About the Author

Terryl L. Givens is Professor of Literature and Religion and holds the Jabez A. Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond. Some of his books include *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (Oxford, 1997), *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford 2002), which the *New York Times* called "provocative reading," *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*, which was named Best Book of the Year by the Mormon History Association for 2007, and most recently, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2009).

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