

A REVIEW ARTICLE OF JONATHAN ROOT, *ORAL ROBERTS AND THE RISE OF THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL*¹

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Abstract

This review article discusses the new biography of Oral Roberts by Jonathan Root. It situates the book in the field of recent Oral Roberts studies and discusses its contributions to the life of this well-known twentieth-century religious figure. It also critically assesses the assumptions of the book related to its framing of Oral Roberts as contributing to the “rise of the prosperity gospel.”

Resurgence of Oral Roberts Studies

It has been nearly four decades since David Harrell, Jr., received unprecedented access to Oral Roberts and his archive to produce the first academic biography of one of the most significant figures in the American religious landscape. Finished in 1985, Harrell offered a thorough but fair appraisal of the Pentecostal healing evangelist whose healing crusades captured the attention of the American public when, for the first time, Pentecostal aesthetics were broadcast to the mainstream public through his television show in the mid-1950s. For the next three decades, Oral Roberts was a household name that exemplified a vision of God as a God of possibilities and miracles.

Harrell’s book was published in 1985 but was finished a few years earlier. This meant that it closed its narrative prior to Roberts’ unfortunate decline in popularity resulting from the controversies of the mid-1980s. In the following years, Roberts was slowly reduced from his status as America’s healing evangelist to national caricature as a religious fundraising charlatan resulting from appeals for funding for the City of Faith Medical and Research Center. The most notable of these financial controversies was an appeal for funding after seeing a “900-foot Jesus” in 1980 and his 1986 controversy of

¹ Jonathan Root, *Oral Roberts and the Rise of the Prosperity Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023).

insinuating that if he did not fund the medical school, God would “call him home.”² The relentless media attention given to these scandals took over public perception of this important figure and all but marginalized his significance. Support declined, scrutiny increased, and Oral Roberts became known not for his remarkable healing ministry, but for exemplifying the greedy televangelist who was out to enrich himself through the donations of the religious public. Just five years after Harrell’s biography, Americans knew a very different image of Oral Roberts than the one portrayed by Harrell.

Thirty years later, the vitriol against Roberts and criticism of the scandals faded, but so had an interest in Oral Roberts, both in the popular imagination and the scholarship of the Spirit-empowered Movement. From 1985 to 2015, only one essay or academic work addressed Roberts. Noticing this gap in research, Wonsuk Ma, who had recently joined the faculty of Oral Roberts University (ORU), championed the idea of a special issue of *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* in order to explore Roberts’ legacy and contributions in a new era. That vision became a reality when in 2018, a special issue was published with twelve new studies about Roberts’ legacy and theology.³ This momentum has continued as several additional studies have been published in subsequent issues.

While interest was increasing inside ORU circles, just a few years earlier, a University of Missouri PhD researcher made multiple visits to ORU and the Holy Spirit Research Center for his dissertation on Oral Roberts and American culture, which he completed in 2016.⁴ Upon completion, he was recruited to expand his PhD research for a book about Oral Roberts to be published in the Eerdmans Library of Religious Biography Series. The series seeks to “bring to life important figures in United States history,” such as Billy Graham, Henrietta Mears, Kathrine Kuhlman, and Jackie Robinson. Including Oral Roberts in this series is an important signal that the academy is ready to appreciate Roberts once again.

As a careful researcher and well-trained historian, Jonathan Root was given the opportunity to take up where Harrell had left off and dig into the “rest of the story” to try to explain the complex and complicated story of Roberts’ fall from his place of importance in the religious imagination. He did so by writing a story about what the publisher coined as “the Rise of the Prosperity Gospel.” Root’s historical research produced an accurate and fair account of Roberts’ impoverished upbringing, his rise in the ranks of Pentecostal ministry, and his transition to healing evangelist that modernized the details of Roberts’ life, but is very much aligned with Harrell’s narrative. Nevertheless, the historical details

² Daniel D. Isgrigg, “‘I Tried Poverty’: Exploring the Psychological Impact of Poverty and Prosperity in the Life of Oral Roberts,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 5:1 (2020), 5–24.

³ See Wonsuk Ma, “Why Oral Roberts Studies?,” *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 3:2 (2018), 157–67. <https://doi.org/10.31380/2573-6345.1083>

⁴ Jonathan Root, “Total Salvation: The Gospel of the Abundant Life and American Culture, 1947–1989” (PhD Thesis, University of Missouri, 2016). <https://doi.org/10.32469/10355/60392>.

offered in the genre of an accessible biography are meticulously documented in the endnotes. Root, knowing full well of the negative portrayals of Roberts in his lifetime, follows Harrell's legacy by painting a fair and favorable picture of a religious innovator who accomplished things that few others have or could have. As director of the Holy Spirit Research Center during Root's research visits to ORU, we had many talks about understanding Roberts in the light of Pentecostalism, the prosperity gospel, and his legacy.

Accomplishments and Observations

The accomplishments of this new biography are many. First, as mentioned, Root offers a fair and kind narrative of Oral Roberts' life that Daniel Vaca describes in the forward as "empathetic yet critical" (xi). This is an accurate assessment. Root paints Roberts as a sympathetic figure from his impoverished upbringing and childhood health challenges to his early successes as a Pentecostal Holiness pastor and evangelist in chapters one and two. In chapters three and four, Root documents Roberts' rise to prominence through his innovations in television media ministry. In this narrative, Root gives insights into the behind-the-scenes business decisions that enabled not only his success in the public eye, but also allowed him to sustain a vast ministry, including the completion of his massive Abundant Life Building in 1958. While recognizing the business side and some of the shifts in Roberts' understanding of wealth to fund his ministry, Root by no means paints these developments in a negative light. In chapters five and six, Root describes the shift from healing ministry to the idea of Oral Roberts University. Much of the narrative about the beginnings of ORU is well known, but one insight he offers is how, at least in part, Roberts' dream of ORU was because of his son, Ronnie, who was a brilliant young man, but whose struggles in life began in college (80). Chapter six explores the legitimacy Roberts gained from the university leading to his friendship with Billy Graham in 1966 and his alliance with the United Methodist Church in 1968. As a result, Roberts' circle expanded beyond the church to important figures, including politicians, statesmen, and even presidents. Chapter seven discusses the importance of Roberts' primetime television ministry and its role in further pushing Roberts to national prominence. That success not only raised questions about Roberts' personal wealth, but also began to establish patterns of fundraising as the primary way he supported the university. In chapter eight, Root discusses how athletics played a major role in Roberts' ambitions and how he navigated his "color blind" theology and sympathetic role in civil rights issues. It was clear that ORU and its athletics were a big factor in Roberts' empathetic disposition toward the plight of African Americans (146–47).

The final three chapters get to the heart of the story, which is no doubt intended by the title, *Oral Roberts and the Rise of the Prosperity Gospel*. In chapter nine, Root goes into detail about the extraordinary vision of the medical school and City of Faith. Root

discusses the local criticism, the legal challenges, and the financial perils he faced in funding such an endeavor. He asserts that during this era, Roberts was blinded by his pride to prove everyone wrong and complete the vision, even to the detriment of the university. Chapter ten is titled “Called Home” and is the pinnacle of the study. He documents the criticisms and accurately portrays Roberts’ attempts to raise the necessary funds to sustain the City of Faith vision even amid the criticism of those tactics. Yet, Root fairly labels these actions as “unfortunate” in that he shows it was not Roberts’ intent to enrich himself, but in service to his own stubborn obsession to complete the vision (180). Yet, as Root notes, “Oral’s reputation never recovered” from this, both locally and nationally, which was the cause of the City of Faith’s ultimate demise, whether Roberts would admit it or not (187–91).

The epilogue concludes with what I consider to be the most important part of the updated biography. Root discusses how Roberts faded from the limelight and gives details of his life after stepping down at ORU. On the one hand, Roots notes that this was the era that cemented his impact on prosperity teaching as he allied with Word of Faith and Charismatic circles with his message of seed faith, which had supplanted healing as his most notable doctrine. On the other hand, Root also gives a sympathetic glimpse into the personal struggles Roberts encountered in this last season with declining health, with a heart attack, the death of his wife Evelyn, and his final years. Even in these accounts, Root paints Roberts neither as a hero nor a villain. He fairly and empathetically wrestles with the complexity of a man who dreamed big, adapted to new cultural realities, and was steadfast even to his own demise.

Resetting the Story or Re-enforcing the Narrative?

With appreciation to Eerdmans and Root for recognizing the importance of this updated biography, I was puzzled by a couple of things in this work. First, I frankly found the title off-putting. So much so that it took me a while just to pick up and read the book. It was clear that the publisher had chosen a title that perpetuated an image of Roberts couched in his contributions to the “prosperity gospel.” The problem is, there is far less in Root’s narrative about this story arch as the title suggests. While Root certainly does not shy away from discussions of prosperity in the development of his theology, that storyline is, at best, a sub plot and by no means the main thesis of the book. By contrast, Root’s work seeks to understand the totality of Roberts: from poverty to wealth, from marginalization to mainstream, from personal triumph to personal loss and anguish. The Roberts of this biography is neither a charlatan, nor a self-enriching narcissist who was milking his supporters. He is, as Root so eloquently comments, one who will “inspire and frustrate,” who can be “humble and arrogant,” and who can be “a sincere disciple of Jesus Christ as well as crass manipulator of

people's emotions" (6). Whatever Roberts' contributions to the prosperity gospel may be, Root's treatment situates these contributions where they should ultimately lie. Roberts' seed faith gospel and fundraising tactics (as problematic and self-sabotaging as they were) were, at the end of the day, for something bigger than himself. His efforts were in service to a larger vision to build lasting institutions like Oral Roberts University and the City of Faith complex, both of which continue today because of that investment.

Second, if it is frustrating that the title does not match the book's content, the title is equally confounding compared to the other titles in the series. Consider the title, *Oral Roberts and the Rise of the Prosperity Gospel*, compared to the following other titles:

One Soul at a Time: The Story of Billy Graham

The Miracle Lady: Katherine Kuhlman

Mother of Modern Evangelicalism: The Life and Legacy of Henrietta Mears

None of the other titles intentionally frame the biography in such a way as to paint the legacy as is the case with Roberts. It is apparent to me that the publisher wished to market Roberts' legacy not in a way that appreciates his positive contributions to religious history, but to perpetuate the stereotype that he is to blame for arguably one of the most problematic elements of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. Roberts is certainly part of that narrative, and Root conveys those facts where appropriate, but to stereotype Roberts to the reader by this title when the narrative does not suggest such shows the publisher's biased intent. While it is possible that this was Root's intention all along, I find little in the book that suggested such an agenda on his part. Here are a few examples. As Roberts gained notoriety in the mid-1950s, Root notes that his success depended on supporters of the ministry. Yet, he notes, "Always aware of the dangers of financial chicanery, Oral dedicated one night of each campaign to raise money for local churches" (45). Again, later, he notes, "As a popular, globe-trotting minister, Roberts knew he had the potential to be wealthy, but he was also aware of what the slightest hint of financial abuse would do to his reputation and ministry" (70). So, while honestly assessing problematic areas of abundance in Roberts' personal finances and his critical role in developing seed faith as an abundance principle, Root gives Roberts the benefit of the doubt in ways that balance these realities fairly and does not seek to further the stereotype. Root's expertise in documenting the development of the prosperity gospel and American culture is certainly a thread in the narrative, but it is not the main concern that drives the overall thesis of the book.

Besides the title, my primary critique of the book is that perhaps Root may have missed the opportunity to shed new light on Oral Roberts and his story in ways that Harrell could not. He took up the task of writing a critical work that sought to

understand and explain the tumultuous years of the 1980s. And overall, I think Root handled that with measured critique and honest evaluation. Root had the opportunity to rewrite the soured legacy of Roberts due to the 1980s controversies. He could have offered nuanced counter-narratives to the popular portrayal of an Oral Roberts who made his ministry all about money, which he did in part. But to leave it there is a bit unfortunate as the financial crisis and controversy was only a small part of Roberts' overall legacy as an epilogue.

I was left feeling disappointed that more was not done to take a more objective look back at the good that came out of that controversial era, especially considering the work I did in 2020. I suggest in my article that there is more to that story, particularly when understood through the lens of the psychology of poverty.⁵ I argued that it was the “biology of inequality” that Roberts faced as a child that was re-traumatized by the loss of two of his children during the most important years of ORU's campus development. His “prosperity gospel” and seed faith teachings, therefore, should be understood more as a “sufficiency gospel” than “prosperity gospel” as he once again had to lean on God to be faithful to provide the money to complete the building of the City of Faith. For Roberts, it did not matter how many millions God provided in the past, psychologically he was still the struggling minister who did not have enough to do what God was demanding him to do. I also point out that when the dust settled from the criticism, the only friends he had to come to his side and help keep the university afloat was the Word of Faith movement that was already entrenched in the health and wealth gospel. It was an alliance that would shape both academic and popular understanding of Roberts. In many ways, he “seeded” the prosperity gospel, but was never really part of it until the aftermath of the 1980s.

Another area of nuance that was missed is the ultimate outcome of Roberts' appeals for funding the ministry. He raised funds for a vision bigger than himself. The \$8,000,000 plea from the Prayer Tower was to scholarship medical school students so they would not have any debt and could serve in medical missions after graduation. The other pleas for giving served to build the campus (fourteen buildings in the decade of the 1970s!), for the building of the City of Faith, and for other buildings, rather than to pay for private jets or mansions (though Roberts had both) as is so common in prosperity circles. These buildings have been used by generations since, and ORU stands today as one of the most important higher education institutions in the Spirit-empowered Movement. Add to that, the vision of merging prayer and medicine is now mainstream, and the massive buildings of the City of Faith today house several hospitals and many other businesses that support the city and feed revenue back into the university. These are just some of his positive legacies that deserve attention, in addition to his influence on what has become the health and wealth segment of the movement.

⁵ Isgrigg, “I Tried Poverty,” 5–24.

The idea that the “prosperity gospel” alone is his legacy is unjustified and frankly does not adequately reflect Root’s intentions. His epilogue discusses his part to play, but certainly does not focus Roberts’ legacy solely on the “rise of the prosperity gospel.” Root himself notes that commentators at Roberts’ death had “less agreement on Oral’s influence on the prosperity gospel” (200). It is a complicated story, and what many have confused as prosperity, I have called more of a “sufficiency gospel,” in obedience to God’s directions, even if those projects were ill-advised at the time. Root admits, and I agree with him, that “Oral’s devotion to things like seed faith and his belief in the causal relationship between faith and wealth—and its opposite—reflect the most damaging aspects of the nation’s crass materialism” (203). These are critiques of both Roberts and American Evangelicalism in general, but not necessarily in service of a larger metanarrative of the origins and development of the “prosperity gospel,” as the title suggests. At the end of the day Root agrees with many critics of Evangelicalism that this movement has been far too “infatuated with money and influence” (204). Roberts ultimately ended on the wrong end of the scale. He began with emphasizing God’s sufficiency out of his poverty and ended with fundraising to the ends that he had determined were necessary for doing God’s work. Root concludes, “In his own attempt to bridge this gap, Oral Roberts represented twentieth-century Christianity’s greatest hopes and worst failures” (204).

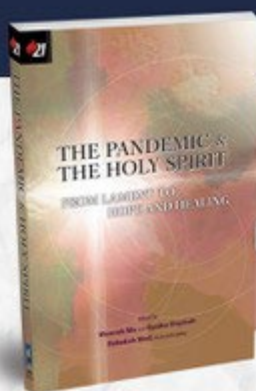
The Right Book at the Right Time, with the Wrong Title.

This book needed to be written, and Root’s research and writing are perfect for a volume of this nature. At the time, Root was probably the best choice for this project. He was bringing much-needed critical and academic study of a significant figure in American religious history after decades of stigma and neglect. Root is to be commended for this volume and its valuable insights and detailed research. I am also grateful that Eerdmans believed Roberts’ story to be valuable enough to be told in the present day. I only wish the editors could have listened more intently to Root’s narrative in a way that would have insulated them from the easy and unfortunate framing of Roberts only in terms of the prosperity gospel. In doing so, they will have unwittingly prejudiced readers from the outset or kept people away from this volume in general. Root’s work deserves a better hearing than that. Nevertheless, I am glad this work is out there and signals a new day for appreciating Roberts’ life and legacy.



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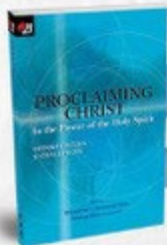
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