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## Theology and Prince (Book Review)

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### Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Theology and Prince* by Jonathan H. Harwell and Katrina E. Jenkins. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019. 178 pp. ISBN: 9781978704176

### Keywords

book review, Theology and Prince, Jonathan H. Harwell, Katrina E. Jenkins

### Comments

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# Theology and Prince

## Review

Prince was arguably one of the most eclectic, creative, transcendent, and eccentric pop artists of all time. Diverse musically and constantly pushing creative and cultural boundaries, Prince fueled controversy while simultaneously uniting the masses through music. Jonathan Harwell and Katrina Jenkins' edited volume *Theology and Prince* explores this musical pioneer's beliefs, revealing a complex, ever-changing celebrity with deep convictions.

*Theology and Prince* is an eight-chapter edited volume that combines the analysis of pastors, music writers, philosophers, and postgraduate students around Prince's spirituality and theology. This distinct work is not a unified exploration of Prince along specific theological topics or a historical review of developing theologies of the artist; instead, the work is an exploration of Prince's work and life by scholars who all have a love for Prince. In theological circles, Prince may not be considered required reading; yet, as a famous music icon who influenced the world, this artist is a voice worth listening to.

Broadly, this book engages with the public theology of the life and music Prince through a breadth of topics and scholarly disciplines, providing a well-situated contribution to the intersection of theology and popular culture. Several contributors utilize lyrical analysis of Prince's songs, setting this work within the Christian tradition. The volume presents a vast coverage of song analysis, engaging with both well-known tracks such as "Purple Rain" and deep cuts such as "God Is Alive." Theological themes such as eschatology, the devil, *eros* and *agape* love, and Pentecost are highlighted in Prince's work. These themes, among others, are not viewed through a monolithic lens of Prince's early life as a Seventh-Day Adventist or later conversion to a Jehovah's Witness; instead, these essays combine to create diverse and divergent readings of Prince's theology through the lenses of racial identity, social justice, LGBTQ+ studies, aesthetics, and lived theology.

In chapter 1, Rachel Harris surveys Prince's eschatology through contrasting case studies of Prince's 2007 Super Bowl performance and Justin Timberlake's use of Prince's image at the 2018 Super Bowl. Zada Johnson's chapter presents Prince within the Black prophetic tradition utilizing music for social change. Joseph Trullinger and Emily McAvan both investigate Prince through the lens of gender and sexuality, and Will Stockton offers reflections on Prince's fusion of theology and food. In chapter 6, Stefan Sereda highlights Prince's "spooky songs," where the use of the devil and other dark imaginary present a fuller view of Prince's spirituality. Erica Thompson's chapter considers how Prince's theology affected the production of the film *Graffiti Bridge*. In chapter 8, Suzanne Castle unpacks the meaning and impact of a Prince-inspired worship service in Fort Worth, Texas, shortly after Prince's death.

With such an array of voices, methods, and views, readers may struggle to find themselves in a flood of "Purple Rain." Yet, scholarly minded Prince fans will experience fresh conversations around this indelible artist. A thematic or historical approach may have created a more accessible and unified volume, yet the interdisciplinary, multivalent approach may better

represent Prince's uncommon life and continued artistic impact. This collection of essays will quickly become an essential starting point for future Prince scholars. Theologians may benefit from chapters focused on extracting embedded theologies through lyrical analysis of songs. Additionally, educators of theology and pop culture will find several chapters suitable for dynamic classroom discussions on the intersection of theological belief and artistic practice.

Harwell and Jenkins have successfully pulled together a scholarly Prince tribute band that traces the waves of Prince's work into each member's unique field of study. Like Prince's music, *Theology and Prince* is a complex, multifaceted fusion of ideas and approaches. This volume presents an original contribution to the field of cultural studies utilizing the music and life of Prince to explore contemporary theological themes and the impact of faith on artistic practice.