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Pedlar, James E. *Review of Methodism and the Miraculous: John Wesley's Idea of the Supernatural and the Identification of Methodists in the Eighteenth-Century*, by Robert Webster. *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies* 38, no. 3 (2016): 364-365.

Robert Webster, *Methodism and the Miraculous: John Wesley's Idea of the Supernatural and the Identification of Methodists in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012). x + 273 pp. \$35.00 paperback.

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It is widely known that John Wesley gave serious attention to visions, dreams, angels, demons, accounts of healing, and even ghosts and witchcraft, and that interest in such phenomena was a distinguishing mark of the early Methodists. Most scholarly interpreters have taken Wesley's unabashed interest in the supernatural as an indication that he was out of step with the spirit of his age. Are not such ideas at odds with Enlightenment sensibilities? Robert Webster's *Methodism and the Miraculous* convincingly demonstrates otherwise. This fine book, based upon the author's Oxford doctoral dissertation, argues that the question of the supernatural remained a matter of lively intellectual debate in the eighteenth-century, and shows that Wesley and the Methodists "were not out of touch with the times in which they lived but actively engaged in the intellectual climate of their day" (10).

Webster's first chapter sets the context for his argument by reviewing perspectives on the supernatural during the Enlightenment. He argues that it is simplistic to propose that reason and faith were seen as fundamentally opposed in the Enlightenment, given that many leading thinkers of the day (including Wesley) saw reason and faith as mutually illuminating. Chapter Two discusses Wesley's epistemology, identifying him as an empiricist, and noting that Wesley considered personal testimony to be an important and reliable form of empirical evidence. Webster reviews Wesley's interesting use of the language of "spiritual sensation," a category which Wesley used when discussing how the Spirit speaks immediately to the human person. As Webster notes, Wesley believed that claims to immediate inspiration should be interpreted in the context of the accumulated weight of experiential evidence gathered over time. Rather than proposing a kind of private revelation, Wesley believed that a "network of knowledge of the invisible world" was established through "testimonies of mediated knowledge, which were verified across time" (38). Chapter Three treats Wesley's view of evil as it relates to the supernatural, focusing firstly on his defense of a traditional view of original sin. Webster next turns his attention to earthquakes, which were a common preoccupation in Wesley's day, and which Wesley viewed as a visible sign of God's judgment on the corruption of the world. Webster also discusses the demonic, noting again that demons continued to be a matter of debate in eighteenth-century theology, science, and philosophy, as well as popular culture. For his part, Wesley supported his views on demons by appeal to the Bible, experience (including his own experience in practicing the ministry of exorcism) and the evidence of personal testimony. Chapter Four, the longest in this book, addresses the topic of visions and dreams, discussing the distinctly trinitarian character of Methodist visionary experiences, and demonstrating how visions and dreams functioned within the Methodist community as confirmation of Methodist teaching on justification and sanctification. Though Wesley was criticized by some for his interest in visionary experiences, he continued to see them as being of revelatory significance (though not normative in and of themselves), and felt that they could instruct and edify the community of faith. Webster does a good job of demonstrating how Wesley took a balanced approach to such matters. He avoided both gullible fanaticism and rationalistic scepticism, by

focusing on the weight of collective Christian experience and testimony, as objective as well as subjective bases for affirming the ongoing reality of visions and dreams. Webster closes the book with a chapter tracing the gradual eclipse of supernatural emphasis in the Methodist traditions in the nineteenth century. While some of the more revivalistic strands of Methodism, such as the Primitive Methodists, maintained a strong focus on supernatural experiences, eventually even they would shift their emphasis and spiritualize the supernatural categories of their forbears.

Webster's book is excellently written and thoroughly researched. Both Wesleyan and Pentecostal / Charismatic historians and theologians will want to make note of this book, in view of the strong historical and theological connections between our two traditions, not to mention the specific focus of this book on extraordinary charismatic gifts. Webster does a fine job of demonstrating how Wesley was able to give serious credence to dramatic experiences of the Spirit from within a coherent, rational epistemology which was grounded in Scripture, experience, and the tradition of the primitive church. I highly recommend this book; in my view, it furthers discussions between Wesleyans and Pentecostal / Charismatic theologians regarding the nature of the Spirit's work in the Christian community.