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## ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY MORMON FEMINISM

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WHEN I SPEAK of Mormon feminism today, I am speaking specifically of the concerns of mostly North American, English-speaking women who tend to be middle class. There are many different kinds of feminism, and there has always been something of a gap between the concerns of what can be called first-world feminism and third-world feminism. Third-world feminism concerns itself largely with basic human living conditions in which women (and children) find themselves and seeks redress for economic and political injustices associated with gender and poverty. For the purposes of my paper today, however, I am going to focus strictly on middle-class concerns which at least on the surface appear to have little if anything to do with issues of poverty or secular political empowerment.

When I use the term "Mormon feminist" among non-Mormons, I nearly always encounter such comments as, "Isn't that something of an oxymoron?" When I use the term among Mormons, I nearly always have to explain that being a Mormon feminist does not necessarily mean that one is lobbying for women to be ordained to the Mormon priesthood, although my paper today will likely do nothing to dispel that myth.

Possibly the most problematic aspect of Mormonism for the Judeo-Christian world to accept is its radical anthropomorphizing of deity—that is, Mormons believe that human beings and God are literally the same species. It is absolutely essential to understand these two points—that Mormons believe God is a glorified human being, and that it is God's

own selfless will that we become gods ourselves—in order to comprehend the significance of the questions of a Mother in Heaven and women and priesthood authority.

In the late 20th-century Mormon church, all worthy males from age 12 and older are ordained to various offices in a lay priesthood that provides the governing structure of the church. Although Mormons view priesthood as the means by which God empowers human beings to minister to one another, Mormon priesthood carries with it an additional aspect: it is the means by which men are to become

like God. But for however clear Mormon scriptures are about men's ultimate destiny, women's place in Mormon theology is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> This is not only because Mormon scripture is cast in androcentric language—that is to say that the scriptures talk about humankind's ultimate destiny in terms that relate primarily to males and not females—but also in the sense that our religious rituals are also centered around male worship activities.

Nowhere is the ambiguity and uncertainty about women's eternal destiny more evident nor more poignant than in the consideration of the Mormon doctrine of a Mother in Heaven. As far as we know, the doctrine was first enunciated in a hymn written by a prominent 19th-century Mormon woman, Eliza R. Snow, who claimed that she learned it from the prophet Joseph Smith. Numerous church authorities in both the 19th and 20th centuries publicly endorsed the doctrine; the most authoritative confirmation was an official statement of the First Presidency in 1909: "All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity."<sup>2</sup>

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However, the doctrine has not been canonized nor expanded beyond the vaguest of inferences—that there simply “is” a Mother in Heaven. Instead, speculation has filled the void of information. Some believe that knowledge of the Mother is withheld because with it we would then have to grapple with the issue of polygyny—not just the polygamous past of our pioneer ancestors, but with the uncertain specter of polygyny in heaven. Indeed, those who accept heavenly polygyny as a given are not shy about questioning whether we have more than one mother in heaven. In concert with this, some people, including several notable past Mormon leaders, have promulgated the idea that the creation of spirit offspring is precisely analogous to the creation of human bodies. Such unbridled flights of fancy have led some women to wonder whether “heaven” will be an unending series of pregnancies; others worry that if the sperm-to-ovum ratio in the hereafter parallels what it is on earth, an exalted man would need to have literally thousands of polygamous wives to populate even one world such as ours.

These are disquieting thoughts. And, of course, a fair number of members, particularly those living outside of the United States and Canada, wonder if Mother in Heaven is really church doctrine at all. Not only is the Mother not worshiped, She is not discussed, sung about, nor included in the general church curriculum. She is not mentioned even when it should be natural to include Her. For example, I have read and heard many talks mentioning what a painful sacrifice it was for the Father to have seen the sufferings of His son Jesus. Wasn't this a painful sacrifice for Jesus' Heavenly Mother as well?

Most Mormons don't pray to Her, particularly now that such prayer to Her has been officially proscribed on the grounds that, unsurprisingly, there is no scriptural precedent for doing so.<sup>3</sup> We do not know Her name, and most Mormons do not believe that revelation can come from Her. Many believe that knowledge about Her is purely tangential to our salvation.

“Maternal deism” best describes our Heavenly Mother's relationship to us here in mortality. She co-created us, but to all appearances has since left us alone. Of all ironies, this must be the most excruciating. Mormon women are constantly told that women are nurturers by nature, but our

Heavenly Mother—ostensibly what all worthy Mormon women are destined to become—is not on the scene to provide nurturing to her mortal children during the crucial test phase of our development. What kind of a mother cannot speak to her children, nor be spoken to? And is this what awaits women hereafter?

The thought of an aloof, distant or otherwise occupied Mother has been so painful to some Mormons that they have diligently searched for ways to “prove” that She has, in fact, been actively involved in this sphere. Some have postulated that the Mother is the Holy Ghost—an idea that does not sit well with those convinced that the Godhead must mirror the all-male priesthood presidencies of our day.<sup>4</sup> Others believe that when the scriptures speak of “God,” they are speaking of both the Father and the Mother as a single unit, and that the title “Father” is to be read in the same generic, inclusive way that “men” is used at times to mean females as well as males.

It requires a very long stretch to bridge the gulf between what very little is actually known and what is so heartfeelingly desired.

The crucial question for most Mormon feminists, then, is whether the anthropomorphic Mormon God is a divine couple—a dyad composed of both a Father and a Mother, co-equal in might, majesty and power; or is the Mother simply God's wife or one of His wives, a subordinated consort lacking authority in and responsibility for the temporal salvation of her children? Is the Mother a passive on-looker or an active participant in what Mormon scriptures call God's work and glory? In fine, does our Mother hold and actively exercise the priesthood, which Mormon apostle Bruce R. McConkie defined as “the power and authority of Deity by which all things exist; by which they are created, governed, and controlled; by which the universe and worlds without number have come rolling into existence; by which the great plan of creation, redemption, and exaltation operates throughout immensity”?<sup>5</sup>

If Mormon women are to take their cues from what they experience and are taught through the auspices of the church, our future appears to be one of silence and obscurity. As it stands, what we do know about being exalted is, as I mentioned before, virtually 100 percent male-oriented. Our scriptures speak of male deity creating this world and

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thus we believe that exalted men will build worlds and rule over them. We know from experience that we pray to a male God and thus infer that male gods will be prayed to. Consider, too, the Mormon temple ceremony called the endowment. This is a dramatic reenactment of the creation of the world and a highly literalistic portrayal of the events surrounding the Fall of Adam and Eve and their being cast out of Eden. God the Father is depicted as orchestrating all the events from the celestial realm. Yet He is seen time and again all alone in the heavenly courts; the Mother is nowhere to be seen, not even as a silent onlooker to the pivotal events leading up to Her children's mortal existence.

Moreover, in the endowment, following the fall, Eve becomes nothing more than a passive, silent companion. Adam takes the lead, becoming a mediator between her and God. The wording of other parts of the temple ceremony raise other questions—for example, what does it mean that women are destined to become “queens and priestesses unto their husbands,” although their husbands are going to be “kings and priests unto God”?

The fallen motif of a dominant-submissive, unequal status relationship is held up as a model for male-female relations in the Mormon Church as in traditional Christendom. Ironically, even though in the temple Mormon women wear the same robes of the priesthood and say the very same explicitly priesthood-related words that men do in order to enter the celestial room at the final stage of the endowment ceremony, the significance of women's doing so is never discussed in or out of the temple, and of late has been actively downplayed. If temple-endowed Mormon women do hold the priesthood, most are completely unaware of the fact.<sup>6</sup>

There are parallels to the division between laity and clergy and the situation that women and men experience in the Mormon Church; there are also some interesting parallels between our religious experience and that of orthodox Judaism, where men's and women's spheres of worship and of ritual are very much divided.

Men's and women's experiences in church are so different as to lead one to think we belong to two churches, one for women and one for men, rather than to one church headed by Christ Jesus. It is not particularly surprising that this should be so, in that church authorities have historically held a highly dichotomized view of the sexes. This view is exemplified by Elder Boyd K. Packer's 1977 assertion that

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There are basic things that a man needs that a woman does not need. There are things that a man feels that a woman never does feel. There are basic things that a woman needs that a man never needs, and there are things that a woman feels that a man never feels, nor should he. These differences make women, in basic needs, literally opposite from men.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from certain very specific biological constraints, it is hard to imagine that members of the same species would not hold most basic needs in common, and indeed Elder Packer does not give any specific examples to back up his assertions. But because many church leaders make such a radical differentiation between women and men, many Mormon women, younger ones in particular, frequently feel pigeonholed and stereotyped, forced into a mold or a definition of “womanhood” that does not reflect the reality of their lives as individuals. Unfortunately, women who do not fit the Procrustean bed that male leaders perceive and define as “womanhood” are often summarily dismissed as not being “true women.”

Elder Packer is also on record as stating that it is the goal of feminists to destroy all distinctions between the sexes.<sup>8</sup> Yet, on the contrary, feminists—at least all the Mormon feminists I have ever met—certainly acknowledge the gross biological distinctions between women and men. What I as a feminist reject is when biological distinctions are used to justify unequal treatment. Indeed, the facts of biological maternity have been historically used to deny women property rights, suffrage, equal opportunities for education and employment, fair compensation and equal standing under the law.

I believe leaders' erroneous views hamper their ability to relate to and work well with women. It doesn't help that most of the top leadership have very little recent (if any) experience in working with women as peers in the day-to-day world. They are surrounded by men; they meet with men; the women they see are in very confined roles and circumstances—the wife of a particular stake president, the mother of the children of a particular church leader, and so forth. Even when they are confronted with exceptional women, there is abundant rhetorical evidence to show that leaders tend to focus on the stereotypical maternal aspects of even an exceptional woman's achievements, rather than what she has done to stand out.

Until male leaders come to realize that women are more

than just potential or real mothers, just as men are more than just potential or real fathers (or priesthood holders)—until the truth becomes evident to them that women are full human beings with the same kinds of aspirations, intelligence, talents and capacities as men—male leaders will continue to ignore the scriptural, historical, sociological, organizational, psychological and other evidence that does not support the status quo.

A monolithic view of women (and of our Mother) is not only damaging to real, live women and men, but also limits the church's ability to avail itself of the full potential of all of its members. The problem is not with the idea that the most noble and glorious calling for women is to be mothers. (I am a mother, and I believe it is a noble and glorious calling.) The problem is multifold: for one thing, there is no corresponding glorification of the role of fathers in our church culture; for another, there is a problem of how men growing up in a particular culture have chosen (consciously or unconsciously) to define motherhood and womanhood. As envisioned by male church authorities, our Mother occupies Herself with idealized, traditional womanly tasks. But the stereotypical, Victorianesque icon of the stay-at-home mother—something which is not accessible to women throughout the world, not even as an ideal—does not reflect the reality of most women's lives, nor does it come close to defining or encompassing the worthy aspirations of numberless women.

Several ironies have not escaped entirely unnoticed in this. First of all, the ideal Mormon family is authoritatively defined as consisting of a father and a mother and their children. Yet our relationship with God is that of a father alone with his children—a single-parent household.

Second, the argument that God the Father is completely sufficient to respond to the emotional and spiritual needs of all His children renders maternal nurturance irrelevant, further undercutting the ideal two-parent model.

Third, while there is no question that the Father does nurture us, it is obvious from both our rhetoric and practice that this particular lesson has not been divined by Mormonism in general—namely, that males can naturally nurture, too, and that to do so is a principal role of a god. But like the rest of the world, we have divided labor roles, following traditional Christendom's insistence on interpreting God's

words to the fallen Adam and Eve as some kind of mandate to arbitrarily divide sex roles into public and private, male and female, rather than interpreting these same words as God's description of what life in a fallen world would be like—in other words, as something to be overcome, not perpetuated.

Some have asserted that the priesthood has been given to men (and only men) to help them overcome the obstacles to

intimacy, nurture, service and love, and to help them become Christ-like, with the corollary argument that women don't need priesthood because they are "naturally endowed" with these virtues, naturally more spiritual than men.

The problem with categorical assignments based on sex—that men by virtue or necessity of being male hold priesthood and that women by virtue or necessity of being female do not—is that such categories ignore the needs

and capacities of huge numbers of individuals who simply do not fit the categorical descriptions. There are many women who are not naturally possessed of those Christlike attributes which holding priesthood ostensibly teaches men. Why would not such women benefit from the "gentle compulsion" of the priesthood? God, after all, looks upon us and treats us as individuals, not as members of any particular category.

Indeed, how else can women come to fully emulate Jesus Christ if we are not given the opportunity to learn to exercise

His power? This leads to a much more basic question: Is it a woman's destiny to become like Christ? Is this something that is realistic for her to set her sights on, for her to expend her efforts and energies on? Our lesson manuals say that it is, indeed, our place and our duty to emulate the Christ, but how far can we extrapolate from this? This consideration is central to Mormon feminists' concerns.

While the categorical restricting of certain necessary positions only to

those holding the priesthood may not be a problem in Utah or other places with a large Mormon population (particularly in active wards with more than enough people to fill roughly 200 job slots), it has had a disastrous effect on the quality of life for many LDS families in the "hinterlands." It should say something to us that Mormon men spend less time doing homework and having talks with their children than do non-Mormon men!<sup>19</sup> Mormon men are burdened with mul-

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tiple callings, taking them away from their families night after night, weekend after weekend. If the church really values fatherhood, should it not do everything in its power to keep fathers at home as much as possible? It makes utterly no sense not to use women in areas where they outnumber the men eight to one or more (especially if the women are no longer actively rearing children or never have had children to rear).

The same sex-based structuring unintentionally sends the clear message that men are more important to the church than women. For example, what is communicated when church authorities say that women are and should be leaders, yet current policy excludes women leaders from leadership meetings, or when all the top-down-directed efforts to reclaim less-active members in the North American North-east Area focus entirely on potential or actual male priesthood holders, with no corresponding effort or energy whatsoever directed towards reactivating women?<sup>10</sup>

Men on the general level are making decisions for and about women with very little and often no input from women—not even from the women called as general auxiliary leaders. This lack of input at the general level is repeated at every level. Women all over the church, regardless of their “political” persuasion, are telling the same stories of having their views and input overlooked, ignored or even denigrated.<sup>11</sup> In practical terms, the transformation of the church’s women’s organization, the Relief Society, from an independent, self-financed, female-led partner with the priesthood organization to simply another correlated auxiliary with a de facto leadership of men has meant that many worthy projects and ideas have been killed or hobbled because women have had to ask men for permission (and sometimes for money) to render some kinds of service. Countless opportunities to serve have died waiting for men to decide matters best decided by the women who would have done the work.

Recently, the Church of England was torn asunder over the issue of women’s ordination. One of the most specific considerations was whether a woman priest could adequately represent Christ, which ties back to the previous question of whether it can be a woman’s destiny to become like Christ. That question hinges on whether or not the salvific Christ transcends or is rather defined by His maleness. The conservative position asserts the latter; thus, as Christ was a man, those who execute the priestly offices in Christ’s stead must be men. Some have asserted, most notably Pope John Paul II in recent times, that Jesus’ having cho-

sen only male apostles is meant to serve as a procedural blueprint for all time. The pope’s argument that Jesus was “perfectly free” to choose women, despite the enormous cultural and social prejudice against women in first-century Judea, is docetism of the worst sort.<sup>12</sup> Although Mormons have not generally used this kind of argument much, the late President Howard W. Hunter may have been alluding to it when asked by the *Los Angeles Times* about the possibility of ordaining women to priesthood. President Hunter replied: “At the present time there isn’t an avenue of ever changing. It’s too well defined by revelation, by Scripture. And we follow strictly the scriptural passageway in matters of that kind. I see nothing that will lead to a change of direction at the present time—or in the future.”<sup>13</sup>

Was this God speaking, or simply Howard W. Hunter voicing an opinion? Yet for many Mormons, this is a moot question. If there is explicit revelation about or interdiction of women’s ordination in Mormon and biblical scripture, I have not been able to find it. Indeed, biblical references to Deborah, Huldah, Phoebe the deacon and so on link women to priesthood-like offices and prerogatives. Perhaps we need to consider, as more and more information comes to light about the practices of the first-century Christian church and women’s place and roles therein, just how closely we approximate “the same organization that existed in the primitive church” (Sixth Article of Faith).

But we needn’t look back so far to find good reason to question current policy. Even I can remember being taught in church that although women cannot exercise the priesthood, they nonetheless hold it “jointly with their husbands.” In retrospect this seems analogous to a woman holding a valid driver’s license while living in Saudi Arabia, where women are not permitted to drive. I also remember discussions in religion classes at BYU about an order called the “patriarchal priesthood” into which temple-endowed, married women enter with their husbands. Again, this is not an active exercising of priesthood on the part of temple-endowed married women. However, “fundamentalist” Mormons—those who persist in practicing polygamy to this day—point to early church leaders’ teachings about this “patriarchal priesthood” to justify not just the taking of more than one wife, but also for women performing blessings of comfort and healing, tasks which are now male-only priesthood tasks in the monogamous mainstream church.

Such teachings, becoming less and less commonly known as the church grows larger and larger and its teach-

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ings become more and more homogenized and condensed, make it increasingly difficult to ascertain any one doctrine's legitimacy, historicity or applicability to current policies and practices. This difficulty in some sense seems particularly ironic in light of some recent official backpedaling away from what was once touted as the "glorious hallmark of the restoration," i.e., explicit doctrinal revelation from God (as opposed to "administrative revelation"). Such backpedaling has led me to wonder if this verse from the Book of Mormon might apply to us in the church: "Woe to those who say, we have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough! . . . from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have" (2 Nephi 28:29-30).

Many are quick to point out that it is only a relative handful of women (and men) who are questioning the status quo. I am reminded, however, during this, the 75th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which granted women the right to vote, that it was a relative handful of women who met at Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, whose efforts led to many laws that ameliorated women's legal standing, eventually culminating in the passage of the 19th amendment. Yet regardless of their "political" persuasion, the church's own studies have shown that virtually all women in the church desire to be more involved in the decision-making councils of the church at all levels. Elder Russell Ballard, a current apostle, recently responded to this issue by encouraging male leaders and the local and stake levels to be sure to include women's input in their councils.<sup>14</sup> However, there is still no decision-making council at the general level in which women are invited to participate.

Finally, sex-linked priesthood fosters a basic inequality that is contrary to the egalitarian model found in the Book of Mormon—one in which the leader is no better than the follower. While we hear and say, for example, that a nursery worker is as important in her/his work as a bishop, stake president, etc., we accord far greater honor to priesthood offices than we do to non-priesthood offices, notwithstanding that all offices and callings in the church are

essential to its proper function. We claim the various courtesies are simply tokens of our respect for the office of the priesthood. But there is no meaningful way to divorce an office from the person called to that office. Children in particular do not see an office as the recipient of respect; rather, they see human men and boys being honored, deferred to and given privileges. When this occurs in the name of "respecting the priesthood," we seem to wind up doing exactly the opposite of our stated intentions: we dishonor the priesthood and we show disrespect to God by creating a system that makes us all unequal.

There is no doubt in girls' minds, at least, that "men are more important than women in the church." Again, it is not that the work traditionally assigned to women isn't just as vital to the proper function of the church, just as the laity's work is in many ways as important as that of the professional clergy, but women's work is less visible, considered "auxiliary" and not accorded visible tokens of respect and honor. This is not simply a matter of stroking the egos of adult women. What is at issue is how children, girls in particular, come to view themselves and their relative value as members of the church.

Girls' feelings of being less important than boys are exacerbated when, at age 12, the boys become part of the formal power structure of the church by being ordained as deacons. There is no equivalent experience for a 12-year-old girl—no concrete tasks for her to perform in her ward, no expectations for her to progress through a visible course of greater responsibility. Girls constantly read in the church's youth magazine and hear church leaders speak in glowing terms about what an enormous blessing and privilege it is for young men to hold the priesthood. What thoughtful 11-year-old girl is not going to feel in some way cheated when she turns 12 and cannot be ordained? (Or at the very least wonder what is wrong with her that she cannot be ordained.) And, of course, the church sends no message that she is expected to seriously prepare for the great Rite of Passage—full-time missionary service.

According to Elder Carlos E. Asay, more young women than young men are inactive in nine out of 10 stakes in Eng-

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lish-speaking North America.<sup>15</sup> Some research has suggested that many older girls feel that the church doesn't see them as important in any way other than as potential wives for young men and doesn't value them for the same kinds of gifts and talents they—as well as young men—might bring to the church. Little wonder that when asked, Mormon girls, just as girls in the larger society, say that they would like to be boys. Virtually no boys want to be girls.

Perhaps most serious of all is that a girl's questions about these differences in roles for boys and girls go unanswered. When I was 12, I marched into my bishop's office and demanded that he make me a deacon, assuring him that I would be a much better deacon than those rowdy boys. He couldn't answer my questions about why I couldn't be ordained, nor did God's church have any authoritative explanation for excluding women. I am grateful that after my bishop's initial guffaw, he took me seriously. Yet more than a quarter-century later, I still have the same unanswered questions. (But now that I'm older, these questions are no longer cute or funny in the eyes of those in authority.)<sup>16</sup>

Asking for clarification, for greater light, on difficult subjects that affect the well-being of a significant percentage of saints has nothing whatsoever to do with trying to "soften the penalties for sin." If asking our leaders to ask God questions which have a broad-ranging impact on the whole of Christ's church is somehow inappropriate, then what in the world is the point of having modern prophets at all?

In summary, the question of ordaining women to priesthood is much more than whether or not a 12-year-old girl should be permitted to distribute the sacrament as do 12-year-old boys, although this in and of itself is not a trivial concern. What is at stake is the knowledge of womankind's eternal potential—what women are to become hereafter and what our relational status is to men, to our children, to the universe at large.

I believe God gives as much light and knowledge as people can handle within their cultural paradigms. I do not believe that God approves of sexism any more than God approves of any other form of oppression that limits the growth and potential of any of God's children. To end on an optimistic note, it seems to me that despite the long way we Mormons have to go to overcome gender bias and prejudice, we are nonetheless seeing a prelude to significant transformation. A shift is occurring in the official rhetoric. Studies have shown that whereas once church leaders unanimously upheld the patriarchal model of the husband-as-head-of-

household and as the ultimate decision-maker, more and more one is hearing and reading of marriage portrayed as a partnership of equals, with inspiration and pragmatic considerations taking precedence over gender as to who has the ultimate say-so in any given decision.

This equal partnership model, antithetical by definition to what has been traditionally defined as the patriarchal order, gives me hope that the larger reality may yet be realized—that we worship a God who is both our Father and our Mother, with neither subordinated to the other; whose complementariness is based on their own unique individual characteristics, rather than on gender-based, arbitrarily imposed roles.

I fully believe knowledge about our Mother is one of those "great and important things" which God has yet to reveal (per our Ninth Article of Faith). Until our Mother is re-

vealed as God-with-the-Father to those governing the church, and until women's full humanity is comprehended and acknowledged, our world and the church will continue to suffer the deleterious consequences of millennia of sexism and oppression. Such consequences for the church range from an increase in women's level of non-participation and disaffection to the widespread incidence of depression among American Mormon women and the persistence of attitudes and practices among LDS men that contribute to what ought not to exist

among us—but nonetheless does—the denigration of women and, as a consequence, an epidemic of wife-beating and domestic abuse.

I do not presume to have specific solutions sufficient to somehow lobby the brethren to implement them. Indeed, there may even be good reasons and pragmatic considerations that currently preclude women's ordination to priesthood. Perhaps doing so would inhibit the preaching of the gospel in lands where women do not enjoy the same level of status and freedom as do women in first-world countries. Yet, how unfortunate it is that there is no open discussion of these issues in Christ's restored church!

Nevertheless, I can do what the daughters of Zelophehad did (Numbers 27). They went to Moses and explained their situation and their feelings of being unjustly treated; Moses listened, took their concerns to God, and as a result, the laws of inheritance in ancient Israel were rewritten to include women. If the daughters had remained silent, or if Moses had refused to listen, they and countless generations of women would have been dispossessed in Israel. So we Mormon feminists try to make our experiences, our con-

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cerns and our questions known to the leaders of Christ's church—not with the idea that we have the complete solution, i.e., “here’s our agenda and we demand that you make the changes we want”—but rather in the hope that our leaders will turn to God and receive authoritative, divinely-

revealed answers to take the place of human opinion, however well-intentioned. Who will be moved upon to ask for answers to our questions? As ever, I hope and pray it will be the current prophet.

## N O T E S

<sup>1</sup> Lynn Matthews Anderson, “Toward a Feminist Interpretation of LDS Scripture,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 1994), 185-203.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, Anthon H. Lund, in Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed., “Mother in Heaven” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 516.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, “Cornerstones of Responsibility,” address, Regional Representatives Seminar, Salt Lake City, 5 April 1991, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Janice Allred, “Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 1994), 15-39.

<sup>5</sup> *Mormon Doctrine*, op. cit., “Priesthood,” 594.

<sup>6</sup> D. Michael Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Held the Priesthood Since 1843,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 365-409.

<sup>7</sup> Boyd K. Packer, “The Equal Rights Amendment,” *Ensign*, March 1977, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James T. Duke, “Cultural Continuity and Tension between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and American Society,” Mormon Studies Conference, University of Nottingham (U.K.), 6 April 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Notes on message from Northeast Area Presidency to Stake Presidents, 1993; in author’s possession.

<sup>11</sup> Archived messages from “sister-share,” an LDS women’s electronic mailing list, available from lynnma@netcom.com. See also Meg Wheatley, “An Expanded Definition of Priesthood? Some Present and Future Consequences,” in *Women and Authority*, op. cit., 151-165; Linda King Newell, “Gifts of the Spirit: Women’s Share,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (University of Illinois, 1987), 111-150; and Jill Mulvey Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> “Pope Reaffirms Ban on Women Priests,” *Boston Globe*, 10 May 1994.

<sup>13</sup> “Leader of Mormons Reaffirms Primacy of Church Teachings,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 October 1994.

<sup>14</sup> M. Russell Ballard, “Counseling with our Councils,” *Ensign*, May 1994, 24-26.

<sup>15</sup> Carlos E. Asay, address, Pittsburgh Regional Conference, 24 October 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Abundant anecdotal evidence indicates that my experience is not unique. See archived messages from “elwc-plus,” an LDS electronic mailing list available from lynnma@netcom.com.

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## Maggie’s God

RITA BOWLES

Buttercups bunching in a tiny fist  
the sun a royal halo framing wonder  
yellow to yellow a princess  
drenched in magnificence  
He was with her then.

Reading Shakespeare backwards with a lisp  
(the Bard’s delight had shaped their Single Soul)  
irreverance mellow was their code  
Unpardonable Omniscience  
He was the Perfect Friend.

Loved walls dripped meaning on their tryst  
hydrating imagination into bloom  
Eureka bellowed the hallowed halls  
grasping their significance  
amplifying Reason without end

’til the 6 o’clock news withered Maggie’s bliss  
hot reality shriveling the buttercups:  
a silenced fellow now, God sleeps on  
beneath an envied innocence  
waiting for the Goddess once again.

# Book Review

## Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible

Edited by  
CHRISTINA BUCHMANN & CELINA SPIEGEL  
New York: Fawcette Columbine, 1994

Reviewed by  
BARBARA BISHOP

In a Latin class at the University of Utah circa 1978, the professor made a passing reference to Saul's famous journey to Damascus. Virtually no one in the class knew the story and the professor pointed out how little we (Mormons) seemed to know about a work we believed was "The Word of God." I resolved then to read the Bible, which I did, although I cannot say I relished the task or felt particularly uplifted when I finished. I was particularly disturbed that the vengeful God of the Old Testament was the same deity I had been praying to all these years. So it was with some trepidation that I approached *Out of the Garden*. Happily, my misgivings disappeared as soon as I started reading.

In their introduction the editors note that many contemporary writers' interest in stories grew out of their early, frequent exposure to Bible stories, usually in a religious, moralistic context. The subtitle assumes that women writers will read the Holy Bible—the voluminous, authoritarian work which most justifies and sanctions patriarchal discourse—differently, and that turns out to be true. Though analytical, the essays in *Out of the Garden* also revel in personal anecdotes and find illumination in the ways in which biblical stories collide with personal experiences. These articles most

often exhilarate, inspiring one's own re-reading and re-thinking of the Bible. Some are decidedly feminist. Some offer more of a re-reading of certain biblical passages. Some respond from a

*These  
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pointedly personal situation, as in the case of Patricia J. Williams, a black single mother who searches for "Pharaoh's Daughter" in the context of today's political climate.

*Out of the Garden* demonstrates beautifully how differently various people respond to a single story. For example, Cynthia Ozick, Marsha Falk

and Margaret Anne Doody all discuss the story of Hannah. While Ozick renders a Torah-informed, feminist reading of the entire story emphasizing the personhood of Hannah, Falk focuses specifically on the courage conveyed by Hannah's prayer and Doody reads the story from the child Samuel's perspective. Nevertheless, a strikingly common characteristic of all the articles is the freedom, the boldness with which each author tackles an authoritarian text almost every author originally approached with some intimidation. Perhaps the act of writing itself emboldened them.

The limitations of the book reflect a problem of range. Although the subtitle suggests that the articles are about the Bible as a whole, there are no essays on the New Testament. In addition, the editors have a decidedly Jewish bias, although there are some Christian writers included. The essays themselves, however, are beautifully written and often illuminate even the most difficult of biblical texts—Job, the Song of Songs and Isaiah. My favorite essays consider narrative voices the Bible itself encourages us to ignore: Vashti, the queen before Esther; Sheba, the "bad mother" who urges Solomon to kill the infant brought before him; and Jezebel. In addition, through Rebecca Goldstein's essay on Lot's wife, I was introduced to the rabbinical midrash, a way of reading the Bible that essentially encourages us to imagine more than the text itself offers and understand more clearly why characters respond the way they do. The result is that the stories take on a very personal, humane dimension that brings them closer to our hearts and minds.

All the essays go beyond moral platitudes and traditional readings. Marcia Falk examines Hannah's prayer for a child before the temple priest Eli, not as an example of her piety, but as an illustration of courage. Hannah boldly dares to give voice to

the yearnings of her heart in a sanctuary of men. Falk argues that Hannah basically creates the prayer of the heart at the moment, although traditionally rabbis have been concerned with the question of "spiritual authority" in this passage.

In "The Paradox of the Psalms," Kathleen Norris recounts her personal experience in a Benedictine Monastery reciting the Psalms. She concludes that the daily recitation and meditation has the effect of the Psalms acting upon her as a kind of prayer: "the Psalms do not submerge or deny your true feelings, but allow you to reflect on them, right in front of God and everyone" (p. 223). Norris's essay, more convincingly than

any Sunday School lesson I've sat through, persuades me to return to those disturbing, contradictory biblical passages that seemed of little import to my life.

Perhaps Norris expresses best the purpose of this volume as a whole. Although the Bible reflects and supports the traditions of a patriarchal, warrior culture, in her words, "in expressing the contradictions of human experience the Psalms . . . defeat our tendency to try to be holy without being human first" (p. 225). In their interpretations, these authors compel us towards a reading of the Old Testament that honors what is human as well as holy.

## I Have An Answer

### Questions to Gospel Answers

**ANSWER:** There is no inequality in the church. While it is true that men and women have distinct and separate roles, both are equally important, equally valued.

**QUESTIONS:** What if for one month the tables were turned—women had the priesthood and men's organizations were called auxiliaries? During sacrament meeting a female bishopric would sit on the stand while one of them conducted. Priestesses would prepare the sacrament while deaconesses passed it. A teenage boy and girl would give talks followed by two high councilwomen, or, if it were Fast Sunday and there were babies to be blessed, the mother, grandmothers and aunts of the baby would bless it. If there had been a baptism, these same women would perform the confirmation.

While women attended priestesshood meeting, men would have les-

sons that could not deviate from the manual, and the manual would contain stories and quotes mostly by or about women, stressing the importance of sustaining their wives and assuring them that they share the blessings of the priestesshood in their homes because their wives are ordained.

Young women would have lessons describing the importance of their priestesshood calling and encouraging them to prepare for a mission, while the Beehive boys and Mia men would be told to respect the young women in their priestesshood, develop homemaking skills and improve their appearance so a worthy young woman might notice them and take them to the temple some day.

In the temple the ceremonies would be conducted by women and sealings and baptisms performed by women and witnessed by them.

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During General Conference all the meetings would be conducted by the female First Presidency. All the speakers for both days but one or two would be female. At least one of the speakers would define priestesshood as the most important gift God has given to women to act in Her name. She would also assure the brethren that they were separate but equal in the kingdom, assigned to a different calling—to be good fathers and to support their wives in their priestesshood—and express gratitude for her wonderful husband, thanking him for doing such a marvelous job of rearing their children in her absence.

In the *Ensign's* General Conference issue there would be pictures of the General Authorities, all women. There might also be a chart showing the structure of the Church organization with no men on it.

If a family member became ill in the night the mother, instead of asking her husband (who supposedly shares the

priestesshood) to help administer, would call another woman even if it meant getting her out of bed to come and perform the ordinance.

Men would go to their female leaders for advice and help with personal problems. If they had any concerns about doctrine or their place in the church, they would be told to repent of such thoughts and support the Sisters who receive revelation directly from God the Mother. They would be cautioned not to listen to minority dissident groups of men who were questioning their status in the church, not to think or pray about Father in Heaven and, above all, not to support legislation which would threaten the status quo.

During the week, female leaders would be in bishopric meetings, high council meetings and priestesshood committee meetings to set goals, formulate programs and make financial and organizational decisions, while once a

month men would have an evening meeting to receive instruction about cooking and fixing cars, talk about children and ball games and have refreshments. The men would be allowed to plan and carry out activities for the children and the ward and take food and sympathy to the ill and be-reaved as long as everything was cleared by the priestesshood.

All letters from Church leaders to local units would be addressed, "Dear Sisters," and if there was information for the men's auxiliaries the sister leaders would be instructed to pass it on, which they would sometimes remember to do.

If this reversed order of church structure were instituted for one month, how many men could be convinced at the end of it that they enjoyed equality in the church?

Judith Curtis

## NETWORKING

The *MWF Quarterly* often receives letters from subscribers who feel somewhat isolated in their communities or who would like to form local MWF chapters. If you are willing to be a contact person for your area, please send us your name, address and telephone number. Be sure to indicate whether or not you are willing to have this information published in the *MWF Quarterly*.

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