

# Mormon Women's Forum

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 1

AN LDS FEMINIST QUARTERLY

SPRING 1998

## TAKING STOCK THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MORMON WOMEN'S FORUM

LORIE WINDER STROMBERG

THE YEAR 1998 MARKED The Mormon Women's Forum's tenth anniversary. Rather than touting our longevity, we would like to use this occasion to take stock, examining not only where we as Mormon feminists have been, but also where we are headed. Included in this issue is a survey compiled by Joanna Brooks. In her introduction to the survey, Joanna refers to the last five years as a time in which we Mormon feminists have found ourselves "at the center of fierce debate and sometimes the target of scrutiny and repression." In truth, the debate, scrutiny and repression that have accompanied the twentieth-century feminist movement within Mormondom began nearly thirty years ago.

In order to prompt discussion about our future as feminists in the LDS Church and provide a context for Joanna's survey, we thought it might be useful to review some of the significant past events that have informed and shaped our present. Compiling this overview of contemporary Mormon feminism was a task made much easier because of Lavina Fielding Anderson's exhaustive record keeping. Most of the following is taken from Lavina's "Landmarks for LDS Women: A Contemporary Chronology," published in the *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly* (Vol. 3, Nos. 3 & 4, December 1992), and "Church-watch," published in the Mormon Alliance's *By Common Consent* (Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1995).

1969—One of the first modern feminist issues to which the institutional church responded publicly was the debate over birth control and reproductive freedom brought to the fore in the 1960s. In 1969, "the Church's long-standing pro-natalist orientation . . . was codified in a First Presidency statement, the first to be issued as an official position signed by all three." In part, it read: "We seriously regret that there should exist a sentiment or feeling among any members of the Church to curtail the birth of their children. . . . Where husband and wife enjoy health and vigor, . . . it is contrary to the teachings of

the Church artificially to curtail or prevent the birth of children." (MWFQ, p. 3)

September 1971—"All LDS women automatically became members of the Relief Society, dues were abolished, and they were forbidden to have separate fundraising activities or budgets." (MWFQ, p. 4)

14 January 1972—"Leonard J. Arrington became director of the Church History division and was called to be Church historian." He, himself, "had already published five groundbreaking articles on Mormon women's history," and he subsequently would hire several researchers, including Susan Staker, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Jill Mulvay Derr, and Carol Cornwall Madsen, who would make significant contributions to the overlooked field of Mormon women's history. (MWFQ, p. 4)

22 March 1972—"The Equal Rights Amendment, first introduced in 1923, passed Congress." (MWFQ, p. 4)

1973—Carol Lynn Pearson published *Daughters of Light*, "a compilation of personal writings by women in LDS history about spiritual gifts (healing, tongues, prophecy, power over evil spirits, etc.)." (MWFQ, p. 4)

July 1974—*Exponent II* began publication. The quarterly newspaper for contemporary Mormon women was founded by a group of Mormon women in Boston. The group, including Claudia Bushman, Grethe Peterson, Nancy Dredge, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and Judy Dushku, put together an Institute of Religion class on Mormon women's history, each researching a topic to present to the class. They decided to begin publishing a Mormon women's periodical after they discovered copies of the original *Women's Exponent*, a Mormon women's suffragist periodical published in Utah during the late nineteenth century, in the Radcliffe library. The discovery of strong pioneer women who wrote eloquently about women's rights and unabashedly practiced spiritual gifts was fundamentally important to this first wave of modern Mormon feminists. It is ironic that

many of these pioneers of modern Mormon feminism felt they had to go back to the nineteenth century to find feminist role models in the church.

**13 December 1974**—Relief Society General President Barbara B. Smith took a public stand against the Equal Rights Amendment during a speech at the University of Utah Institute.

**1976**—The Boston women published a book of essays, *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*, which grew out of the research they had done for their Institute class on Mormon women's history.

**22 October 1976**—The First Presidency issued an official statement against the Equal Rights Amendment.

**Spring 1977**—Mormons for ERA was organized in Washington, D.C. by Teddie Wood, Sonia Johnson, Maida Withers, and Hazel Rigby.

**June 1977**—“At the Utah state meeting of the International Women's Year, almost 14,000 women crammed the Salt Palace, many of them responding to a public invitation from the Relief Society to send ten women per ward and many of them in response to private ‘assignments’ from ecclesiastical leaders. Defensive and threatened, they saw the prepared IWY agenda as an attack on the family and vigorously voted down such resolutions as equal pay for equal work.” (MWFQ, p. 5)

**1978**—“Marilyn Warenski published *Patriarchs and Politics: The Plight of the Mormon Woman*, . . . the first book-length treatment of Mormonism as a patriarchal system oppressive to women since the anti-polygamy attacks of the nineteenth century.” (MWFQ, p. 5)

**1978**—“Vicky Burgess-Olsen, editor, published *Sister Saints*, . . . a collection of twenty-four essays on nineteenth-century Mormon women.” (MWFQ, p. 5)

**25 May 1978**—“The First Presidency issued a statement opposing extension of the ratification deadline for the Equal Rights Amendment. . . . Congress extended the ratification deadline to 30 June 1983.” It was never ratified. (MWFQ, p. 5)

**9 June 1978**—The First Presidency released a revelation allowing black males to hold the priesthood. “President [Spencer W.] Kimball, responding to an Associated Press query about the ordination of women, stated, ‘We don't expect any revelation regarding women and the priesthood.’” (MWFQ, p. 6)

**26 August 1978**—The First Presidency for the first time defined the Equal Rights Amendment as a “moral issue,” rather than a political issue, and thereby justified their public opposition to it. (MWFQ, p. 6)

**8 November 1978**—“The Virginia Citizens Coalition was organized at the home of Clifford Cummings, then a stake president in Virginia. The meeting was chaired by Robert Beers, a Mormon and political action coordinator of Stop

ERA. At the organizational meeting, Julian Lowe, a regional representative, ‘told the sixty or so Mormons assembled that he was acting at the suggestion of Gordon B. Hinckley’ so that ‘the services of the sisters might be appropriately focused, and let them know that if they do anything it is an honorable thing to do. . . . Ward bishops were asked to solicit donations from individual ward members; petitions were signed in ward lobbies (possibly a first in church history); a pyramid organization was constructed with Beverly Campbell as chairman and stake Relief Society presidents as members of the executive board.’ This group later became the Virginia LDS Citizens Coalition.” (MWFQ, p. 6)

**April 1979**—“A story by Linda Sillitoe in the April 1979 issue of *Utah Holiday* reporting the Church's anti-ERA activities in Virginia conceded that ‘the Church is well within legal limits lobbying against the ERA with or without ad hoc organizations.’ However, her article also denounced ‘the transparent “cover story”’ that the Virginia LDS Citizens Coalition was simply a spontaneous organization of citizens. She quoted Robert Beers, Mormon chair of Stop ERA, ‘Many weren't even registered to vote before this started.’” (MWFQ, p. 7)

**1 December 1979**—Sonia Johnson was tried and excommunicated in a bishop's court for her public denunciations of the church's anti-ERA campaign.

**February 1980**—The *Ensign* included a 23-page booklet, “The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue,” in its February issue. While it outlined the church's opposition to the ERA, it also denied that church funds had been given to anti-ERA groups and asserted that “favoring the ERA was not grounds for excommunication.” (MWFQ, p. 7)

**1981**—Sonia Johnson published *From Housewife to Heretic*, “the story of her Church involvement, feminist awakenings, and excommunication.” (MWFQ, p. 8)

**25-27 May 1982**—As Lavina Fielding Anderson recorded, “Approximately 56 women from across the nation met in Nauvoo for a retreat we called Pilgrimage, organized by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Linda King Newell, and me. We discussed the Relief Society, change, the institutional Church, and our spiritual lives. The energy generated from that gathering was so great that we left resolved to conduct regional gatherings of the same sort.” The Salt Lake Pilgrimage, an invitational gathering, meets yearly. “The Midwest Pilgrims, an open group, now meets twice a year. The annual *Exponent II* retreat in New Hampshire has a spin-off Provo Canyon retreat organized by Provo women.” (MWFQ, p. 9)

**1983**—Feminists and intellectuals who had contributed to *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, and so forth reported being “questioned by their local bishops or stake presidents and told

- the church was worried about their faithfulness.” (MWFQ, p. 9)
- June 1985**—Following the publication of their book on Emma Smith, *Mormon Enigma*, Valeen Tippetts Avery and Linda King Newell were banned from speaking on historical topics in church meetings. “The ban, which lasted for ten months, immediately tripled sales.” (MWFQ, p. 11)
- 19 August 1986**—“Elder Howard W. Hunter, acting president of the Council of the Twelve, sent a letter to priesthood leaders announcing various ‘Adjustments in the Relief Society Organization,’ including the direction that stake Relief Society boards were to be disbanded. That this action was communicated through the priesthood hierarchy rather than from the leaders of those auxiliaries follows the modern pattern which has served to underscore at least the perception that women’s input pertaining to women’s auxiliaries has been sharply curtailed.” (MWFQ, p. 11)
- 22 February 1987**—President Ezra Taft Benson delivered his “To the Mothers in Zion” address, confirming that “the counsel of the Church has always been for mothers to spend their full time in the home in rearing and caring for their children.” (MWFQ, p. 11)
- 23 August 1988**—The Mormon Women’s Forum held its first meeting in Salt Lake City.
- 2 October 1988**—Primary General President Michaelene P. Grassli became the first woman to speak in a regular session of general conference since 1929.
- 1989**—VOICE, a feminist student organization, was founded at BYU. A second wave of twentieth-century Mormon feminists emerged whose feminism was informed by feminist theory.
- September 1989**—“Some mothers had been asking for permission to stand in the circle as their children were given a name and a blessing, pointing out that unordained and non-member fathers were permitted to do so. This practice was ended by a statement in the 1989-3 *Bulletin*, restricting participation in this ordinance to only male Melchizedek Priesthood holders.” (MWFQ, p. 13)
- October 1989**—The *Mormon Women’s Forum Newsletter*, now *Quarterly*, began publication.
- January 1990**—Carol Lynn Pearson’s one-woman play “Mother Wove the Morning” was sponsored by The Mormon Women’s Forum for an extended engagement in Salt Lake City.
- April 1990**—Changes in the temple ceremony were made that softened the former requirement that women obey their husbands.
- April 1991**—A student prayed to “Our Father and Mother in Heaven . . .” at a BYU Commencement. “President Hinkley warned Regional Representatives ‘to be alert’ to ‘small beginnings of apostasy’ and cited prayers to Mother in Heaven as an example.” (MWFQ, p. 13)
- August 1992**—The existence of the Strengthening Church Members Committee, an ad hoc church group which “provides local church leadership with information designed to help them counsel with members who may hinder the progress of the church through public criticism,” became public at the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City. (MWFQ, p. 16) Also at the symposium, Janice Allred delivered her paper, “Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother,” which was later published in the Summer 1994 issue of *Dialogue*.
- 31 August 1992**—“Almost as an afterthought in reporting a 1991 study on the activity of Mormon young men (32 percent served missions in 1990 compared to 46 percent in 1980), Mark Hurst, an assistant to Young Men General President Jack H. Goasling, observed, ‘The data could be generalized for the young women—its very similar. In fact data show that the number of young men remaining active is slightly higher,’ he said. Hurst said this was the first time statistics had indicated the Church was losing more young women than men.” (MWFQ, p. 16)
- 17 December 1992**—*Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks, was published. Essays included in the volume “span the range from historical discourse on feminism, Mother in Heaven, and women and the priesthood, to considerations of empowerment, discourse, gender-inclusive language, women’s gift of healing, sister missionaries, and organizational dynamics within the LDS Church.” (MWFQ, p. 18)
- 28 April 1993**—In reaction to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s rejection as the keynote speaker for the BYU/Relief Society Women’s Conference, the first Counterpoint Conference was held in Salt Lake City. Debate over sponsorship of the conference created tension among Mormon feminists, many of whom feared ecclesiastical reprisals because of the conference’s association with The Mormon Women’s Forum. The Mormon Women’s Forum emerged in the minds of many as the more radical voice of Mormon feminism.
- May 1993**—Boyd Packer gave an address to the All Church Coordinating Council in which he identified gays/lesbians, feminists, and “so-called intellectuals” as “dangers” to the church. At the Sunstone Symposium the following August, many speakers expressed concern over Packer’s statements.
- June 1993**—BYU feminist literary critic and VOICE faculty sponsor Cecilia Konchar Farr was denied a continuing contract at the university following her third-year review. Also in June, Margaret Toscano, addressing a VOICE meeting, commented, “It is dangerous to speak of Heav-

enly Mother lately." In July, Toscano's stake president instructed her to stop "speaking, writing, and/or making media appearances on subjects involving Church theology and/or policy." (BCC, p. 2)

**September 1993**—Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, president of The Mormon Women's Forum, was disfellowshipped for apostasy. Maxine Hanks, feminist editor of *Women and Authority*, Lavina Fielding Anderson, who had begun to chronicle instances of "spiritual abuse" in the church, and Mormon historian Michael Quinn were all excommunicated for apostasy. In reaction to the September purge, the White Roses Campaign was organized. On Sunday following the morning session of October general conference, Irene Bates and Shirley Paxman presented a thousand white roses, paid for by donations from members around the world, to the church's general authorities as a gesture of peace and love and an appeal to "let the fear and the reprisals end."

**1993/1994**—Mormon feminist electronic discussion lists began to flourish.

**13 October 1994**—Janice Allred, after months of meetings with her bishop and stake president, was summoned to a disciplinary counsel and subsequently placed on formal probation for disobeying her church leaders and teaching false doctrine. In order to avoid further disciplinary action, Allred was told she must submit to certain conditions, including allowing her writing and speaking to be supervised and censored if necessary.

**9 May 1995**—Having refused to submit to any kind of supervision or censorship of her writing, Janice Allred was excommunicated for apostasy.

**September 1995**—The church issued a formal proclamation on the family at the annual women's meeting in Salt Lake City. Tacitly responding to concerns over pending same-sex marriage legislation, the proclamation reaffirmed the church's opposition to homosexual unions and support for the traditional nuclear family and codified gender roles, even asserting that gender was eternal. Feminists speculated that the proclamation partly was an attempt to give doctrinal status to the church's positions on women and homosexuality in order to allow leaders to discipline for apostasy those who spoke out contrary to these positions.

**6 June 1996**—BYU English professor Gail Turley Houston was denied continuing status at the church-sponsored university in part because she publicly questioned the notion that gender is eternal and spoke of praying to Mother in Heaven.

**April 1997**—The feminist-friendly Relief Society general presidency, which included Chieko Okazaki and Aileen Clyde, was replaced by a more conservative presidency, with Mary Ellen Smoot as president.

## *Millinery Grace*

Laraine Wilkins

It seems  
He saved her:  
the amber-skinned island woman  
who knelt before a prophet,  
his veined hand skimming her round profile  
in blessing.  
Her five children,  
in need of her—to spin their marrow  
in grains and sugar cane,  
to weave their morning prayers  
throughout her day,  
a grand shawl, seams  
stitched up and down rows  
of golden pineapple fields  
and the pews of her new religion.  
Twenty-two years later,  
the healing remains  
in her bones, as I

Collapse through my day,  
its rigid contours burrowing me through  
tunnels without hands.  
Will he save me, when all I own  
is the hem of my child's life?  
With a patient eye, the needle  
of my single maternal instinct  
pulls itself through  
the thorny rosebushes,  
late-blooming,  
of this hospital garden.  
The light gray stone  
of Mary, with her babe,  
a rose in the desert of everyday,  
smooths the grass trimmed fine  
between hedges, but finer  
at the edges. My edge  
blooms and sighs.

# TAKING STOCK OF "OIL AND WATER" A MORMON WOMEN'S FORUM SURVEY

JOANNA BROOKS

A FEW YEARS AGO, *Ms.* magazine published a news brief on the excommunication of Janice Allred. The headline read "Oil and Water," and the brief opened with the wry comment that "Mormonism and feminism is becoming increasingly oxymoronic" (January/February 1995, 94). Yes, I thought, some days it certainly feels like that. But I was disappointed, even hurt, to find a statement so dismissive in a publication like *Ms.* After all, if I wanted to see Mormon feminism "dissed" in print, I could subscribe to Brigham Young University's *Daily Universe* and get my fill from the "letters to the editor."

So I wrote to *Ms.* "You know it's a bad day," I told them, "when even *Ms.* magazine questions the validity of your feminism." Mormon feminism, I concluded, "may look like 'oil and water' to some, but it is life to me." (*Ms.* editor-in-chief Marcia Gillespie later responded to my letter with a very thoughtful handwritten apology.)

When I read the *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly*, I am reminded that this "oil and water" life is not mine alone. We who call ourselves both "Mormon" and "feminist" know

what it means to be considered "peculiar people" on all fronts. Secular liberalism asks us "why don't you just leave the church?"; some conservative church members ask us the same thing. And yet—despite the discouragement, the firings, and the excommunications—we continue to claim for ourselves a space where Mormonism and feminism need not nullify each other, where we ourselves can negotiate what our faith, our culture, and our convictions will mean.

During the past five years, we Mormon feminists have found ourselves at the center of fierce debate and sometimes the target of scrutiny and repression. Now I would like to see us take stock, for ourselves, of what "Mormon feminism" means. What makes us "Mormon"? What will we do with our "feminism"? These two questions are the heart of the following survey. Please take a moment to respond. Feel free to photocopy the survey and to include additional pages as necessary. Mail completed surveys to *MWF Quarterly* Survey, c/o Joanna Brooks, 4339 Grand View Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90066. We will report on your responses in a future issue of the *Quarterly*.

- 
1. I am  Female  Male
  2. I am  Under 18  18-25  26-35  
 36-49  50-65  Over 65
  3. I consider myself  
 African-American  
 Asian-American/Pacific Islander  
 Chicana/o or Latina/o  
 Native American  White  Other
  4. I consider myself  
 Working-class  Middle-class  
 Upper-class/privileged
  5. Tell us about your Mormon background. (Mark as many of the following as apply.)  
 I was baptized into the Mormon Church as a child.  
 I am a convert to the church.  
 I have never been baptized.  
 One or more of my parents are converts.
  - My parents are not/were not members of the church.  
 I come from pioneer stock.  
 My spouse/significant other is Mormon.  
 My spouse/significant other is not Mormon.  
 I grew up in a predominantly Mormon community.  
 I grew up in a predominantly non-Mormon community.
  6. In your opinion, what makes you "Mormon"? (Mark as many as apply.)  
 My baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints  
 My belief in Mormon doctrine  
 My "activity" in the church, e.g., attending meetings or holding callings  
 My family history  
 My observance of Mormon practices, e.g., the Word of Wisdom, tithing  
 My upbringing or acculturation  
 My friendships and affiliations with other Mormons  
 I do not consider myself "Mormon"  
 Other (please explain)

*Mormonism*

## Our Feminisms

7. Which *one* of the following statements most closely matches your view of gender?
- Women and men are created equal; women should be allowed equal opportunities for social participation and achievement.
- Women and men are inherently different; however, women's voices, values, and achievements should receive more recognition and respect.
- The social structures through which power is defined, regulated, and distributed need radical change; the empowerment of women must be a key component of such change.
- Gender itself is a questionable and slippery concept; women need space to interpret and negotiate it for themselves.
8. How do you feel about the word "feminist"? (Mark as many of the following statements as apply.)
- I think of myself as a feminist.
- I do not hesitate to call myself a feminist.
- I hesitate to call myself a feminist in certain social settings—e.g., work, Church, family gatherings.
- I do not think of myself as a feminist.
- Other (please explain)
9. The status of women in society is
- better or  worse than it was in the 1840s.
- better or  worse than it was in the 1890s.
- better or  worse than it was in the 1950s.
- better or  worse than it was in the 1970s.
- better or  worse than it was in 1990.
10. The status of women in the church is
- better or  worse than it was in the 1840s.
- better or  worse than it was in the 1890s.
- better or  worse than it was in the 1950s.
- better or  worse than it was in the 1970s.
- better or  worse than it was in 1990.
11. Which of these church-related issues most concern you? (Mark as many as apply.)
- Women and the priesthood
- Status of women within Mormon culture
- Ecclesiastical sexual harassment
- Theological treatment of Mother in Heaven
- Child sexual abuse within the church
- Official statements on the "role" of women
- Church treatment of gays and lesbians
- Firings and excommunications of feminists
- Political stances taken by the church (e.g., ERA, same-sex marriage, abortion rights)
- Representations of women, including women from the Bible or Mormon history, in church manuals and publications
12. Which, if any, of the following groups or publications do you affiliate with or subscribe to?
- Affirmation  Algie Bailiff Forum
- Counterpoint Conference  *Dialogue*
- Exponent II*  VOICE
- The Mormon Alliance
- Mormon feminist retreats
- Mormon women's reading groups
- Mormon women's e-mail networks
- Sunstone* magazine or symposia
13. Tell us about the feminists in your life. On a scale of one to five, one meaning "not supportive" and five meaning "very supportive," how supportive of your thoughts and feelings on women's issues are the following people?
- Spouse/significant other  Children
- Mother  Father  Siblings
- Mormon friends  Non-Mormon friends
- Members of my ward  Local church leaders
14. In addition to women's issues, which, if any, of the following advocacy groups do you actively read about or participate in?
- Labor/economic justice  Health care reform
- Social justice/anti-racism  Environmentalism
- Gay and lesbian rights  Peace/demilitarization
- Children's issues  Other (please explain)
15. In a few words, tell us what you would like to see The Mormon Women's Forum do in the next five years.
16. In a few words, tell us what topics/columns/articles you would like the *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly* to feature in future issues.
17. In a few words tell us your thoughts of the future of feminism in the LDS Church.

# FURTHER THOUGHTS ON CONTEMPORARY MORMON THEOLOGY

DENISE D. GREAVES, PH.D. & SHELDON W. GREAVES, PH.D.

The opportunity we had to review Janice Allred's book, *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays*, in the last *MWF Quarterly* (Vol. 8, Nos. 3 & 4, Fall & Winter 1997) prompted us to consider the state of current Mormon theological studies, and Mormon feminist theology in particular. If both are to flourish, their practitioners must acquire and use the tools necessary to build sound intellectual structures. Toward that end, we wish to recommend the following.

First, more Mormon theological writers must acquire a firm grounding in the history of religious ideas. Many Mormons act as though we are disconnected from the rest of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is not the case. Mormonism was and is a response to that tradition. Many of our doctrines were and are shaped by religious ideas that cross sectarian boundaries. In addition, the study of religious ideas can yield a rich variety of approaches to timeless problems. We hasten to add that one need not have a Ph.D. in order to do meaningful work. Amateurs and enthusiasts make important contributions in many fields of study. However, we feel that Mormon scholars of theology need to read widely enough to be familiar with the intellectual landscape associated with their subjects. The history of Mormon religious ideas is becoming easier for the theologian to access as the store of historical documents and studies—many of them quite excellent—continues to grow.

Second, Mormon theologians must use greater care in the terminology they use to discuss theological subjects. One significant challenge is to balance the precision and convenience of jargon with the need to communicate with non-theologians (i.e., nearly all of the church membership.) Using the language of scholarship need not obscure the subject matter. Editors and publishers editing works prior to publication must take care to ensure that what gets printed is both clear and precise.

Third, methodical theology and textual scholarship need to be incorporated into our writing and study. Talking about God cannot be limited to vague, barely supported suppositions and speculations. We need not become clones of great Catholic or liberal Protestant theologians in order to produce great theological studies. But non-Mormon theologians have trod the paths that we are only beginning to follow. They have thrashed out many of the problems that our writers have not yet addressed. They have developed methods and models for dealing with some of these problems that we can borrow with profit. Since Mormonism proceeds from a number of extremely radical theological ideas, we should expect our theological studies to be unique. They could make a genuine contribution to theo-

logical studies in general. But they must also be rigorous, logical, and well-documented.

Textual scholarship carries its own set of requirements. Before we understand what a text means, we need to know what it says. When texts are part of our study, every tool must be employed, every effort must be made, to illuminate them. Biblical texts in particular present special challenges. Fortunately, today's student has a wealth of material to make this task easier. At least passing familiarity with biblical languages, such as Greek and Hebrew, is essential to avoiding the pitfalls of bad translations (the King James being one of these) and sloppy interpretations. Knowing even a little of these languages allows the use of some excellent research tools unavailable to earlier generations of scholars. Serious Mormon scholars can no longer afford the luxury of "prooftexting." This is the practice of using scriptures or other documents in a narrow or mistaken context to prove a point. Scholars must insist on reading important texts in context. This also applies to modern texts. Word usage and vocabulary in nineteenth-century texts can trap the unwary. Some of the texts that are important to Mormon theological history, such as the Doctrine and Covenants and Joseph Smith's *History of the Church*, have been edited over the years. These edits change or obscure certain ideas. For this reason, it is important to get back to the way these texts were originally written, if possible. We also need to understand that a text reflects a snapshot of ideas that develop over time. Mormon theologians can no longer treat their sacred texts as presenting a completely consistent framework of ideas and doctrine.

Fourth, publishers of "alternative" Mormon books and journals must treat their audience and authors with greater respect. Although publishers like Signature Books have produced some outstanding works in the past, their track record is not as consistent as it should be. Intellectual studies must contain the apparatus of scholarship if they are to be useful and credible. Publication of books and journal articles should be based solely on quality of content rather than name-recognition or trendiness.

Finally, Mormon theological scholarship can no longer restrict itself to an audience consisting mostly of other Mormons. This leads to dialogue that is repetitive, insular, and unenlightening. And while independent Mormon scholars have mostly come to grips with their rejection by the institutional church, we must begin writing for other religious forums besides those in the narrow circle of "alternate" Mormon publications. We have much to learn from other traditions, just as they have much to learn from us.

# Uncommon Threads

**Editor's Note:** The "American Religious History Discussion Group" is an on-line list that counts among its members scholars, librarians, museum curators, clergy, and others interested in American Religious history. Members often post scholarly queries or requests for information. Recent "threads" have discussed the racial and sexual politics of Pentecostalism, gender-segregated seating in early American churches, and "family values" movements in the American South in the early twentieth century. Of late, the talk has turned to Mormonism and feminism. Reprinted below are a number of postings from list members on this topic.

DOES ANYONE KNOW IF THERE IS any kind of feminist movement within the Mormon Church? My impression is that there is not and that women who critique the church do so from the outside, after leaving the group. I don't recall ever reading any lively debates from within the church over women's roles such as one finds in mainline Protestant denominations. That doesn't mean, however, that the debates haven't taken place. It simply means that I don't know about them if they have. Thanks in advance for your help.

Suzanne Thurman  
Assistant Professor of History  
Mesa State College

I'm sure you'll receive many of the same suggestions from other Mormon-watchers and Mormons on this list. But here are the standards. On nineteenth-century Mormon feminism, suffrage in particular, see Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed., *Battle for the Ballot: Essays on Women Suffrage in Utah, 1870-1896*. You might also want to look at Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters*, which was recently re-released with a new introduction by Anne F. Scott.

The major struggles over feminism within Mormonism in this century have surrounded the ERA. See Sonia

Johnson's autobiography *From Housewife to Heretic*; D. Michael Quinn's article "The LDS Church's Campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment," *Journal of Mormon History*, 20 (Fall 1994); and Martha Sonntag Bradley's excellent oral history of Utah's IWY conference, which pitted a minority of Mormon and non-Mormon feminists against a conservative Mormon majority that flocked to the conference to vote down feminist proposals, "The Mormon Relief Society and the International Women's Year," *Journal of Mormon History*, 21 (Spring 1995).

Johnson, the leader of a group called Mormons for ERA, was excommunicated.

During the 1970s a group of Boston-based Mormon feminists, including historians Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Claudia Bushman, founded a publication called *Exponent II*, which is still operating. Also in the 1970s, a group of Mormon women historians, mostly based in Salt Lake City, began doing fine work in Mormon women's history. A number of these people have personal and historical essays collected in Lavina Fielding Anderson and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, eds., *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*. For other personal essays from this era see Mary Bradford, ed., *Mormon Women Speak*.

During the 1980s a Salt Lake-

based feminist group called The Mormon Women's Forum organized. This has been the most vocal group of insider women working for institutional reform, including priesthood ordination and wider recognition and articulation of Mormonism's "Heavenly Mother" theology. They sponsor a quarterly publication, and many MWF voices are collected with others in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*.

Mormon leaders launched a renewed attack on feminists in the early 1990s that included the firings of some feminist professors from Brigham Young University and the excommunication of two of the editors cited above. Another MWF-affiliated theologian, Janice Allred, published a book called *God the Mother* after she was excommunicated. Her sister and brother-in-law, Margaret and Paul Toscano, had earlier published a book of theological essays, *Strangers in Paradox*. Paul Toscano was among the handful of reformist Mormons excommunicated in 1993.

The most complete treatment of the BYU cases, including a 120-year history of feminism at BYU, is included in a book I just finished writing with a co-author, Brian Kagel, *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at BYU*, which is due out in early December. This includes treatment of a student feminist group that has gained national attention for its activism from time to time. One BYU feminist firing in 1996, along with a broader history of academic freedom violations, resulted in an AAUP censure of the school's administration earlier this year. (We discussed this issue briefly last fall on this list.)

You're right that some feminist pressure on Mormons comes from without or from people who are no longer church members. But a lot happens inside, though it's considered more and more dangerous, es-

pecially to be vocally critical of church leaders or policies. (One senior Mormon leader in 1993 named feminists along with gay rights activists and “so-called scholars and intellectuals” as primary “dangers” to the church.)

One place to look for other work by Mormon feminists working inside the tradition is *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. It’s had periodical issues devoted to Mormon feminist topics. One of these, Summer 1994, has an essay by Ulrich called “Border Crossings.” A more popular independent Mormon publication, *Sunstone* magazine, also publishes material on Mormon feminism from time to time.

I’ll be happy to provide whatever else I can—including more complete citations or addresses for the publications—or answer questions. I guess it’s obvious that I find this an interesting topic.

Bryan Waterman  
American Studies  
Boston University

I’d like to add to my friend Bryan Waterman’s capable bibliographic posting to this list an additional comment on the topic of Mormonism and feminism. Suzanne Thurman raises a good point when she observes that much feminist critique of Mormonism happens from “the outside.”

Many Mormon feminists would challenge the idea of a clearly demarcated Mormon “inside” and “outside.” Lavina Fielding Anderson, a woman excommunicated for her unflinching feminist history of recent events in the church, has recently argued that excommunication does not diminish one’s cultural identity as a Mormon or one’s ability to participate in Mormon spirituality. Who claims Mormonism is an issue of

authority. Membership in the church is regulated by the all-male priesthood; feminists with a stake in their Mormonism continue to define their own ways of claiming it.

I’d suggest Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge*, and especially its epilogue “The Clan of One-Breasted Women”, as a personal/narrative point of entry into this issue.

Joanna Brooks  
UCLA

Here are some observations of changes having to do with women in the LDS community. They seem to have been influenced by millions of loyal women simply asking the church for help as they face particular difficulties as Mormons in contemporary culture.

The mostly male LDS hierarchy in the past few years has received complaints from loyal members, especially single women, who felt the leaders were not responding to their special needs as never-married, widowed or divorced individuals. The tension between declaring the power of the single female soul to thrive and serve while emphasizing the ultimate power of the married couple has recently been addressed by church leaders as follows:

a) Women church leaders speak now in every LDS conference along with the male apostles,

b) A younger, unmarried female has been consistently called to serve in the highest women’s council of the church in recent years,

c) Though not officially encouraged to do so, thousands of twenty-one year old women are choosing to go out as full time missionaries, which was traditionally men’s work,

d) A subtle distinction is developing with the meaning of the term *priesthood* as a power to bless others

that is contingent on righteousness, on the one hand, and separately as an authority for administrative leadership. Women are coming to feel they can have their own righteous power to bless (not yet called priestesshood) even if they do not run the main church organizations,

e) On Sept. 23, 1995, the LDS prophet chose to first announce the most important revelatory declaration (“The Family”) in two decades to the General Women’s Conference, not the General Conference of the church,

f) Within that declaration published broadly to the world was a most astounding doctrinal disclosure with feminist—and other—ramifications: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”

Mary was beatified by the Catholic councils, but she was not brought into the Godhead. Joseph Smith went all the way claiming deity was a divine woman married to a divine man. God, in the fullest manifestation, is a married couple. Mormons have spoken informally of a divine Mother in Heaven, but this new declaration overtly states that humans are not only children of God but precisely children of “heavenly parents,” whose gender is eternal. It is the beginning of the formal placement of women in parity with men (not equality since gender is different and eternal) within Mormonism. This amazingly radical doctrine—unabashedly anthropomorphic (or theomorphic for Miltonians)—is pregnant with profemale theological possibilities.

Charles Randall Paul  
Committee on Social Thought  
University of Chicago

# Search the Scriptures

## Understanding Miracles

JANICE ALLRED

IN HER FIRST ADDRESS AS THE new Relief Society general president (*Ensign*, November 1997, pp. 86-88), Mary Ellen Smoot told a personal story about her mother. Seriously injured in an automobile accident, her mother miraculously recovered after promising God that if she were permitted to live long enough to see her six daughters married in the temple, she would dedicate her life to him and be ready to die after her desire was granted. Her mother did recover and serve God and live to see all her daughters married in the temple. Shortly after seeing her youngest daughter married in the temple and being released as stake Relief Society president, the mother died of cancer.

I do not doubt the facts of this story. What I find problematic is how Smoot interprets and frames them. She calls her mother's promise a "sacred covenant between a beloved daughter of God and her loving Heavenly Father." I believe this seriously distorts the meaning of "sacred covenant." A sacred covenant between God and a person must be ordained of God. A human being cannot initiate a contract with God and assume he honors it. Speaking of covenants, the Lord said:

Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion.

Will I accept of an offering that is not made in my name?

Or will I receive of your hands that which I have not appointed?

And will I appoint unto you, except it be by law, even as I and my Father ordained unto you before the world was? (D&C 132:8-11)

Many people attempt to bargain with God. If their request is not granted, either they lose faith in God or God's active presence in our lives,

or they think they did not have enough faith or they didn't serve God well enough. But perhaps neither God nor they failed to act faithfully. Perhaps their mistake is in their idea about how God works or doesn't work in our lives. Can we control God with our promises and good works? Of course we can make promises to God and we can perform good works, but in doing so we do not obligate God to grant us our desires.

Smoot frames her mother's story with a quote from Boyd K. Packer:

Your every need shall be fulfilled, now, and in the eternities; every neglect will be erased; every abuse will be corrected. All of this can come to you, and come quickly, when you devote yourself to Relief Society.

She uses her mother's experience as a witness that Packer's assertion is true. Packer began with a general statement about the goodness and justice of a loving God, but then he concluded by implying that God's blessings for women are contingent on Relief Society service, a conclusion for which there is no scriptural or theological basis. To me the purpose of the statement seems to be for securing women's service in Relief Society.

Smoot is not alone in her attempt to draw generalizations about the way God works in our lives from her personal experiences. We all want to secure God's blessings; we would all like a formula for getting the things we pray for. When a genuine miracle occurs, we who believe that God does sometimes grant us miracles naturally look for its causes; we look for a method to bring about miracles. Scriptural writers are also sometimes guilty of hasty conclusions and unwarranted generalizations about the causes of miracles.

The story in the Book of Mormon

of the sons of Helaman whose lives were miraculously spared in battle after battle is a case in point (Alma 56-57). B. H. Roberts in his *Studies in the Book of Mormon* says that this story is an "illustration of the amazingly miraculous events connected with Nephite wars, a wonder tale of a pious but immature mind." Those who witnessed the miracle of the preservation of the lives of the young warriors of the people of Ammon were amazed by it and regarded it as a genuine miracle. Helaman, the writer who recorded this miracle, and those who observed it sought a simple principle to explain it, but the complexity of the events recorded and the ideas presented in the text subverts the explanation of the miracle that Helaman provides. In my view this textual complexity, with parts of the text in tension with other parts, supports an interpretation that allows us to give more credence to the events themselves than the explanation of the events.

Mormon gives the background of the sons of Helaman in his history of the Nephite wars. They were the sons of a group of Lamanites who had been converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ by Ammon and then brought to live in the Nephite lands. After becoming converted to Christ, these Lamanites made a covenant to never again take up arms against their enemies, but to suffer death themselves rather than shed the blood of another person. Having been brought into Nephite lands by the Nephite missionaries in order to preserve their lives from their fellow Lamanites who were making war on them, the people of Ammon kept their oath for many years. But the difficulties of the Nephite wars tempted them to break their oath in order to defend their country and help the Nephites who had protected them for so many years. Helaman, the head of the church, persuaded them that they should not break their oath, but their sons, who had not covenanted to refrain from defending themselves against their enemies, entered into a

covenant to fight for the liberty of their people and the Nephites. They were called the sons of Helaman because they asked Helaman to be their leader and they were all young men.

The story of their miraculous pres-

*Mormon Women's Forum: An LDS Feminist Quarterly* is published by The Mormon Women's Forum, a non-profit corporation. The views expressed reflect the perspectives of the individual authors and not necessarily those of the editors, The Mormon Women's Forum, or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Founded in 1988, The Mormon Women's Forum invites all people to examine women's issues, particularly within the context of Mormonism. It makes no formal demands on any organization or system of belief. It does, however, examine and question traditional interpretations of women's roles, their history, and their relationship to deity.

Subscriptions are \$15 for four issues. The Mormon Women's Forum welcomes additional tax-deductible donations to help fund its publishing and networking efforts. Please send all subscriptions, contributions, and inquiries to:

The Mormon Women's Forum  
P.O. Box 58281  
Salt Lake City, UT 84158

The MWF *Quarterly* is interested in your thoughts, ideas, creative works, original artwork, and scholarly endeavors. All submissions to be considered for publication, including letters, personal and scholarly essays, reviews, poetry, and news stories, should be sent typed and double-spaced or on diskette (in IBM-compatible Word Perfect 5.1 format) along with a printed copy to the address listed above.

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 your name, address, and telephone number to the above address. Be sure to indicate whether or not you are willing to have this information published in the MWF *Quarterly*.

Lorie Winder Stromberg  
*Editor*

Lavina Fielding Anderson  
*Contemporary Issues*

Lynn Matthews Anderson  
*I Have An Answer*

Carlan Bradshaw  
*Networking*

Connie Disney  
*Design & Production*

Kelli Frame  
*Founding Editor*

Maxine Hanks  
*Women's Studies*

Sarah Smith  
*Book Reviews*

Paul Swenson  
*Poetry*

Cory Sargent  
*Circulation*

Margaret Toscano  
*Theology*

Alison Walker  
*Copy Editor*

Lynne Kanavel Whitesides  
*Feminist Theory*

© Copyright 1999  
The Mormon Women's Forum  
All rights reserved.

ervation in battle is recounted by Helaman in a letter that Mormon quotes extensively. Although they were in many fierce battles and all of them received many wounds, not one of them was killed. Helaman and the whole Nephite army considered their preservation a genuine miracle. Helaman offered this explanation of the miracle.

And we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God, because of their exceeding faith in that which they have been taught [by their mothers] to believe—that there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his marvelous power. (Alma 57:26)

In interpreting the text and seeking to understand the reasons for miracles we might ask, "Why did God preserve the lives of these young men?" "Why did Helaman think their lives were preserved?" "Why did the young men think their lives were preserved?" and "What did the mothers tell their sons?"

We cannot know the answer to the first question because God did not reveal his reasons. The text can be interpreted as offering an explanation in the form of a general principle: there is a just God. If a person does not doubt that God will save him from his enemies, then God will, indeed, save him from his enemies. But this principle is inconsistent with experience and reason and what we know of the nature and purposes of God as revealed in the whole scriptural text. Why would a just God preserve someone who doesn't doubt? Is doubt inconsistent with faith? Is it not rather an essential component of faith and part of what it means to be human? Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane doubted.

Helaman is the one who offers the explanation for the preservation of the young men, but there are several indications that Helaman himself does not believe his own explanation. He says that the young men had faith in "that which they had been taught to believe." He does not claim that the principle they had been taught to believe in was true.

Before the young men's first battle they tell Helaman, "Father, behold our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall" (Alma 56:46). Helaman says that they "had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" (Alma 56:47). Nevertheless, Helaman indicates that he himself doubted that their lives would be preserved. He writes that after the battle he "numbered those young men who had fought with me, fearing lest there were many of them slain. But behold, to my great joy, there had not one soul of them fallen to the earth" (Alma 56:55-56). Although none of them was killed in the first battle, Helaman still doubts that their faith will preserve them. After the second battle, when he discovers that none of the young men perished although they all received many wounds, he says that he was greatly astonished. It seems, then, that Helaman is not able to believe without a doubt that those who do not doubt will be preserved in battle.

What of the young men? Did they believe that God would preserve them in battle if they believed without a doubt that he would? We have only the indirect account of their beliefs given by Helaman. He talks about their beliefs in two places: in his accounts of the aftermath of their first (Alma 56) and second (Alma 57) battles. It is not clear from the record whether Alma wrote the account of the first battle before or after the second battle occurred. If he wrote it after, then his account is undoubtedly influenced by the interpretation of the events that he formulated after the second battle. Whatever the case, there are indications in chapter 56 that before the young men learned that God had preserved all of them in battle, their belief was different than the one recorded in Alma 57:26. In chapter 56 the young men say that God is with them and he will not let them fall. It is more plausible to interpret this as meaning that God will aid them in prevailing over their enemy than as meaning that not one of them would die in battle. This interpretation is

supported by verse 47 in which Helaman says, "They did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives." The more plausible interpretation of this is that the young men were not afraid to die, not that they thought they would not die.

Helaman says that the young men "had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" (Alma 56:47). What exactly did the mothers teach their sons? Did they teach them that if they did not doubt that God would save them in battle, then God would save them in battle? We have only a third-hand account of what the mothers taught their sons: Helaman's account of what the young men said their mothers said. It would be surprising if there were not some distortion here.

It will be helpful to go back and look at what we know about these mothers. They were among the people of Ammon who had covenanted that they would suffer death themselves rather than shed the blood of another person. Their king stated their belief: "if our brethren destroy us, behold, we shall go to our God and shall be saved" (Alma 24:16). They did not believe that God would save them from being destroyed by their enemies. They believed that God would save them from their sins and from hell because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

When their enemies came upon them, many of them were slain. These women saw many of their husbands slain by their enemies even as they prostrated themselves defenseless on the ground with perfect faith in God. Therefore, it seems highly unlikely that they would believe that God would preserve their sons' lives in battle if the sons believed without a doubt that God would preserve them in battle. What the mothers knew without a doubt was that death was not to be feared if we have faith in Christ. Their faith was in Jesus Christ and his power to save them from sin and to take away the sting of death. Surely they taught their sons to put their faith in God and not fear death.

How did the mothers' teaching that God would deliver them from sin and hell turn into the idea that God would deliver them in battle? I have suggested that the mothers may have told them that God would enable them as a group to prevail in battle since their cause was just. Another possibility is that the mothers were promised by God that their sons would be spared. They then may have told them not to doubt that they would be delivered. If this were the case, then the reason for the young men's miraculous preservation would have been God's promise to the mothers, not the sons' lack of doubt.

Helaman's record seems to indicate

that the young men were also surprised when they discovered that none of them had been killed in battle. He says, "to our great astonishment, and also the joy of our whole army, there was not one soul among them who did perish" (Alma 57:25). The "our" here must refer to Helaman and his young warriors since it is contrasted to "our whole army." If the young men were astonished that none of them was killed, then surely they were not without doubt.

But it seems that both the young men and Helaman succumbed to the almost universal desire to find causes and formulate generalizations. Why did God preserve the young men's lives? We cannot know for sure, but one possibility occurs to me. Why did the young men speak of their mothers' teachings and their mothers' faith, and not of their fathers' teachings and their fathers' faith? Was it because, as some have suggested, that mothers are better at teaching the gospel to their children or that mothers have more faith? Of course not. Probably it was because these young men's fathers died when they were small, slain by the Lamanites because they refused to defend themselves. Miracles do not occur deterministically. They are gifts from God. I like to think that God spared the lives of the young men as a gift to the mothers whose husbands had not been spared.

The Mormon Women's Forum  
P.O. Box 58281  
Salt Lake City, UT 84158

Address Service Requested

NON PROFIT  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
SALT LAKE CITY, UT  
PERMIT NO. 5486