

# Toward a Feminist Interpretation of Latter-day Scripture

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DURING THE PAST FIVE YEARS I have read the Book of Mormon more than a hundred times both while working on *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon* and later.<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, I am astonished that it took so many readings and a focus on the question of using gender-inclusive language in the simplified version to discover something that should have been obvious to me from the beginning: females scarcely figure or matter in our sacred books. While this is true for the Bible, it is even more true for the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price.

Writing of the effects of women's invisibility in Torah, noted Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow observed, "The silence of women reverberates through the tradition, distorting the shape of narrative and skewing the content of the law."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Latter-day Saints' ignorance of and indifference to the content of our own scriptures *vis-à-vis* women distorts our own sacred narratives, skews the content and language of our doctrine, and short-circuits the revelatory process by promoting the erroneous belief that all answers to contemporary questions about women's place and role in Christ's church can be found in the standard works.

This essay briefly outlines the extent of the dearth of women and the feminine in LDS scripture, delineates some of the theological implications of women's absence in scripture, and then briefly discusses the possibilities

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1. *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon* is a verse-by-verse paraphrase of the Book of Mormon written on a fifth-grade reading level. It is intended as a help for persons with limited reading ability and will shortly be available through Seagull Book & Tape. For more information, see my "Delighting in Plainness: Issues Surrounding a Simple Modern English Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 16 (Mar. 1992): 20-29. I have not received and will not receive any money for this work.

2. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 9ff.

for recovering women's stories as well as for developing a framework for a feminist interpretation of sacred writ.

#### WOMEN IN LATTER-DAY SCRIPTURE: IMPOVERISHED INHERITANCE

Judith Plaskow argues for the need to document and acknowledge the full extent of women's invisibility and marginality in Jewish scripture because, in her words, "if we refuse to recognize the painful truth about the extent of women's invisibility, we can never move forward."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it has been too painful for Latter-day Saints to acknowledge the way women are overlooked or portrayed in our scriptures. Although the paucity of references to women has been acknowledged from time to time,<sup>4</sup> there has been no serious exploration of the implications of women's absence. I recently completed a lengthy study of women's treatment in latter-day scripture, and the reality of women's invisibility and marginality in Mormonism's sacred texts is not pleasant to contemplate.

Compared to the Bible, which mentions nearly 200 women by name, references to women in latter-day scripture are sparse. Out of the three latter-day books of scripture, only fourteen women are named: six in the Book of Mormon—three biblical figures (Eve, Sarah, and Mary), along with Sariah, Abish, and the harlot Isabel; five in the Doctrine and Covenants—Emma Smith, Vienna Jacques, Sarah, Hagar, and Eve. Surprisingly, the Pearl of Great Price contains the greatest number of named women (ten).<sup>5</sup> Whereas the Bible directly quotes scores of women (both named and unnamed), only three individual Book of Mormon women are quoted (Sariah, Lamoní's consort, and wicked King Jared's daughter), along with one group of women (the daughters of Ishmael). No women's words are recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants; and in the Pearl of Great Price only Eve is quoted.<sup>6</sup>

Although there are a handful of latter-day scriptures to which Mormon

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3. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

4. A candid summary of female characters and stories in the Book of Mormon appeared in the September 1977 *Ensign*, under the title "My Book of Mormon Sisters," by Marjorie Meads Spencer. Spencer acknowledged that "women characters seemed to be so few and far between among the overwhelming numbers of men that it was easy to conclude that women had been slighted," and that "outwardly, the Book of Mormon fails to create a strong impression of women" (66). But while Spencer notes most of the explicitly inclusive doctrinal passages, she does not address issues of exclusive language, assumed audience, and women's limited accountability in a patriarchal society.

5. Some women, such as Eve, Sarah, and Emma Smith, are mentioned in more than one book of scripture.

6. The female personification of the earth (the "mother of men") is also quoted (Moses 7:48).

feminists can point as markers of the right relation of women and men to one another and to God (e.g., 2 Ne. 26:33; Mosiah 5:7, 27:25; Ether 3:14), such can scarcely lessen the shock of such female-denigrating phrases as “the whore of all the earth” (1 Ne. 14:10, 11; D&C 29:21, cf. D&C 86:3), “the mother of abominations” (1 Ne. 14:9, 10, 13, 16; D&C 88:94, cf. D&C 88:05), and “the mother of harlots” (1 Ne. 13:34, 14:16) as metaphors for human (usually male) sinfulness. Nor can such entirely mitigate the overall impression of our scriptures’ negative portrayal of women, particularly in “the keystone of our religion”—the Book of Mormon. Women are frequently portrayed there as mere chattel—lumped together with flocks, herds, and other possessions (Mosiah 22:2, 8; Alma 2:25, 3:2, 7:27, 58:12; 3 Ne. 3:13; see also Mosiah 2:5, 11:12). Book of Mormon women are commodities to be used as gifts or bribes (Alma 17:24, Ether 8:10-12); their sexuality is used to protect men (Mosiah 19:13-14); they become the wives of their kidnappers (20:3-5, 23:33). Nephite women are not only taken prisoner (Alma 58:30-31, 60:17), they are evidently helpless to prevent their own starvation (53:7). Women’s minds as well as their feelings are “delicate” (Jacob 2:7, 9), and their emotionality is a threat to the survival of the community (Mosiah 21:9-12). Even individual women notable enough to receive positive mention are nevertheless also portrayed in negative ways: emotionally weak (Abish, in Alma 19:28); incapable of coherent communication (Lamoni’s queen, in v. 30); complaining and faithless (Sariah, in 1 Ne. 5:1-3).

There are scarcely any accounts of women acting in anything other than tightly-defined or constrained circumstances, with the possible exceptions of Morianton’s maidservant, who nonetheless responds as a victim of male brutality (Alma 50:30-31), and evil King Jared’s prodigiously evil Jaredite daughter (Ether 8:7-12, 17)—who, incidentally, seems to be the only literate woman in the Book of Mormon. What is more important, however, is that women’s infrequent appearances in latter-day sacred narrative serve only to facilitate the telling of male stories. To paraphrase Judith Plaskow, women in these male texts are not subjects or molders of their own experiences but objects of male purposes, designs, and desires. They may be vividly characterized, but their presence does not negate their silence. If they are central to plot, the plots are not about them.<sup>7</sup> Even the account of Lamoni’s unnamed queen (Mosiah 18:43-19:30)—arguably the most powerful story involving a Book of Mormon woman—is a supporting, secondary scene in the much larger story of the sons of Mosiah’s proselyting success among the Lamanites (Alma 17-26).

Of particular significance, however, is the fact that women are not

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7. Plaskow, 2-3.

intended as the audience for God's word in either ancient or modern times. To illustrate, women are peripherally addressed (in other words, are acknowledged as being present) in only three out of two dozen or so major discourses or doctrinal expositions in the Book of Mormon, all of which are clearly addressed to men and often provably only to men. (Even the resurrected Jesus directs his words to men in the mixed-gender multitude, as in "Pray in your families, that your wives and your children may be blessed" [3 Ne. 18:21].) Without exception, every word intended for readers in modern times who "shall receive these things" (Moro. 10:3-5) is directed only to men: the writers, redactors, and even the translator of the Book of Mormon assumed a solely male audience for its salvific message.<sup>8</sup>

One might expect to find things more even-handed in our most modern book of scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants. Yet disappointingly, it is the worst of our scriptures where women are concerned. There are no women's voices or stories therein, and fewer than 4 percent of its verses pertain explicitly to women or use "female" language (in other words, use specifically female nouns or pronouns). Of this 4 percent, only one-third directly or indirectly addresses women or contains doctrine or counsel specifically applicable to women. The other two-thirds is made up of references to women as objects or as metaphorical images, the most prominent of which is the female personification of Zion, which accounts for 28 percent of all female language in the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of section 25, in which God directly speaks to Emma Smith through Joseph, only one portion of one other revelation (section 128, a canonized letter from Joseph Smith) directly addresses women.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Lynn Matthews Anderson, "The Book of Mormon as a Feminist Resource, Part One: Dispelling the Illusion of Inclusion," 9-11, Aug. 1993, privately circulated.

9. An interesting verse to consider in light of the female personification of Zion, particularly when juxtaposed with the current policy proscribing women's ordination, is in section 113 and is in response to the question of what is meant by "put on thy strength, O Zion" (Isa. 52:1, cited in v. 7). The answer (v. 8): "He [Isaiah] had reference to those whom God should call in the last days, who should hold the power of priesthood to bring again Zion, and the redemption of Israel; and to put on her strength is to put on the authority of the priesthood, which she, Zion, has a right to by lineage; also to return to that power which she had lost."

10. Yet after the initial welcome burst of inclusivity—"And now, my dearly beloved brethren and sisters" (v. 15)—Joseph writes only to men, as in verse 22: "Brethren, shall we not go forward in so great a cause?" and verse 25: "Brethren, I have many things to say to you on the subject." Portions of sections 90 and 132 indirectly address specific individual women—in other words, God speaks directly to Joseph Smith about specific women, as in "it is my will that my handmaid Vienna Jacques should receive money" (90:28) and "if she [Emma Smith] will not abide this commandment, she shall be

But skewed statistics are hardly the only source of concern relative to women and the Doctrine and Covenants. Androcentric language and masculine focus in virtually all the revelations create barriers to understanding women's place in our doctrine and theology. For example, although women are mentioned as "begotten . . . daughters unto God" on the myriad created worlds (76:24), what does it mean that the vision of the celestial kingdom and criteria for entrance (76:50-70) are described in solely male terms? Those inheriting celestial glory are called "priests and kings" (v. 56), "priests . . . after the order of Melchizedek" (v. 57), and "gods, even the sons of God" (v. 58). If women are to share in "all things . . . present or things to come" (v. 59), or to "dwell in the presence of God . . . forever" (v. 62), and if our "bodies [will be] celestial," and our "glory [will be] that of the sun" (v. 70), no mention is made of these facts. In revelation after revelation women are completely unaccounted for—in the premortal existence, in this life, in the hereafter.

Another example of women's exclusion from larger theological considerations is in Doctrine and Covenants 84. In what ways can this section be applied to women? What can a woman infer about herself and her standing before God when she reads verses 33-38?:

For whoso is faithful unto the obtaining these two priesthoods of which I have spoken, and the magnifying their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies. They become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God.

And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord; for he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; and he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.

Will women's bodies be sanctified unto renewal? Can women become daughters of Moses and Aaron, are women counted as Abraham's seed? (And what of Sarah and the other prophets' wives? Who are their children?) Are women part of "the church and kingdom, and the elect of God"? If women receive the Lord's servants by accepting the gospel and by being baptized and confirmed as members of Christ's church, are they eligible to receive all that the Father has, including priesthood? (Or will women receive what the Mother has, and if that is the case, what does the Mother have?) Might the "wo" pronounced on "all those who come not unto this priesthood" (v. 42) include the sisters of the church? (And if the temple

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destroyed" (132:54). A handful of other verses deal with women in relation to church law (most of which are found in section 42).

endowment serves to induct women into the priesthood, as some have suggested,<sup>11</sup> why aren't Mormon women aware of this "induction"?)

Even in the handful of scriptures which focus on women's concerns, women are portrayed as passive objects—as victims or beneficiaries, never as subjects or principals. One of the most under-analyzed passages from a feminist point of view, in my opinion, is section 123. Historically, it pertains to keeping a record of persecution the Saints suffered while in Missouri, but verses 7-17 describe in strong terms the effects of the "creeds of the fathers" (v. 7) that have caused so much iniquity and suffering throughout the world, and enjoin recipients of this revelation to "wear out their lives" to do all they can in "bringing to light all the hidden things of darkness" (v. 13). On close scrutiny, this seems to be a superlative condemnation of patriarchy, yet the language Joseph Smith uses in urging the overthrow of "the very mainspring of corruption" (v. 7) actually reinforces that mainspring. Even recognizing the greater social and legal constraints on women at the time this section was written, what does it mean for women today that we are not urged along with our brethren to participate in this "imperative duty"?

Most sobering is to ponder the implications of Official Declaration 2, received and canonized in 1978: it is addressed only to general and local priesthood officers, beginning with the salutation "Dear Brethren." This letter's content is also male-oriented; while it mentions that from that point on, every worthy male can be ordained to the priesthood, "and enjoy with his loved ones . . . the blessings of the temple" (presumably some of the "loved ones" are female), women are not part of this momentous event—neither as audience nor subject, even though this announcement also paved the way for all worthy adult women of all races to attend the temple. Thus even toward the end of the twentieth century, one must ask: Why are women, who make up the majority of the adult membership of the church, still situated at the nether end of "revelatory channels"?

#### THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF EXCLUSION

Some people, on being told of the dearth of things female in our scriptures, respond with indifference or a defensive "so what?"—the latter generally accompanied by the protestation that, regardless of the language, regardless of the erroneous assumption of audience, "obviously" women are *now* included and "of course" scriptures apply to women *today*. But previously there has been little detailed textual examination relative to

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11. See D. Michael Quinn, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843," in Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 365-409.

women and the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, which makes the topic of women in latter-day scripture vulnerable to misinterpretation and manipulation. In a religion that adheres to a literalistic concept of dispensationalism—that is, that God has repeatedly revealed a set body of saving knowledge to human beings through prophets—it is only natural as individuals and as an institution to approach both biblical and latter-day scripture with the expectation of finding certain themes therein. Thus all too often what we glean from the scriptures is more a reflection of the assumptions we bring with us than what the texts themselves actually say. When we ignore the facts of women's historical exclusion in all walks of life—religious, economic, or political—we easily fall into the trap of projecting women's current status onto the reality of the past.<sup>12</sup>

Our own experience of greater inclusivity for women induces us to expect that women were included in the past—if not explicitly, then at least implicitly. This tends to give rise to the phenomenon of approaching our scriptures with “cultural overlay”—of making the unfamiliar familiar by projecting ourselves and our conditions onto disparate peoples, cultures, and circumstances. When scriptures abounding in masculine language are included in Relief Society manuals, for example, it seems obvious to us that those scriptures were meant to be universal in application. A refreshing, recent development has been hearing at least some general authorities modify the androcentric scriptures they quote in general conference to explicitly include women. Such efforts at inclusivity, however, can lead listeners to erroneously conclude that women are as integral to the ecclesiastical and theological scene as men, and always have been.

Mormon art has also gone a long way in popularizing the idea that gospel principles in all dispensations have been as essentially “egalitarian” as they are viewed today, and that the church, albeit restricting the role of women in formal ministry by precluding ordination to priesthood, is nonetheless a church with a membership composed of women as well as men, and always has been. For example, Arnold Friberg's famous depiction of Alma baptizing his people in the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18:8-17)—an illustration included in missionary editions of the Book of Mormon for decades—shows women and men being baptized. But the account of the

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12. A case in point is when President Gordon B. Hinckley pointed to the Declaration of Independence as proof that the word “men” included women (Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign* 21 (Nov. 1991) [address delivered at the 1991 Women's Conference]: 98-100). In a note appended to the printed version of his talk, President Hinckley acknowledges that the Declaration of Independence was written at a time when women were disenfranchised; however, he insists that “subsequent generations have regarded *men* in a generic sense. I might have used various other examples on which there could be no question.”



event does not mention women at all (while explicitly mentioning men), and later references to the event in both Mosiah 25:18 and Alma 5:3 state specifically that Alma baptized “his brethren.”

While I am not arguing that women were not baptized, I am saying that there is nothing in either the Book of Mormon or the Pearl of Great Price to indicate that women were baptized or were even thought to need baptism; there is no clear evidence in these two sacred books that women received the Holy Ghost, partook of the sacrament, engaged in “Christian” service, or participated in any aspects of what we today consider the normal life of the church. In all, there is an abundance of textual evidence to support the conclusion that women’s accountability was limited, and thus they were not fully part of the early “church of Christ” among the Nephites. Moreover, in the Pearl of Great Price only Adam is instructed about salvation and is baptized (Moses 6:55-68)—and this particular pattern is given so that “thus may all become [God’s] sons” (v. 68, emphasis added). One wonders where God’s daughters are in all this.

So long as Latter-day Saints continue to believe that women are included in our sacred stories when they are not, we not only perpetuate the myth that each dispensation of the gospel was in most ways identical to our own, but we perpetuate the larger myth that all the answers to contemporary questions pertaining to women can be found in our scriptures. This fundamental flaw in the basis for traditional and contemporary interpretation of LDS scripture prevents us from seeking new revelation and answers to old problems.

A feminist re-reading and reinterpretation of latter-day texts should startle, discomfort, and inspire Latter-day Saints—especially our leaders—to ask questions both about the role of women in the church “back then” and especially about their role now. The importance of this issue cannot be overemphasized: If our theology and doctrine are based on texts exclusive of women in the past, how can we find answers there to questions which concern or include women today? The facts of women’s exclusion in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants carry with them important implications, not the least of which is the idea that a theology based on exclusion must be recast when those who were once excluded become included.

The evidence of women’s theological irrelevancy in scripture attests to the need for analyzing our reasons for now including them as well as for reexamining the rationale for that inclusion. If we now recognize that women were excluded previously because of past cultural biases, how can we know, short of revelation, that we are not also acting today on the basis of our own biases in continuing to exclude women from certain aspects of church membership? Although answers to certain questions, such as the



need for women to be baptized, are explicit in the Doctrine and Covenants (20:72-74), the Doctrine and Covenants does not give explicit answers to the proper relationship of women to priesthood authority and church governance, nor to what is becoming an even more urgent issue: the proper worship of God the Mother as well as God the Father.<sup>13</sup> Specific knowledge about these "new" issues cannot be found in our scriptures: the questions themselves, in the context of the times and cultures of origin (including the nineteenth century), were not comprehended, much less formulated. Indeed, such issues have only begun to be understood in our own day, and the vast majority of questions defining these issues have yet to be officially acknowledged, much less thoughtfully explored.

In sum, that there is so little pertaining to women in our scriptures indicates not that what little we have is somehow sufficient on which to base policy and practice, but that there needs to be more. Given the apparent attitude among some current LDS leaders that "if God wants things to be different, he will let us know," it seems likely that we will continue to trade our birthright of revelation for a pottage of culturally-contaminated tradition.<sup>14</sup> Until such new revelation is sought for, however, I believe it is the task of Mormon feminism to recover and reconstruct

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13. In two separate instances in 1991 President Gordon B. Hinckley counseled first with regional representatives and then with women of the church about not praying to Mother in Heaven. President Hinckley cited several examples of Jesus praying to the Father, including the Lord's Prayer, and then said, "But, search as I have, I find nowhere in the Standard Works an account where Jesus prayed other than to His Father in Heaven or where He instructed the people to pray other than to His Father in Heaven. . . . The fact that we do not pray to our Mother in Heaven in no way belittles or denigrates her. None of us knows anything about her" ("Report of the 1991 Women's Broadcast," *Ensign* 21 [Nov. 1991].) The appeal to "argument from silence" rather than stating that the counsel represents God's will on the subject has troubled a number of Latter-day Saints (see, for example, the letters to the editor section in several issues of *Mormon Women's Forum* following publication of President Hinckley's statement in the *Ensign*). Interestingly, President Hinckley referred to Jesus' instruction in 3 Nephi 18:21 that his hearers should "pray . . . unto the Father . . . that your wives and your children may be blessed," apparently without noting the gender referent that excludes women and children from this counsel.

14. For example, while President Hinckley admitted to the possibility of change with regard to women and priesthood at the 1985 Women's Conference, his remarks seemed to indicate a desire for God to take the initiative, thereby marking a departure from what Mormons are taught is the pattern of revelation—that God bestows greater light and knowledge on those who pray, study, ponder, and ask (Lynn Matthews Anderson, "The Mormon Church and the Second Sex," 10, Oct. 1992, privately circulated; see also Gordon B. Hinckley, "Ten Gifts from the Lord," *Ensign* 15 [Nov. 1985]: 86: "[A] few Latter-day Saint women are asking why they are not entitled to hold the priesthood. To that I can say that only the Lord, through revelation, could alter that situation. He has not done so, so it is profitless for us to speculate and worry about it").

women's stories wherever possible, as well as to develop and promulgate new ways of evaluating and interpreting the scriptures.

#### RECOVERING WOMEN'S STORIES

Over the past two decades Jewish and Christian feminist theologians have made significant contributions to textual reconstructions to recover women's untold stories in sacred writ.<sup>15</sup> Textual reconstruction involves exegetical study—a critical examination of the original texts on which a given translation is based—as well as the incorporation of secular data to create a context for interpretative analysis. While Mormon feminists find their task more formidable because of the dearth of textual references to women and at least where the Book of Mormon is concerned the absence of original text material and corroborating historiographical and archaeological evidence, it is nevertheless possible to use correlative material from Old Testament studies to expand our understanding of women's position in portions of the Pearl of Great Price and the Book of Mormon—particularly if we treat the latter as a society shaped by the Law of Moses.<sup>16</sup> Let me give a brief example of this kind of reconstruction by focusing on Nephi's forgotten sisters, who are not even mentioned in today's seminary Book of Mormon study guide.

Nephi does not mention any sisters leaving Jerusalem with Lehi (1 Ne. 2:5). When Lehi "cast[s] his eyes about" in his dream of the Tree of Life, he mentions that Sariah and Nephi and Sam eat the fruit, but that Laman and Lemuel do not (8:13-18); he does not mention his daughters. (Nor does Lehi mention seeing his as-yet-unborn sons Jacob and Joseph eat the fruit; perhaps his daughters were born after he left Jerusalem? If so, no mention is made of their birth, although his later sons' births are spoken of in 1 Nephi 18:7.)

If we are dealing with older daughters, why are neither Sariah nor Lehi concerned about finding husbands for them? Even though in Israel marriage and childbirth was the key to women's redemption and social

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15. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work in New Testament studies has been particularly important in illuminating and analyzing secular sources about women's situations in the first and second centuries and what these might mean in understanding women's lot in the early Christian church.

16. I am aware of the controversy regarding Book of Mormon historicity. However, I believe it is important to approach all LDS scripture by accepting at face value the institutionally-accepted views of their historicity. The impact of these books on the lives of the majority of Latter-day Saints rests on a particular set of assumptions about their theology and history. While I believe it is possible to develop a method for reinterpretation which does not necessitate undermining that set of assumptions, obviously this is an issue which requires more exploration and discussion.

status,<sup>17</sup> God explicitly sends Lehi's sons back to Jerusalem to procure wives from among Ishmael's daughters (1 Ne. 7:1). A possibility is that the sons of Ishmael are already married to Lehi's daughters: 1 Nephi 7:6 mentions "the two sons of Ishmael and their families." Being married to the sons of Ishmael could explain why the daughters were not with Lehi's family during the initial escape into the desert: once an Israelite woman married, she legally belonged to her husband's family. The daughters' connection to Ishmael's family would also explain why Ishmael was inclined to view Lehi's cause with favor, but this same connection becomes more problematic later on.

The first and only mention of Nephi's sisters is in 2 Nephi 5:6, when Nephi takes his family, and "Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me" into the wilderness to escape the murderous plots of Laman and Lemuel. This raises an interesting question: Have Nephi's sisters abandoned their husbands, the sons of Ishmael (who stay behind with Laman and Lemuel)—thereby giving greater cause for the Lamanites to hate the Nephites as home-wreckers? Or are there simply more of Nephi's sisters than there are sons of Ishmael, and it is only the unmarried ones who leave with Nephi?

Yet if the daughters were married to the sons of Ishmael, Lehi never acknowledges their direct connection to him; rather, he gives his conditional blessing only to "my sons who are the sons of Ishmael." This seems an odd way for a "tender parent" (1 Ne. 8:37) to overlook his own offspring, even if they are female, although it fits what seems to be a patriarchal pattern in the Old Testament of blessing only male progeny. But the plot thickens again in 2 Nephi 4:3-10 when Lehi gathers his grandsons and granddaughters—the offspring of Laman and Lemuel—and gives them all a conditional blessing. Thus if the grandfather blesses both male and female progeny in this instance, why would Lehi overlook his own daughters earlier?

Other possibilities to account for the seeming anomalous recording (or lack thereof) include such plausible but fantastic scenarios as (1) Lehi dies before Sariah knows she is pregnant with twin girls, hence he does not bless them; (2) Sariah dies in childbirth, the daughters survive, but Lehi and Nephi blame them for Sariah's death, hence it is too painful to mention them; (3) Joseph Smith mistranslated "nieces" or "maidservants" or some other word as "sisters."

While there is too little textual material from which to draw a complete

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17. See Rachel Biale, *Women & Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), and Blu Greenberg, *Women & Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

portrait of womankind among the Nephites, Lamanites, and Jaredites, this example shows that it is possible to flesh out at least some of the passing references to Book of Mormon women. Just as there is more that we can infer about the harlot Isabel, other than the fact she was a success in her career (cf. Alma 39:4), there is likely more we can infer about other "inconsequential" women whose lives are probably more inspirational than Isabel's.

The few women's stories in the Pearl of Great Price also invite recovery and reconstruction. The book of Moses, for example, paints an interesting portrait of Eve and her relationship to Adam following the Fall—a portrait that varies with the sex-role stereotyping still prevalent in the modern church.<sup>18</sup> The lesser-known story of Lamech and his wives in Moses 5:47-54 (cf. Gen. 4:19-24) tells of a different kind of far-reaching consequence. Lamech, a member of one of the earliest secret combinations, tells his wives Adah and Zillah that he has secretly slain Irad, not for "the sake of getting gain, but . . . for the oath's sake" (v. 50), Irad having begun to reveal the secret oaths to "the sons of Adam" (v. 49). Lamech's wives are unimpressed, rebel against him, and reveal his secret, which apparently is why secret combinations were found "among the sons of men" (v. 53), but "among the daughters of men these things were not spoken" (v. 54). The all-male composition of secret combinations in the Book of Mormon thus reflects a long-standing tradition, one which continues to be observed in modern-day analogs (organized crime families, cartels, etc.).<sup>19</sup>

Another kind of challenge awaits LDS feminists in approaching the Doctrine and Covenants, which differs significantly from other scriptures in that it contains little narrative history but instead records God's direct words to Joseph Smith, often in response to Joseph's or other men's questions or concerns. Still, during the past twenty or so years there has been an upsurge of interest in the stories of early LDS women, some of

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18. Although Spencer W. Kimball stated that "the male [is] to till the ground, support the family, to give proper leadership; the woman [is] to cooperate, to bear the children, and to rear and teach them" (*Ensign* 16 [Mar. 1976]: 70-72), Moses 5:1 indicates that Eve worked alongside Adam; verse 3 reports that the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve tilled the land and tended flocks. Interestingly enough, verse 5 seems to say that both Adam and Eve were commanded to make offerings to the Lord, perhaps indicating that priestly prerogatives were not yet assigned on the basis of gender. Evidently Mormon doctrine about male leadership stems from the same sources in traditional Christianity which insist on treating God's description of what life would be like in a fallen world (cf. Gen. 3:16-19, Moses 4:22-25) as God's will concerning the stereotypical dichotomizing of human gender roles.

19. Lee Flosi (former head of the FBI's Organized Crime Task Force in Chicago and former legal attaché to Rome), "Some Families Aren't Forever," Oct. 1992, notes in my possession.

whom kept diaries and journals. While one cannot extrapolate from these sources and put words into God's mouth, it is nonetheless possible to explore in greater depth the impact of these androcentric revelations in the lives of women who were admittedly only "auxiliary" thereto. For nearly every man called by revelation to serve a mission in the early days of the church, for example, there was a wife left behind to grapple with the vicissitudes of supporting a family in difficult circumstances. God's help to these women deserves to be recognized as equally essential to the growth and progress of the church as the better-publicized stories of God's help to their missionary-husbands.

Nevertheless, adding historical depth to commentary about scripture and its coming forth or implementation in people's lives—specifically, women's lives—is not the same as those stories and experiences being part of scripture itself. While I cannot help but wonder how long it will take for women's stories to merit canonization, I am more staggered at the thought that God had no words of encouragement to give through a living prophet to women whose efforts enabled their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers to undertake the proselyting work that society at the time rarely permitted women to do.

#### ESTABLISHING A MORMON FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

We cannot ignore the foundational texts of our religion; nor can we afford to dismiss those things in them we find unsettling or distasteful. But unless we are willing to worship a God who is sexist, partial, and misogynist, we cannot ascribe all that is found in our scriptures to deity. Rather, we need to develop an interpretive framework that permits us to distinguish between timeless truths and human influences. In short, although we as Mormons, and more particularly we as Mormon feminists, are decades behind colleagues in other faiths in recognizing the need for developing a feminist interpretive approach to scripture, we can begin to make amends by building on the work of non-LDS feminists in approaching scriptural interpretation faithfully yet critically—reevaluating texts that appear out of harmony with the life and mission of Jesus and highlighting previously overlooked, undervalued, or misunderstood texts in which God affirms the equal worth of women and men.

While I believe part of this critical reevaluation necessitates a shift in our assumptions about scriptural authority, Latter-day Saints are theoretically in a strong position to make such a shift. For one thing, our scriptures attest to the notion of human error and weakness intermingling with timeless truth: the Eighth Article of Faith says that we believe the Bible is the word of God "as far as it is translated correctly" (with the clear

implication that not all of it reflects God's will); Moroni's preface to the Book of Mormon speaks of the possibility of faults which are "the mistakes of men"; but most important is what this scripture tells us: God works with people "in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24; see also 2 Ne. 31:3). In other words, God speaks to people within rather than outside of their particular cultural context, and such contexts have everything to do with the perception of women's stories and experiences as worthy for inclusion in sacred writ.

Our own belief about the relative authority of scripture makes it possible for us to use some, if not all, of the tools being developed by Judeo-Christian feminists to reinterpret biblical texts. One such tool is what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls "a hermeneutics of suspicion." This "hermeneutics of suspicion . . . takes as its starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions" and "questions the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and unarticulated interests of contemporary biblical interpretation."<sup>20</sup> This tool, I believe, can be applied to latter-day scripture and its tradition-based contemporary interpretation whether one attempts to find the applicability to women of an exclusive, androcentric text such as Alma 13; or to reconcile the unchristian elements of coercive polygyny with the expansive elements of eternal marriage relationships in Doctrine and Covenants 132; or to make sense of the negative characterization of Lamech's wives as lacking compassion when examined in the context of the fuller narrative of Moses 5:43-55.

Despite the fact that our texts are steeped in patriarchal language and imagery, I believe the tools of feminist theology can enable us to use latter-day scripture to overcome the sin of patriarchy in three ways: contextually, interpretively, and thematically. By contextually, I mean that latter-day scripture provides evidence to show that the structures of patriarchy, both ancient and modern, deny the full humanity of women. This denial establishes the unreliability of uncritically using patriarchal prooftexts as a means of authoritatively answering questions relevant to contemporary gender issues. By interpretively, I mean that despite the patriarchal context and androcentric language of our scriptures, modern prophets have interpreted the doctrines found in many specific texts as binding on, applying to, and inclusive of women. Such texts in and of themselves testify to the need for serious reconsideration of current attitudes, practices, popular "theology," and doctrinal interpretation concern-

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20. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 15ff. Hermeneutics is the critical analysis and/or development of interpretive methodology.

ing the status of women in God's church.<sup>21</sup> By thematically, I mean that latter-day scriptures, taken as a whole, contain recurrent ideas and motifs, two of which, however dimly or differently understood by their writers and redactors (or even by their translator), point to: first, that the parameters of the salvation offered through Christ's atonement are universal, crossing lines of gender, race, and class; and second, that equality in a society is a correct measure of its righteousness—when the people are righteous, they treat one another as equals; when they fall into unrighteousness, there is great inequality both temporally and spiritually.<sup>22</sup>

Scripture not only functions as a record of God's dealing with people in particular social and cultural milieus, but also as history. Latter-day Saints, as with most other faith groups in the Judeo-Christian tradition, understand that just because a practice, an act, an event, or a custom is mentioned or described in sacred writ does not constitute divine approbation of that practice, act, event, or custom. (For example, the fact that the Book of Mormon contains lengthy accounts of warfare and strife cannot be construed as scriptural advocacy of warfare and strife; to the contrary, Mormon's purpose in including these narratives seems to be to show the violent consequences of power-seeking and sin.) A Mormon feminist hermeneutic proposes to expose patriarchal biases which account for women being overlooked, excluded, or negatively portrayed, thereby refuting the notion of divine approval for any supposedly scripturally-based hierarchical ordering of the sexes. Viewed from a feminist perspective, an enormous number of "case histories" in biblical and latter-day narrative do not uphold the concept of patriarchy, but rather give proof of the adverse consequences of gender inequality and sexism. Even women's invisibility, in a certain ironic way,<sup>23</sup> functions as a testament against the dehumanizing elements found in every form of patriarchy, including its most benign incarna-

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21. Regarding the modern-day prophetic inclusion of women in otherwise exclusionary texts, Mormon feminist David Anderson notes: "It's important that these more inclusive interpretations be recognized for what they are; as things now stand, with our leaders not explicitly stating (or even understanding) that they are doing something new, we've left open the possibility for later leaders (and members) to claim that these broad interpretations were the unintended result of unexamined popular notions" (personal correspondence).

22. I am not suggesting that equality and respect for others ever eliminated gender discrimination even during periods of greatest righteousness, as in the City of Enoch or during the 200 years following Christ's visit to the Nephites. To propose such, especially for the latter situation, would be problematic, since women of the first generation (to say nothing of men) would have been completely unprepared psychologically, culturally, and otherwise for such equality. See my "Nephite women & patriarchy," 30 Nov. 1992, electronic essay, Mormon-L archives, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

23. I am indebted to Martha Pierce for this insight.



tion (i.e., the patriarchal order).<sup>24</sup> A feminist re-reading of latter-day scripture provides a new paradigm for interpreting the dearth of women's voices and concerns in scripture—one that uses scripture, both ancient and modern, as evidence of societies in the thrall of patriarchy, societies out of balance and harmony with fundamental aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ

Finally, a careful reading of all scripture, biblical as well as latter-day, points to two core values on which the entire gospel of Jesus Christ is predicated, and which provide a standard for judgment and reevaluation: first, God's commitment to human moral agency; and second, love of God and of one's neighbor, which we Latter-day Saints further define as charity or "the pure love of Christ." Both values affirm the worth and divine potential of each human being; neither delimits that worth or potential on the basis of membership in any particular human category of gender, race, or class. Both values are inextricably intertwined as foundational elements on which all other gospel principles are based: one value cannot stand without the other. I believe a critical reevaluation of all latter-day scripture in light of these two core values makes a strong case for the revamping of our notions of hierarchical, patriarchal priesthood and for the dismantling of patriarchal systems generally. Just as the Book of Mormon is, as Carol Lynn Pearson points out, the history of a fallen people and an unrelenting testament to the failure of patriarchy,<sup>25</sup> so the void of God's words to and about women even in modern-day scripture attests not only to society's continuing failure to recognize the equal personhood and worth of more than half of humanity, but also to the church's continuing failure in this area.

Using a dual basis of agency and charity for reinterpreting those texts used historically to justify oppression of women also enables LDS feminists

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24. This is not to say that the patriarchal order was not inspired; on the contrary, I believe it was probably the best system men were capable of receiving from God. Nevertheless, it represents the best of a fallen and teletial world, not a system that is in any way "celestial" in nature.

Gerda Lerner provides the following definition of patriarchy: "Patriarchy . . . means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources" (*The Creation of Patriarchy* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], 239).

Key elements of the patriarchal order are the same as more virulent forms of patriarchy, and thus the order itself is antithetical to the core values of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

25. Personal correspondence, 19 May, 8, 28 June 1993. See also Carol Lynn Pearson, "Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?" 1993, privately circulated.

to question larger assumptions imposed by millennia of patriarchal influence. This celestial influence continues to make itself felt even in the restored church, as our adherence to rigid sex-role stereotypes and increasing emphasis on "channels" and "protocol" shows. Those with an authoritarian bent will likely view reducing the gospel to its foundational elements as dangerous: doing so ultimately returns individual salvation to a place of primacy in the church, as well as restores an important key in discerning between human opinion and divine revelation. These two criteria hold in abeyance any assignation of divinity to human pronouncements, policies, and programs which uphold rather than destroy inequality, sex-role stereotyping, and other dehumanizing aspects of sexism; and, further, such criteria empower the Saints to break away from the ever-growing weight of patriarchal tradition which increasingly insists on enforced conformity rather than freely-chosen unity, on loyalty to persons and offices rather than to principle, and on assumptions of infallibility and inspiration even when those holding positions of authority do not ascribe their utterances, programs, or policies to God's inspiration.

#### CONCLUSION

Shortly after Official Declaration 2 was made public in 1978, Elder Bruce R. McConkie gave an address to Church Educational System personnel entitled "All Are Alike Unto God," in which he cited 2 Nephi 26:33:

For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.

He then went on to make an extraordinary admission:

These words have now taken on a new meaning. We have caught a new vision of their true significance. This also applies to a great number of other passages in the revelations. . . . Many of us never imagined or supposed that they had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have. . . . We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.

We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don't matter any more.

Despite this recent experience with the limits of human understanding, it remains to be seen how long it will take for church authorities to reexamine what this and other texts say about the relation of women to priesthood authority, as well as about the nature of priesthood authority itself.<sup>26</sup> Until Latter-day Saints look again at our scriptures and ask what it is they say and mean in light of issues confronting us in the late twentieth century, we will continue to suffer the effects of sexual dichotomizing and gender bias—of belonging to two churches, one for women and one for men, rather than all of us belonging to one church headed by Christ Jesus. In the words of Mary Daly,

The Church has been wounded in its structures, for it has deprived itself of the gifts and insights of more than half of its members. It has been grievously hurt in its members of both sexes, for in a society which welcomes and fosters prejudice, not only is the human potential of the subject group restricted, but the superordinate group also becomes warped in the process.<sup>27</sup>

The marginalizing of women in scripture, as Rachel Biale explains from her perspective as a Jew, “results in laws which exclude women from the central activities of Jewish life as well as laws which make them dependent on men and vulnerable to exploitation and denigration.”<sup>28</sup> These same words held true for Nephite, Lamanite, Jaredite women, nineteenth-century Mormon women, and likewise hold true for late-twentieth-century Latter-day Saint women. While I do not believe that people will be penalized beyond the natural consequences of the way they understood the gospel because of their cultural context, I nevertheless feel that we who live in a time when women are beginning to break free from male domination are obligated to hasten the day when male and female truly will be “alike unto God” and treated as such in Christ’s church.

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26. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike Unto God,” address to Church Educational System personnel, 1978, copy in my possession. That it may take a while for our understanding to increase *vis-à-vis* gender issues is typified by the refusal to acknowledge the issue’s existence, even in a peripheral sense, in the following quote of Howard W. Hunter. He first cites 2 Nephi 26:33, then says, “From this statement it is clear that *all* men are invited to come unto him and *all* are alike unto him. Race makes no difference; color makes no difference; nationality makes no difference” (“All Are Alike Unto God,” 1979, emphasis in original). But by its very omission from his comments, apparently *gender* does make a difference. This omission is consistent throughout his talk.

27. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 176ff.

28. Biale, 263.

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