

MORMON WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEFINITION

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EVER SINCE I BEGAN STUDYING and writing about the life of Emmeline B. Wells, which will be a life's work for me, I have felt her steadying hand on my shoulder reminding me of the caution she once gave to those who shared their deepest confidences with one another:

How utterly unable we are, to judge one another, none of us being constituted exactly alike; how can we define each other's sentiments truly, how discriminate fairly and justly in those peculiarly nice points of distinction which are determined by the emotions agitating the human heart in its variety of phases, or under, perhaps, exceptional circumstances?¹

I am sensitive to that steadying hand as I attempt to identify and define what for an earlier generation of women identified and defined them as women—their relationship to the Church. The individual variables, including the level of commitment and the extent to which any individual allows an institution to affect his or her life, impede the process of generalizing. Moreover, the deeply personal nature of religious conviction almost defies a corporate assessment, yet I will attempt to do just that, hoping I will not misplace Emmeline's trust that private thoughts and feelings and the diversity of sentiment and opinion will not be misjudged or misinterpreted. The generalizations I will make cannot possibly be all inclusive. I hope they will be instructive.

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I would like to concentrate on three aspects of the religious life of early Mormon women which I think helped them define and understand themselves and their place within both the theology and the institution of Mormonism. All had their beginnings in the Nauvoo period when women emerged as a visible, collective entity through the organization of the Relief Society. Most members today are familiar with what has become a symbol of that organization's beginning—Joseph giving the key to women. According to Eliza R. Snow's minutes, Joseph turned the key *to* women, not in behalf of women, as we generally hear, and told them that knowledge and intelligence would flow down from that time forth. "This," he said, "would be the beginning of better days for this society,"²

For many, that symbolic gesture signaled the opening of a new dispensation for women, not only Mormon, but all women. Summing up this interpretation of those significant words, Apostle Orson F. Whitney explained:

[The Prophet Joseph] taught that the sisters were to act with the brethren, to stand side by side with them, and to enjoy the benefits and blessings of the priesthood, the delegated authority of God.

The lifting of the women of Zion to that plane, was the beginning of a work for the elevation of womankind throughout the world. "I have turned the key," said the Prophet on that historic occasion, and from what has since taken place we are justified in believing that the words were big with fate. . . .

The turning of the key by the Prophet of God, and the setting up in this Church, of women's organizations, [were] signs of a new era, one of those sunbursts of light that proclaim the dawning of a new dispensation.³

While the organization of the Relief Society in Nauvoo marked the beginning of a specified collective role for women in the Church, Mormon women in Kirtland had already informally organized to contribute in material ways to the building of the Kirtland Temple. Working in unity with the brethren of the Church in that venture and receiving the Prophet Joseph's commendation for the liberality of their services, many were understandably disappointed to learn that they would not be permitted to participate in the ordinances performed in that temple. That privilege would come later in Nauvoo.

The organization of the Relief Society came about from the same voluntary effort of women during the construction of the Nauvoo Temple. Sarah Kimball's suggestion that a female benevolent society be organized for this purpose, however, was met by Joseph's statement that he had something better for them. Explaining that the Church was not fully organized until the women were, he told them that "he was glad to have the opportunity of organizing the women, as a part of the priesthood belonged to them."⁴

From the beginning, Relief Society members perceived their organization as distinctive from the ladies aid and benevolent societies that were flourishing elsewhere. Formed "after the pattern of the priesthood," it had been "organized according to the law of heaven," explained John Taylor, present

at its inception.⁵ In an address to the sisters, Elder Reynolds Cahoon elaborated this idea: "There are many Benevolent Societies abroad designed to do good," he told them, "but not as this. Ours is according to the order of God, connected with the priesthood, according to the same good principles. Knowledge will grow out of it."⁶ Thus empowered, the women of Nauvoo assumed their assigned tasks to relieve the poor, watch over the morals of the community and save souls. Membership burgeoned.

In the years that followed the re-establishment of the Relief Society in the Salt Lake Valley, its potential as a parallel force with the priesthood in building the kingdom blossomed. Eliza R. Snow, by appointment of Brigham Young, directed the affairs of the society throughout the territory, organizing and assisting the various units to meet the needs of the community which Brigham Young had outlined. But while the impetus for organization this time originated with the Prophet, the women planned, developed and implemented many of the specific economic, community, educational and religious programs that came to be their share of kingdom building. There was wide latitude in their stewardship. While the broad purposes were the same for all, no two units functioned exactly alike, each devising a meeting schedule, course of study and economic and charitable programs to fit the needs and resources of its particular community. There was ample room for innovation and leadership on both the local and general level in the initial stages of the Relief Society.

Conflicts between Relief Society programs and ward plans were to be resolved according to the bishop's wishes. "We will do as we are directed by the priesthood," Eliza told one inquiring Relief Society president, this message becoming her major theme.⁷ Nevertheless, there were resources which women could employ in their need for cooperation. As Eliza reminded a Relief Society in Cache Valley, "We are accredited with great persuasive powers and we can use them on the Brethren."⁸

With the exception of Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow was unique among women leaders in the Church. She not only held the position of "Presidentess of all Mormon women's organizations," indeed of all Mormon women, she was also the wife of the living prophet. As Maureen Beecher has described, she was the "chief disseminator of the religion to the women of the Church," and conversely, we might add, their advocate with the Prophet. No minutes exist of the conferences between Eliza and Brigham, but it is certain that Eliza's respect for the priesthood and her obedience to authority did not deter her from vigorously representing the interests of the women of Zion in that unique council of two. Always announcing new assignments or programs as having been advised or suggested by President Young (though we cannot be certain who originated them), she was able, by this means, to instruct women to yield the same obedience to authority she exemplified and also to provide an authoritative base for the programs she directed.

The interconnection of priesthood and Relief Society first enunciated by the Prophet Joseph was continually reinforced by later church presidents. "Let male and female operate together in the one great common cause," John

Taylor told a conference audience.⁹ Wilford Woodruff confirmed this mutual labor: "The responsibilities of building up this kingdom rest alike upon the man and the woman."¹⁰ Lorenzo Snow exhorted the sisters to take an interest in their societies for they were "of great importance. Without them," he repeated, "the Church could not be fully organized."¹¹ Presiding Bishop Edward Hunter expanded the words of Joseph to the sisters. "They have saved much suffering," he said, "and have been a great help to the bishops. They have the priesthood—a portion of the priesthood rests upon the sisters."¹² The Relief Society did not consider itself just a ladies' auxiliary.

Through it the women of the Church had been given a vehicle by which their voices could be heard, their capabilities utilized, their contributions valued.

In the process of organizing the women into the structure of the Church, Joseph opened other significant avenues of participation. At the 28 April 1842 meeting, he affirmed their right to use spiritual gifts, which were freely exercised in the early days of the Church. The gift of tongues had rested on many of the sisters of the Church since its beginning, and others had testified to receiving the power to rebuke evil spirits and to prophesy. At issue at this particular meeting in Nauvoo was the right of women to lay on hands for the purpose of healing. Some were ordained for this purpose, Joseph explained to the Relief Society women, but, he assured them, anybody could do it who had the faith or if the sick had the faith to be healed by that administration.¹³ These were gifts of the spirit, he told them, designated to follow all believers. They were gifts of faith given to the faithful, irrespective of gender or age. One member of the General Retrenchment Association described her own healing at the hands of her young son whose "perfect and pure faith in the power and mercies of God had claimed for her the blessings which he asked in childish simplicity and trust."¹⁴

Again, Eliza was to lead as the practice of blessing one another through laying on of hands and washing and anointing developed among the sisters. She not only encouraged the use of these spiritual activities but taught women the proper procedure. In a directive to the Relief Society in 1884 she reminded the sisters that no special setting apart was necessary for these administrations. "Any and all sisters," she said,

who honor their holy covenants, not only have the right, but should feel it a duty, whenever called upon, to administer to our sisters in these ordinances; and we testify that when administered and received in faith and humility they are accompanied with almighty power.¹⁵

While she connected their use to those who had received the temple endowment, President Joseph F. Smith in 1914 substantiated Joseph's original counsel that such administrations could be exercised by all members of the household of faith.¹⁶

Minutes of the women's organizations (Relief Society, YWMA, and Primary), personal diaries and letters attest to the efficacy of these spiritual

activities of the women, not only in healing the sick and bringing comfort and solace to women in childbirth but in strengthening the spiritual fibre of all who participated in them. Relief Society testimony meetings were punctuated with demonstrations of the gift of tongues and accounts of healings by the administration of sisters. Washing and anointing a woman about to be confined for childbirth became one of the most significant of these rituals, encouraged by their leaders and sought after by the sisters themselves. At a time when women continually faced the crushing burden of infant death as they gave birth year after year—or even their own death—such administrations by those who knew precisely the pangs of that burden had a deep and personal meaning. The women must have experienced a unique transmittal of energizing spiritual strength and support as they felt the knowing and comforting hands of kindred souls placed upon them. These religious practices became a source of spiritual bonding among the sisters of the Church. Looking back on a lifetime of sharing such experiences with other women, Emmeline Wells recalled the “beautiful little meetings” which the sisters often held in her home. She remembered the glorious testimonies born by Sister Isabella Horne and Eliza Snow . . . and the wonderful singing of Mother Elizabeth Ann Whitney [in tongues] with its beautiful interpretation by Aunt Zina.” These were women, she told a new generation of Mormon sisters, “whom I loved as much as if bound by kindred ties, closer, perhaps, because our faith and work were so in tune with our everyday life.”¹⁷ Access to this kind of spiritual power and union by both women and men gave meaning to the concept of building a community of Saints.

It was in the temple experience that Mormon women of the early Church most fully defined themselves and their place in both the temporal and eternal kingdom. Here they learned their relationship to priesthood in very personal and tangible ways, particularly those who received all of the temple ordinances. Joseph recorded, before meeting with the Relief Society at its sixth meeting, that he was going to give a lecture to the sisters on the priesthood, showing them how they would come in possession of its gifts, privileges and blessings. Subsequent events indicate that he intended to prepare them, just as he had the brethren, to receive the fullness of the gospel, or the priesthood ordinances that were to be administered in the temple. Conscious that his time was limited, he introduced these ordinances to a selected group of men and later women before the completion of the Nauvoo Temple. When it was completed many of those who had received their endowment beforehand became the first temple officiators. “Woman,” Emmeline B. Wells remembered, “was called upon to take her part in administering therein, officiating in the character of priestess.”¹⁸ This term was consistently applied to women who performed temple service. Eliza R. Snow, Zina D.H. Young and Bathsheba W. Smith, who served, each in her own time, simultaneously as general president of the Relief Society and as temple matron (using a contemporary term) were frequently referred to as Presiding High Priestesses.

Once again women and men were called to unite their efforts in another aspect—the most important one—of their religious life. “Our sisters should

be prepared to take their position in Zion," John Taylor announced at a Relief Society conference. "They are really one with us, and when the brethren go into the temples to officiate for the males, the sisters will go for the females; we operate together for the good of the whole . . . all acting mutually, through the ordinances of the Gospel, as saviours upon Mount Zion."¹⁹

I believe it is impossible to overestimate the significance of temple work in the lives of early Mormon women. As both initiates and officiators they knew they were participating in the essential priesthood ordinances of the gospel in the same manner as their husbands, their fathers or their brothers. Moreover, they knew it was a universal work for both the living and the dead, and the appellation, "Saviours on Mount Zion," was not just a poetic phrase. Nor was it mere hyperbole in the words of welcome given by the Kanab Relief Society officers when Eliza R. Snow and Zina D.H. Young visited:

We welcome sisters Eliza and Zina as our Elect Lady and her counselor, and as presidents of all the feminine portion of the human race, although comparatively few recognize their right to this authority. Yet, we know they have been set apart as leading priestesses of this dispensation. As such we honor them.²⁰

Besides bringing women and men together to work as partners in performing priesthood ordinances, the temple also underscored their interdependence in the eternal plan. Marriage was an essential saving ordinance and through marriage women had access to priesthood. James E. Talmage, author of *House of the Lord*, explains:

It is a precept of the Church that women of the Church share the authority of the priesthood with their husbands, actual or prospective; and therefore women, whether taking the endowment for themselves or for the dead, are not ordained to specific rank in the priesthood. Nevertheless, there is no grade, rank, or phase of the temple endowment to which women are not eligible on an equality with man.²¹

Lucy Meserve Smith, wife of apostle George A. Smith, was one who expressed very clearly this perception of shared priesthood. Writing of a particularly frightful experience in which she felt the tangible presence of evil spirits, she recalled that

the holy spirit said to me they can do no harm where the name of Jesus is used with authority. I immediately rebuked them in [that name] and also by virtue of the Holy Priesthood conferred upon me in common with my companion in the Temple of our God.²²

In a patriarchal blessing given to her at the death of her husband, Zina Y. Williams was also reminded of the particular power given to her in the Temple: "These blessings are yours, the blessings and the power according to the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood, you received in your endowments. . . ."²³

Though the question of women and priesthood evoked a great deal of semantic volleying over whether they held or shared it, the effect of the precept, expressed by Talmage, was the encouragement by church leaders for women and men to use it jointly in blessing or administering to their children—or to others—as occasion arose. And they did. In 1873, for example, George A. Smith, then a member of the first presidency, travelled with a party of Mormons, including Lorenzo Snow, his sister Eliza, Feramor Little and others, to the Holy Land. At a stopover in Bologna, Italy, he felt ill. “I became fatigued and dizzy,” he wrote in his diary. “I got into a carriage and returned to the hotel. On arriving at the hotel I found myself so unwell that I requested Bros. Snow and Little and Sister Eliza to lay hands on me.”²⁴ Children were encouraged to cultivate enough faith to be able, when afflicted, to call upon either their parents or the elders to lay hands upon them that they might recover.²⁵

The ambivalence that seemed to follow the question of women and priesthood is noticeably evident in an answer Joseph F. Smith gave in 1907 in the *Improvement Era* to a question on the subject. No, he said, women do not hold the priesthood. Nevertheless, he continued, “if a woman is requested to lay hands on the sick with her husband or with any other officer holding the Melchizedek Priesthood, she may do so with perfect propriety.”

It is no uncommon thing for a man and wife unitedly to administer to their children, and the husband being mouth, he may properly say out of courtesy, “By authority of the holy priesthood in us vested.”²⁶

While the debate went on around them concerning their precise relationship to priesthood, women went about with a knowledge that they did indeed have a claimable right, not just to its blessings but also to its gifts and privileges, as Joseph had promised. In their homes it was exercised jointly with their husbands, or alone in their husband’s absence, in behalf of themselves, their families and often friends or neighbors. In their church activities it bolstered the authority delegated to them to officiate in their various callings. In the temple it was utilized directly by women as they administered the priesthood ordinances to other women.

Thus through the sealing ordinances of the temple, men and women became not only heirs to the blessings and privileges of priesthood but candidates for godhood, ultimately, according to Talmage, “administering in their respective stations, seeing and understanding alike, and cooperating to the full in the government of their family kingdom.” Conscious of the inequities that unbalanced the relationships of men and women in this life, he added, “Then shall woman be recompensed in rich measure for all the injustice that womanhood has endured in mortality.”²⁷

So it was that from their membership in the Relief Society which they understood to be an essential part of church organization, functioning alongside priesthood in implementing and supervising temporal concerns, from their participation in spiritual affairs through the exercise of spiritual gifts and their share in the uses of priesthood, and especially from the promise of

godhood which awaited the faithful man and woman only together, Mormon women felt themselves to be an integral, viable force within the kingdom. Allowing for the extravagance of the zealot, and Eliza R. Snow was certainly that, there *was* a basis for her claim that Mormon women “occupied a more important position than was occupied by any other woman on earth, . . . associated as they are with apostles and prophets, sharing with them in the gifts and powers of the holy priesthood, and participating in those sacred ordinances which would prepare them to once more dwell in the presence of the Holy Ones.”²⁸ This is the legacy of Mormon women.

NOTES

¹Blanche Beechwood, “About Letter Writing,” *Woman’s Exponent* 4 (1 July 1875):24.

²Minutes of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society, 28 April 1842, typescript copy, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited CA), p. 32.

³*Young Woman’s Journal* 17 (July 1906):295–96. ⁴*Woman’s Exponent* 7 (1 July 1878):18.

⁵Relief Society Minutes, 17 March 1842, p. 8.

⁶Relief Society Minutes, 13 August 1843, p. 91.

⁷Eliza R. Snow to Wilmarth East, 23 April 1883, Eliza R. Snow Papers, CA.

⁸Smithfield Ward, Cache Stake, Relief Society Minutes, 1868–78, 12 May 1878, p. 486, ms, CA.

⁹*Journal of Discourses* 19 (21 October 1877): 246. ¹⁰*Woman’s Exponent* 9 (15 July 1880):31.

¹¹Box Elder Stake Relief Society Minutes, 1875–1884, 10 December 1876, ms, CA.

¹²*Woman’s Exponent* 6 (1 December 1877):102.

¹³Relief Society Minutes, 28 April 1842, p. 29.

¹⁴*Woman’s Exponent* 1 (15 February 1873):138.

¹⁵*Woman’s Exponent* 13 (15 September 1884):91, and General Relief Society Handbook, 1902.

¹⁶First Presidency (Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, Charles W. Penrose) to Presidents of Stakes and Bishops of Wards, 3 October 1914, ms. CA.

¹⁷*Relief Society Magazine* 3 (February 1916):68.

¹⁸Emmeline B. Wells, “Pen Sketch of an Illustrious Woman,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (15 October 1880):74.

¹⁹*Woman’s Exponent* 8 (1 June 1879):2.

²⁰*Woman’s Exponent* 9 (1 April 1881):165.

²¹James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1912), p. 94.

²²*Historical Record of Lucy M. Smith*, ms, CA, p. 52. (Record begins: “Salt Lake City June 12th 1889 Historical Sketches of My Great Grandfather.”)

²³Zina Y. Card Papers, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

²⁴George A. Smith, Diary, 9 January 1873, holograph, CA.

²⁵*Woman’s Exponent* 1 (15 April 1873):173.

²⁶*Improvement Era* 10 (February 1907):308.

²⁷“The Eternity of Sex,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 25 (October 1914):602–603.

²⁸“Position and Duties,” *Woman’s Exponent* 3 (15 July 1874):28.