

The format of this book, written for a popular audience, has allowed May to make some useful asides that would have been out of place in a more "scholarly" monograph. For example, he advises his readers that, when visiting archaeological sites, "It is against the law and shamefully irresponsible to alter or remove . . . artifacts" (p. 19) — an ethical issue certainly important for Utahns as well as other Americans to understand.

Finally, the University of Utah Press should be congratulated for publishing what is truly "a people's history" of Utah. This reasonably-priced, attractive book abounds in well-chosen and placed illustrations and maps and clearly fills a need in the Utah history book market. It is highly readable, factually sound, and interesting to the casual browser. In other words, in this book May has accomplished what he set out to do.

## What Do Mormon Women Want?

*Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 268 pp., \$21.95.

Reviewed by Rebecca Reid Linford, a Ph.D. student in Renaissance history at UCLA, currently a political analyst for the United States government.

EARLY IN MY ACADEMIC CAREER I determined to study neither Mormon history nor women's history, so I was at first somewhat hesitant to review this book which obviously dealt with both. As a historian I have steered clear of the ongoing debate surrounding the validity of the New Mormon History; and I have always had difficulty understanding the more strident anti-male, anti-patriarchy feminists in the Church. The book's title, too, aroused my suspicions. I guessed that it might be a collection of sappy "Especially for Mormon Women — Volume IV" type of vignettes promoting faith and sisterhood. Or maybe the title was actually a tongue-in-cheek twist for a raving feminist diatribe against a dictatorial patriarchy.

Happily, I discovered within a few pages that I was wrong. This collection of essays has been written by thoughtful, scholarly Mormon women who think and feel deeply about various aspects of Mormon womanhood. Each essay shows that intelligence and faith are not mutually exclu-

sive — not even for Mormon women. These sisters have overtaken the "sisters in spirit" cliché and infused it with a new depth and beauty.

Taking its roots from a lunch/discussion group that met in the early 1970s in Salt Lake City, this compilation discusses pertinent social and religious issues. The first two essays examine the Eden story and other biblical stories about women, tracing them through centuries of Judeo-Christian theological and cultural interpretations and showing how they have influenced the way women are viewed today. While they do not directly deal with the sisterhood of religious women, both lay the groundwork fundamental to an understanding of the evolution of scriptural and religious views on the role and value of women and therefore to an understanding of the successive essays.

Jolene Rockwood's refreshing examination of the Genesis account sheds new light on the garden scene, showing how the story may have been twisted to reinforce patriarchal and cultural stereotypes. She traces the Genesis story through centuries of theological debate and doctrinal reinterpretation, showing how each generation has used Eve as a scapegoat, not only for the sin in the garden but for many of the world's ills. Rockwood also identifies the special meaning for Mormon women of the Genesis account as communicated in the temple ceremony, noting several subtle

but constant reminders that women are subject (inferior?) to men and that they somehow deserve blame. Rockwood's reanalysis of the Hebrew text leads to a riveting new interpretation of what transpired and a quasi-revolutionary and exalted way of looking at women.

I did, however, have a few problems with Rockwood's analysis. Her brief romp through history tends to emphasize only negative views toward women; she does not show, for example, how the Cult of Mary during the late medieval period helped counterbalance Eve's culpability. Also, some of her interpretations of the traditional scriptural account seemed far-fetched if not incredible. For example, when Rockwood describes Eve's judgment following her transgression, she guesses that the phrase "thy desire shall be to thy husband" means that Eve desires Adam to return her to her former state of equality rather than ruling over her. I felt Rockwood was really stretching there.

Melodie Moench Charles takes the scriptural precedents for women beyond the Eden story for a comprehensive and far-reaching overview. She concludes that throughout religious history Jesus had the most democratic, liberated views of the value and role of women. He broke the stringent mores that dictated male behavior and attitudes toward women by teaching women scriptures, speaking to them in public, involving them in his work. He directed his teachings and offers of salvation to women as well as men. Moving from the New Testament setting to the nineteenth-century Mormon world, Charles states that "subordination and inferiority of women is no longer explicitly preached in the Mormon Church" (p. 57) and then shows how the message is still implicitly conveyed through modern prophets' dicta about such subjects as women's roles. The Savior's liberated and liberating attitudes and practices stand out as being even more liberated than those of the men who would restore and direct his church more than 1800 years after him. Apparently it is easier

to restore ordinances for salvation than the Savior's loving attitudes and behavior.

An interesting analysis of the first real Mormon sisterhood network by Jill Mulvay Derr reveals the quasi-clubbish nature of early Church experience. Derr examines a group of women in Salt Lake City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of these women were plural wives of Joseph Smith and later of Brigham Young. They crossed the plains together, blessed and healed one another, served in the Relief Society and officiated in the temple together, and fought together for women's suffrage and Utah statehood. They were bound together by shared experiences, family connections, and ecclesiastical and political ties. These networks continue to some extent today in book review clubs, support groups for new mothers, and "study groups," which flourish in Utah. They seem a natural result of the early Church leaders' emphasis on community and give many women a feeling of belonging and opportunities for expression, although at times these networks seem too exclusive and intimidating to the outsiders who long for friendship and inclusion. I wish there were currently more opportunities for developing such sisterhood networks.

In another revealing and informative essay, "Mormon Marriages in an American Context," Marybeth Raynes compares and analyzes Mormon and non-Mormon marriage attitudes and practices. Raynes finds that we are not so different from our Gentile sisters after all; statistics reveal that on such issues as birth control, working women, premarital sex, and birth rates we follow — to a lesser but comparable degree — the national trends. Raynes interviews prominent Mormon psychologists and family therapists who not only interpret the data but make noteworthy suggestions to Church authorities on how such matters could be handled more effectively, more lovingly.

Three authors trace the erosion of women's power and status in the Church. Linda King Newell, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Jill Mulvay Derr show that al-

though women have never been doctrinally or scripturally prohibited from using or developing spiritual gifts, Church authorities have eventually put an end to women blessing one another, prophesying, healing, presiding autonomously over their organizations and auxiliaries, and serving in gender-blind administrative positions — all things that the Prophet Joseph Smith had previously encouraged and supported. We are left to wonder why General Authorities today have not questioned the reasons — of lack thereof — for these “rescinding orders.” Why are so many talented, spiritually gifted women left unutilized?

A connective thread running through many of the essays in this collection is Mormon women’s relationships with and understanding of the priesthood. Women writing on this topic (particularly Grethe Ballif Peterson in her survey of eight active LDS women) make it clear that several changes are necessary in the ongoing womanhood/priesthood drama. The first is a redefinition of priesthood. Men’s and women’s perceptions of and attitudes toward priesthood vary greatly. We may ask: Do men see priesthood as a secondary sex characteristic or as the literal power of God given to them to better serve humankind? Why is the “priesthood/motherhood” comparison continually promulgated with no mention given to fatherhood? Why are single or childless women forgotten in practically any Mormon value system, especially when all single, childless men still receive and practice priesthood? Of fatherhood and priesthood, which technically is the greater responsibility? In reality, which gets the greater attention from the majority of male Church members? How does this impact Mormon families? Do men in the Church perceive priesthood as the actual power of God upon which the entire universe is founded, or as the opportunity and authority to serve in administrative, ecclesiastical positions and to receive gratification from their priesthood superiors? Peterson points out that many women feel dependent

on a man to enjoy the blessings of God’s power and feel completely excluded from substantive management and administrative positions within his Church. It seems there should be a higher, more concrete standard for mutual understanding of this important priesthood power.

Another key issue that several authors deal with is women’s equality with men. Practically all of the authors described the early days in Church history as a seemingly unprecedented era of liberating equality for women. This era saw a strong, quasi-autonomous Relief Society organized by Emma Smith and functioning with Joseph’s full approval; the empowering temple ceremonies/rituals, also established by the Prophet, which revealed woman to be an essential element in man’s salvation; the spiritual gifts of healing and blessing and other talents possessed and exercised by strong women.

However, I was somewhat confused about how the temple ceremony elevates a woman to a man’s status. I am wondering if these authors have attended different temples than I, for I seem to remember when I received my own endowments not only promising to have sex only with some unseen, unknown, faceless future husband, but also promising to obey this generic man as he obeys God! I grew up believing that true equals do not obey one another. I do not understand how the temple ceremonies, therefore, can be used to argue that woman is “just as equal” as man just because he cannot get to heaven without her. Fortunately I have no serious questions about my value or self-worth, but I worry about many of my Mormon sisters who are fed a constant, subtle diet of submission and “knowing one’s place.” I marvel that so many of them are genuinely happy and satisfied in their traditional roles.

A comprehensive women’s volume would be incomplete without several looks at Mormonism and motherhood. Linda Wilcox provides us with two such essays. Her first, on the concept of a Mother in

Heaven, stresses that humankind has always sought for a loving, nurturing presence. Wilcox traces this desire to the teachings of such early Church leaders as Erastus Snow, who taught that "God" was actually the combination of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, that our Heavenly Parents were God. She reports that certain early Church authorities believed Heavenly Mother was actually the third member of the godhead, or the Holy Spirit. However, because of paucity of official Church pronouncements on her existence and characteristics, a grassroots "Mother in Heaven" movement has mushroomed among Latter-day Saint women. Perhaps this widening folk theology will prompt Mormon theologians to more closely examine and more clearly define her.

In a second essay, Wilcox examines the roots of the Mormon emphasis on the mothering role. She identifies many of the ill-defined and too well-defined roles and expectations of Mormon mothers, as well as their joys and blessings. She documents Church dicta against working women, which blame them for such misfortunes as neglected, delinquent, uncared-for children (ignoring the fact that most of these children are being tended by their fathers, babysitters, or in daycare centers). The Church equates motherhood with godhood, emphasizing that mothers perform the same holy calling as our Heavenly Father does — without realizing that by making motherhood sacred they are simultaneously excusing fathers from any real participation in or responsibility for parenting. Wilcox points out that fortunately the absentee-father role is changing, that fathers today are taking a much more active, hands-on role in parenting; but she also notes that this is happening not because our theology

has changed, but because men are discovering that fatherhood is fulfilling.

While I am enthusiastic about most of this book, I am surprised that some things were left unsaid. The authors have successfully articulated questions and issues, but I was sometimes left wondering what women really want. Priesthood? And what do I want, after reading about the way things used to be and speculating on how they could or should be? What purpose does sisterhood serve, how does it better our lot? Is it just a way to comfort and support each other until the next life when everything will be made right? I found no answers — only mild frustration and hope for amelioration. I would have liked to see some contemporary sisterhood networks examined; perhaps the relationships/bonds formed with full-time sister missionaries, or a study of university students or of student wives, who often form particularly strong, emotional ties.

In the past, I have avoided speaking or thinking about Mormon women's issues, not wanting to be out of harmony with the Church or fearing that once I started voicing my problems I'd never shut up. This book has demonstrated that there are others in the Church — my sisters — who have not only felt many of the same frustrations and problems about being a woman in the Church but have quietly and intelligently examined these questions. Not only do I feel a sisterhood with them because of our common questions and feelings, but I have renewed hope that the condition of women in the Church can and indeed will improve. *Sisters in Spirit* invigorated and challenged me. It should appeal not only to students of women's issues, but to all Church members and authorities as well.

## History of Historians

*Mormons and Their Historians* by Davis Bitton and Leonard Arrington (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 213 pp., \$20.00.

Reviewed by Gary Topping, curator of manuscripts at the Utah State Historical Society.