Theological Foundations of Patriarchy

Alison Walker

MOST RESEARCH BY MORMON FEMINISTS has been historical in nature. Proponents of greater power and privilege for women cite as precedents the lives of Huldah and Deborah of the Old Testament, the treatment of women by Jesus Christ, or the activities of pioneer women in the early restored Church, including blessing the sick. The strength that many women have found in history has been helpful, and I do not seek to trivialize it. One of my greatest personal experiences of empowerment—a realization that the first to know of Christ's resurrection were women (Luke 24:1-10)—came from history. However, feminism's opponents also cite history: God's ancient covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, for example; or the maleness of Jesus and his twelve apostles; or the former practice of the principle of polygamous marriage. Indeed, the problems of a historical focus on feminist issues are several.

History, by its very definition, relates to a particular people in a particular social and cultural setting, rather than to universals. The implications of any historical occurrence, and even the "facts" of an incident, are always colored by the perceptions of those who have recorded it and those who interpret their records. Implicit in any analysis of history, however uplifting or empowering, must be a question of its applicability to present circumstances.

A more productive approach to Mormon feminism might be a theological one: How does feminism fit within the theological tenets—the unchanging universals, the eternal truths—of Mormonism? Upon what

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ALISON WALKER lives in the Los Angeles area with her husband Dan Kaseda. She has a master's degree from the School of Accountancy at Brigham Young University. *An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1989 Sunstone Symposium West in Concord, California.*

theological tenets is our system of patriarchy based? Simply stated, *why* the patriarchal order? Perhaps a theological approach would lend rational support to what many of us have long known spiritually and emotionally: that patriarchy is not good, that patriarchy is not right, that patriarchy, in the words of feminist and former Latter-day Saint Marilyn Warenski, is "discrimination in the name of God" (1978, 277).

I will direct my analysis to explore the primary foundations of patriarchy in traditional Judeo-Christian thought and to discover why these principles are unacceptable justifications for patriarchy in Mormondom.

First we ought to define patriarchy. In *Mormon Doctrine*, Bruce R. McConkie called the patriarchal order the nature of the Lord's government, a system with the family at its center (1979, 559). Dean L. Larsen, of the presidency of the Seventy, expounded on that idea in an article in the *Ensign*:

> [The patriarchal system] places parents in a position of accountability for their own direct family, and it links these family kingdoms in a patriarchal order that lends cohesiveness to the greater kingdom of God of which they are a part. . . . In the Lord's system of government, every organizational unit must have a presiding officer. [God] has decreed that in the family organization the father assumes this role. (1982, 6–9)

Quoting Stephen L Richards to make his point, Larsen continues:

> Where is the personality more perfectly endowed by nature and divine ordinance to receive and exercise authority in his own household than the father of that household? (1982, 11)

Larsen's discussion also links the father's presiding position to his priesthood authority: "He bears the priesthood ordination. He is accountable before the Lord for his leadership" (1982, 9). Carolyn Wallace, in researching the Church's priesthood, summarized: "The patriarchal chain . . . establishes an order on earth as well as in heaven, an order that both expresses and depends on priesthood authority" (1986, 122).

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, feminist Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as "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 [implying] that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power" (1986, 239). In linking male dominance over women in the family to male dominance over women in institutions, Lerner completes our definition. In the Church, the priesthood's administrative functions also tie the hierarchy back to ordination.

Patriarchy, then, is more than just husbands and fathers presiding in homes, more than simply an all-male priesthood, and more than

only male hegemony. The patriarchal system consists of and encompasses all three. Now, what theological foundations underpin such a system?

Dualism of Spirit and Body

One foundation of patriarchy in traditional Christianity is the concept of dualism. In *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, Sterling M. McMurrin explained "that the mind-body problem, the question of the nature of the soul or spirit and the body and the relation between them, has been a major metaphysical issue in occidental religious thought since the earliest Christian centuries" (1965, 7). Dualists answer this question by postulating that "minds are immaterial, unextended, simple conscious substances, and bodies are material, extended, composite, nonconscious substances" (Wolff 1981, 331). In the words of Rene Descartes, the modern Western philosopher most closely identified with the dualist view, "It is certain that I, [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am], is entirely and truly distinct from my body" (in Halverson 1981, 173). As Truman Madsen explains this distinction, "The soul has none of the qualities of the body and vice versa. Mind or soul is really real, the body is unreal or less real. The soul is eternal; the body temporal. The soul is good; the body is evil" (1970, 44).

Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether explains that in traditional Christian thought, "the relationship of male to female is analogous to the relationship of spirit to matter"; femaleness is correlated with "the lower part of human nature in [this] hierarchical scheme of mind over body" (1985, 64; 1983, 93). Ruether further notes that "femaleness is both symbol and expression of the corruptible bodiliness that one must flee in order to purify the soul for eternal life. Female life processes—pregnancy, birth, suckling, indeed, female flesh as such—become vile and impure and carry with them the taint of decay and death (1983, 245).

Traditional Christianity's dualism originated in part in ancient Greece from the metaphysical theories of Plato and Aristotle. Says Rosemary Radford Ruether,

> The influence of . . . Aristotelian biology on Christian theology . . . can hardly be underestimated. Aristotle's biology gave "scientific expression" to the basic patriarchal assumption that the male is the normative and representative expression of the human species and the female is not only secondary and auxiliary to the male but lacks full human status in physical strength, moral self-control, and mental capacity. This lesser "nature" thus confirms the female's subjugation to the male as her "natural" place in the universe. (1985, 65)

Centuries of Israelite tradition also influenced Christianity's dualism. Ruether offers this example of female subjugation from the time of Moses:

> In the story of the giving of the law at Sinai, the people are told to assemble and prepare themselves for the great revelation that will be the charter of their life as a nation of God. Yet, we are startled to read that the "people" are told to keep strictly away from women for three days in order to be ready for the revelation. Suddenly, we realize that the author simply assumes that the "people" means males. . . . Women are not only invisible, but they are also seen as sources of pollution inimical to the receiving of divine revelation. Male sacrality is defined by negation of the female sexual body.[1] (1986, 44)

In the first century, Philo, "the foremost Jewish philosopher of antiquity[,] . . . attempted a reconciliation of the dominant Hellenistic metaphysics of his time with the Hebrew scriptures" (McMurrin 1965, 19), contributing to the dualist view of the relationship of body to spirit and female to male adopted by the Christians. Judaism, and subsequently Christianity, was affected, too, by Persian dualism. The tendency to call the body evil was manifest most sharply in Manichaeism, named for its founder, Mani, a Persian who lived in the third century. Manichaeans believed that "because human beings [are] made of matter, their bodies [are] a prison of evil and darkness. . . . To achieve salvation, humans must . . . abandon all physical desires" (Kagan 1983, 236).

Mormonism has rejected the principle of dualism with such modern-day revelations as D&C 29:34 ("All things unto me are spiritual") and D&C 131:7 ("There is no such thing as immaterial matter; all spirit is matter"). As Truman Madsen clarifies, in Mormon theology, "mind, spirit, and body are all material, in varying degrees of refinement. They have equal status in spatio-temporal existence and are, in their perfected state, of equal worth" (1970, 45).

Furthermore, as Carolyn Wallace has written, "the physical body, which is considered the temple for the spirit, is necessary for the perfectibility that LDS church members strive to attain" (1986, 119). In direct opposition to a fleeing from bodiliness to purify the soul, in Mormonism the soul cannot be purified without the body. "Spirits cannot attain spiritual maturity unless they live in the embodied state" (Wallace 1986, 119). Mormonism's "conception of God as a material

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[1] See Exod. 19:14–15. For an additional example, see Levit. 12:2–8 for the law of purification of women after childbirth, noting that "a woman is polluted for twice as long if she bears a female child than if she bears a male child" (Ruether 1986, 44–45). Ironically, even Mary, the mother of Jesus, was deemed unclean after giving birth to the Son of God (Luke 2:22).

being existing in space and time" reinforces its view of the body and the spirit, further "distinguish[ing] Mormon theology from the traditional Christian theology which . . . adopted the established Greek theory of the nature of reality as immaterial in its higher forms" (McMurrin 1965, 41).

At times, having spent my life as a female in Mormonism's patriarchy, as I have searched for answers to my numerous questions about the blatant inequalities in the system, I have tentatively concluded that the Church's devaluation of women and things female must result from the inherent lesser worth of femaleness compared with maleness. I have occasionally thought that my lower status on earth comes from a relegation to femaleness in this life because I was not quite as "noble and great" (Abra. 3:22) in the premortal existence as those who have earned maleness. It has even occurred to me that the entire sphere of existence permitted women under the patriarchal order seems to spring from the fact that we are capable of bearing children.

Fortunately, such thoughts are not consistent with the theological tenets of Mormonism regarding dualism (and happily, my sense of self does not allow me to entertain them for long). Because Mormonism has rejected the traditional dualist view of the qualitative nature of spirit and body, Mormonism's patriarchal system cannot be justified by the corresponding dualist view of the value of maleness and femaleness.

God the Father

A second theological justification for traditional Judeo-Christian patriarchy is the belief of God as male. Today, Rosemary Radford Ruether observes, "few topics are as likely to arouse such passionate feelings . . . as the question of the exclusively male image of God. Liberals who have advanced to the point of accepting inclusive language for humans often exhibit a phobic reaction to the very possibility of speaking of God as 'She' " (1983, 47).

Gerda Lerner has written, "For over 2500 years the God of the Hebrews was addressed, represented, and interpreted as a male Father-God. . . . This was, historically, the meaning given to the symbol, and therefore this was the meaning which carried authority and force. This meaning became of the utmost significance in the way both men and women were able to conceptualize women and place them both in the divine order of things and human society" (1986, 178). Feminist theologian Mary Daly summarizes the situation: "As long as God is male," she says, "the male is God. . . . If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and accord-

ing to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated" (Daly 1973, 19, 13).

Merlin Stone, in her book *When God Was a Woman*, writes of ancient Near and Middle Eastern societies that worshipped female gods. In those societies, Stone theorizes that the status of women paralleled the reverence of the female deity. Similarly, in *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler looks to the prehistoric worship of the Goddess to assert the existence of an earlier egalitarian age that she calls gylany.

Proof for such societies is little more than subjective and tentative reasoning. Rosemary Radford Ruether regards the surviving texts of the "ancient religions that revere Mother Goddesses" as "not fully 'feminist' but . . . more or less androcentric. The power of the Mother is viewed from the perspective of males who wish to defeat or harness this power to seat themselves on it as their throne." As for a gylanic society "lost in the mists of time," Ruether writes, "Perhaps it once existed. Perhaps it did not. In any case, it is 'prehistoric,' which is to say that it does not exist as a part of our historical experience" (1985, x). Writer John A. Phillips bluntly claims that "there is a notable lack of convincing evidence that there ever was a period of general worship of the Mother Goddess, let alone a correlated stage of equality between the sexes" (1984, 176).

These discrepancies reinforce the problems I have noted about a historical focus on feminism. Still, I am convinced that belief in the existence of a female god, a Mother in Heaven, can be a great endowment for women. In the words of radical feminist Sonia Johnson, "I know that Goddess ritual, insofar as it generates reverence for and celebrates that which is female, which is *us*, is fiercely empowering, and that her image in our minds—images of ourselves as deity—is necessary as a blueprint for a more authoritative mode of being in the world" (1987, 6).

In 1835, mystic Rebecca Jackson, pursuing an itinerant preaching mission, recorded her vision of an Eternal Mother as the empowering revelation that allowed her to resist and triumph over the hostile reception she was receiving by the African Methodist Episcopal Church who wished to silence her: "I saw that night, for the first time, a Mother in the Deity. This indeed was a new scene, a new doctrine to me. But I knowed when I got it, and I was obedient to the heavenly vision—as I *see* all that I hold forth, that is, with my spirit eye. And was I not glad when I found that I had a Mother!" (in Ruether 1985, 7, 18).

As Latter-day Saints, we too have knowledge of the existence of an Eternal Mother. Even as we sing "O My Father," we are reminded that "truth eternal tells [us we have] a mother there" in heaven, as well

(Snow 1985, 292). A 1909 First Presidency statement made the doctrine official: "All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity" (in Wilcox 1987, 69). Believing as we do, in contrast to traditional Christians, that our "Father [and Mother have] bod[ies] of flesh and bones as tangible as man's [and woman's]" (D&C 130:22) enriches for us the benefits of seeking a female god: while others believe "that all language for God is metaphorical and not literal and that the authentic God/ess is beyond gender" (Ruether 1985, 8), our Mother is literally a woman. Abraham 4:27 states: "So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image . . . male and female to form they them." In Mormonism, more than in any other religion, "to be in the image of God is to be male *and* female" (Weber 1987, 58).

Yet, official Mormondom has little to say about Heavenly Mother. Melodie Moench Charles contends that in orthodox Mormonism she "is a nothing at best, and at worst is a housewife. . . . Our theology has allowed her no authority nor power; she gets no acknowledgment for her distinctive contributions, whatever they are. She has no self apart from her husband" (1988, 84–85). Specifically *because* official Mormondom makes few definite statements about the nature and place of God the Mother, however, I will argue that Mormonism's patriarchal structure is not validated by its theological convictions about God or Goddess; rather, the orthodox presumptions about our Eternal Mother stem *from* the patriarchal structure.

Mormon feminist Margaret Toscano explores the concept of the Mormon goddess: "If she were allowed to emerge from obscurity and if there developed around her a body of teachings that could be harmonized with our existing beliefs, they would result in a theology that could, perhaps, provide the basis for a reevaluation of the Godhead in terms of the sacred marriage of the Heavenly Father and the Heavenly Mother" (1988, 54). Such a reevaluation would necessitate the transcendence of "cultural prejudices" (Charles 1988, 86)—including those of the patriarchal system. Then, and only then, could the sacred marriage be viewed not as a male-focused, male-led, and male-dominated Mr. and Mrs. God, with Mrs. God nothing but a helper to her husband, the Supreme Being, but as Rosemary Radford Ruether interprets some of the ancient Goddess myths, lacking even "the concept of gender complementarity," where "the Goddess and God are equivalent . . . images of the divine" (1983, 52).

While we lack information about our Mother and her place in the universe, at least as Latter-day Saints we are unable to justify patriarchy based on the exclusively male image of God. In the meantime, perhaps we ought to pray with Lisa Bolin Hawkins:

Another Prayer

Why are you silent, Mother? How can I
Become a goddess when the patterns here
Are those of gods? I struggle, and I try
To mold my womanhood to something near
Their goodness. I need you, who gave me birth
In your own image, to reveal your ways:
A rich example of the daughters' worth;
Pillar of Womanhood to guide our days;
Fire of power and grace to guide my night
When I am lost.
My brothers question me,
And wonder why I seek this added light.
No one can answer all my pain but Thee,
Ordain me to my womanhood, and share
The light that Queens and Priestesses must bear.
(in Wilcox 1987, 73)

THE FALL OF EVE

Perhaps the most pervasive theological rationale for patriarchy in traditional Christianity comes from what Gerda Lerner has called the most powerful metaphor of gender in the Bible (1986, 182), from a narrative that for over two millennia has "influence[d] the Judeo-Christian view of the roles of the sexes and their part in creation" (Collins 1974, 65)—the story of Eve. As James E. Talmage tells it: "Satan presented himself before Eve in the garden [of Eden], and, speaking by the mouth of the serpent, questioned her . . . and sought to beguile [her]. . . . [B]eing eager to possess the advantages pictured by Satan, she disobeyed the command of the Lord, and partook of the fruit forbidden" (1982, 64–65). Eve then urges Adam to eat of the fruit also, and he does. "Adam was not deceived [however], but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Tim. 2:14). Punished for her disobedience in the garden, Eve is told, "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3:16). Further, all women (since Eve is the symbol of all women) are made subject to the rule of their husbands as the result of God's decree.[2]

Of Eve's blame, one Christian woman wrote, "When Eve listened to the serpent, representing temptation, she followed, not the will of

[2] Some analysis ties the Eve and Adam story back to the dualism of the body and spirit: Eve "lacks the moral discipline and reasoning skill to keep from being victimized by her senses. She has no intellect to hold her passions in check. She is the less rational, the more sensual of the pair. . . . Man symbolizes mind, and woman symbolizes sense" (Phillips 1984, 61; also Ruether 1985, 63).

God, but the path of evil. . . . [E]ve fell far short of the ideal in womanhood" (Deen 1955, 5-6). Art historian Merlin Stone wrote of her personal experience with the Eve account:

> Even as a young girl I was taught that, because of Eve, when I grew up I was to bear my children in pain and suffering. As if this was not a sufficient penalty, instead of receiving compassion, sympathy or admiring respect for my courage, I was to experience this pain with guilt, the sin of my wrongdoing laid heavily upon me as punishment for simply being a woman, a daughter of Eve. To make matters worse, I was also supposed to accept the idea that men, as symbolized by Adam, in order to prevent any further foolishness on my part, were presented with the right to control me—to rule over me. According to the omnipotent male deity, whose righteousness and wisdom I was expected to admire and respect with a reverent awe, men were far wiser than women. Thus my penitent, submissive position as a female was firmly established by page three of the nearly one thousand pages of the Judeo-Christian Bible. (1976, 5-6)

This submissive position of women is likewise firmly established in Mormonism. In fact, based on Eve's choice in the garden, Mormon women, married or single, until recently have been required to covenant to obey the law of their husbands as part of the temple ceremony, whereas men are required to covenant to obey the law of God. Melodie Moench Charles draws the only logical conclusion: "males are linked directly to God, and women to God only through their husbands—even women who have no husbands. . . . husbands, on some level, act as god to their wives" (1988, 79). In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton similarly describes the relationship of Adam, Eve, and God: "He for God only, she for God in him" (in Phillips 1984, 72). Yet, in addition to violating my idea of what God or Goddess ought to be to people—women *and* men—such patriarchal elements of the temple blatantly contradict Mormon theology concerning the Fall of Adam and Eve.

First, in Mormon theology, the Fall is not the disastrous event other religions view it. As Eve herself explains, the Fall was necessary for the development of human souls: "Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient" (Moses 5:11). Although it is only speculation, I and others choose to view Eve as "an 'intelligent, sensitive, and ingenious' woman who weighs carefully the choice before her and then acts out of a desire for wisdom" (Toscano 1988, 41). President Joseph F. Smith's vision of the spirit world in the Doctrine and Covenants confirms that "among the great and mighty ones who were assembled in the vast congregation of the righteous" was "our glorious Mother Eve, with many of her faithful daughters" (D&C 138:38-39).

Mary Daly explains the positive direction of such a belief: "In [the Fall], women reach for knowledge and, finding it, share it with men,

so that together [they] can leave the delusory paradise of false consciousness and alienation. In ripping the image of the Fall from its old context . . . its meaning is divested of its negativity and becomes positive and healing" (1973, 67). John A. Phillips, in studying the myth of Eve, reaches the same conclusion, calling the Genesis narrative "the story of the beginnings of human consciousness, human history, human civilization. . . . The Fall is not a curse, but a blessing. It is the story of humanity becoming human" (1984, 91). Didn't Nephi of old write: "[Eve] fell that [wo]men might be, and [wo]men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25)? Why should Eve, and thereby all women, be punished for making a commendable choice?!

Further, the second Article of Faith states that "men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression." Indeed, historian Jan Shipps makes the following observation:

> A fundamental theological tenet that separates Mormonism from traditional Christianity is its rejection of the power of original sin. The LDS doctrine of individual salvation rests on a passage in the Book of Mormon which indicates that, since the atoning sacrifice of Christ redeemed the children of men from the fall, men are free forever, having the right to choose good over evil, liberty over captivity to sin and death, and so on. . . . [But] while LDS men may be free so that in Adam's fall they did not all sin, LDS women continue to suffer the curse of Eve. (1987, xii)

Yet if, as Latter-day Saints, we really believe that men are punished for their own sins, we must also believe that women will be punished for their own sins and not for Eve's transgression. In rejecting original sin, Mormonism must also reject the subordination of women derived from Eve partaking of the fruit first. Even if Eve was punished for her actions, that punishment should not extend to anyone else.

Analysis of the Fall in the context of Mormon theology presents a wide discrepancy between what we claim to believe concerning Adam and Eve's transgression and the concept of original sin and what we claim to believe concerning women's obedience and submission to men. Using the Fall of Eve to justify the patriarchal order is not consistent with basic tenets of Mormon theology.

So what of the "curse"? Some see the fall of Adam and Eve as a carefully designed myth created by men exercising power over women. When male supremacy was "written into the Bible as one of the first major acts and proclamations of the male creator . . . male domination was explained and justified . . . as the divine and natural state of the human species" (Stone 1976, 217–18). Rosemary Radford Ruether calls the story a "rather odd folktale" and notes that "Hebrew thought itself, in the scriptures and early Rabbinic writings, did not take [it] very seriously" (1983, 166). Even the temple ceremony invests the

Eden story "with mythical dimensions" as it "instructs participants to consider themselves to be Adam and Eve as the drama unfolds" (Norman 1988, 93).

Others view Eve's subordination to Adam not as a divine decree of what should be, but as a prophecy of what would be. As Hugh Nibley has asserted, "There [was] no patriarchy or matriarchy in the Garden" (1986, 93). Jolene Edmunds Rockwood explains:

> Whether the man's rule is righteous or unrighteous in mortality, the fact that it is mentioned at all presupposes that man did not rule over women before the fall. No elements of the judgments are in existence in the prefallen state. Fallen man must work an unyielding earth by the sweat of his brow; before the fall he was not subject to death. Fallen woman must bear children in pain; before the fall she could not understand pain nor have children. Fallen man rules over fallen woman; before the fall, they were equal companions. (1987, 21)

I concur with Ida Smith, founding director of the Women's Research Institute at Brigham Young University: "Our goal as a people should be to emulate the equal partnership of Adam and Eve before the Fall, not to perpetuate the spiritually blind, unequal relationship that resulted from the Fall" (1987, 103). In the words of Hugh Nibley, "All have fallen, but how *far* we fall depends on us" (1986, 93).

To conclude, I again quote Rosemary Radford Ruether: "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive [and] what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community" (1983, 18–19). Mormonism does much to reject nonredemptive aspects of traditional Judeo-Christianity—the principle of dualism, the exclusively male image of God, ideas about the Fall and original sin—and thereby reflects truth. Why must we persist in reinforcing patriarchy with its denial and distortion of the full humanity of women?

Gerda Lerner contends that "the system of patriarchy is a historic construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end. Its time seems to have nearly run its course—it no longer serves the needs of men or women and in its inextricable linkage to militarism, hierarchy, and racism it threatens the very existence of life on earth" (1986, 228–29).

But what about patriarchy specifically within the Church? In her book *Patriarchs and Politics*, Marilyn Warenski wrote about the manifesto of 1890 terminating the practice of polygamy—Official Declaration 1 in the Doctrine and Covenants—and asserted that "change can only be expected to occur when the Mormons once again are so out of

tune with society that their divergence constitutes a serious threat to the kingdom" (1987, 274). Was the denial of priesthood to the blacks such a threat? Shortly after the publication of Warenski's book, revelation as Official Declaration 2 extended the priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church.

"We believe that [God] will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God," states our ninth Article of Faith. I am certain that another of these "great and important things" will be the forthcoming condemnation of the "perversion" (Nibley 1986, 93-94) that many of us consider patriarchy to be. "Mormon women [are not] destined to continue the game of 'Father, May I?,' receiving permission to take only a series of baby steps toward solving a giant problem" (Warenski 1978, 276). Official Declaration 3 or 4 or 5 will finally transform our perception of the Lord's government "from patriarchy into something that never existed before—into [something] radically new" (Daly 1973, 13).

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