

choice and accountability, the Lord steps. (91–92)

Into that gap between choice and accountability, the Lord steps. That gap, that beat of “imperfection,” is what makes room for love. Love is possible because our choices are *always* made under circumstances that are less than “perfect.”

*Weeps* qualifies that “always” with an “in this life,” but I don’t think that qualification is necessary. The borrowed and incomplete character of our agency is not an “imperfection” in the expression of that agency, but its condition of possibility. And, moreover, it is the condition of possibility for the fullest possible expression of agency: redeeming love. “The paradox of Christ’s saving sway is that it operates on the basis of what the world would call weakness” (29). The paradox of agency is the same.

## **Prophetic Glimpses of Mormon Culture: Recent Publications on Patriarchal Blessings**

Irene M. Bates and E. Gary Smith. *Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of the Presiding Patriarch*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 272 pp. Notes, index. Paper: \$23. ISBN: 978-0-252-07115-7.

H. Michael Marquardt, ed. *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007. 447 pp. Index. Hardcover: ISBN: 978-1-56085-202-5.

H. Michael Marquardt, ed. *Later Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2012. 648 pp. Index, appendices. Hardcover: \$90. ISBN: 978-1-56085-221-6.

Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd. *Binding Heaven and Earth: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. 185 pp. Notes, references, index. Hardcover: \$54.95. ISBN: 978-0-271-05633-3.

*Reviewed by Susanna Morrill*

With these publications, Gary and Gordon Shepherd and H. Michael Marquardt have contributed immeasurably to the scholarly conversation about Mormon patriarchal blessings. This has been a continuing conversation that intensified in 1996 when Irene M. Bates and E. Gary Smith published their book on the office of Church patriarch. Scholars now have a critical mass of primary and secondary material with which to understand this often overlooked but powerful practice in the LDS Church. Each of these books adds something to the conversation, complicating it in messy, fruitful ways. They illuminate the intersection of the institutional and lived religious levels of Mormonism, an intersection that has been largely unexplored but is receiving increasing scholarly attention. Marquardt's collection of patriarchal blessings, in particular, enables scholars to examine how, every day, leaders and members created the Mormon faith as a viable and vigorous religious group.

Bates and Smith's book has been the standard work on patriarchal blessings. Even with these additional works, it stands well the test of time; those with little to no knowledge of these blessings should begin here. Written by sociologists, the book is a curiously effective mix of sociological analysis and measured mourning for the loss of this early Church office. The authors apply a standard Weberian interpretive framework as they chronicle the rise and fall of the position of Church patriarch. The office originated in 1833 (or possibly 1834) when Joseph Smith Jr. ordained his father as patriarch, and it ended with Eldred G. Smith's forced retirement in 1979. Bates and Smith argue that it was inevitable that the office of Church patriarch, a manifestation of traditional authority in its "familial charisma" form, would be eclipsed by the "office charisma" form of traditional authority wielded by the Twelve Apostles.<sup>1</sup> Still, generations of apostles and presidents were thwarted from establishing control over the office because Joseph Smith Jr. never spelled out the exact role of the patriarch and gave to his father, Joseph Smith Sr., and his brother, Hyrum Smith, the first and second patriarchs, additional Church responsibilities. It was not clear if these additional offices were attached to the patriarchate or to the persons of Joseph Smith Sr. and Hyrum Smith.

Bates and Smith effectively complicate the Weberian model, a necessary step in any Weberian analysis where ideal types must

bend (if not break) to complex, historical reality. For instance, they highlight the importance of personality in speeding up and inhibiting the inevitable eclipse of the office. The fourth church patriarch, “Uncle John,” the brother of Joseph Smith Sr., was steadfastly loyal to Brigham Young and avoided using family claims to the office. His tenure stabilized the office within the rationalizing church. Eldred G. Smith had the opposite effect because he attempted to revive the precedence and privileges that Hyrum Smith enjoyed. Hyrum Smith had administrative roles such as ordaining and overseeing stake patriarchs. The Twelve did not allow Eldred G. Smith to take up these roles, despite his desire to fulfill them. The Twelve argued that Hyrum Smith had more authority because Joseph Smith gave him additional responsibilities relating to Hyrum Smith’s role within the presidency. Thus, Bates and Smith demonstrate in nuanced fashion how effective the Weberian is as a model for analyzing the development of the LDS Church.

Shepherd and Shepherd’s book is a useful complement to Bates and Smith’s earlier work. The authors have a very different approach and focus. They are more theoretical and aim to demonstrate how their methodology and the Mormon case study speak to general patterns in the development of new religious groups. They argue that, in the years 1834–45, when members faced much opposition from outsiders, internal dissension, and difficult living conditions, patriarchal blessings were a key “commitment mechanism” that promised members a balance of sacrifice and rewards if they stayed faithful to the Church and its teachings (18). For Shepherd and Shepherd these patriarchal blessings reveal how members and leaders in new religious groups collaborate to create a new faith that meets the needs of members.

Like Bates and Smith, Shepherd and Shepherd approach the blessings from a Weberian sociological perspective, but with a quantitative, rather than qualitative methodology. Using the blessings published in Marquardt’s first volume, they applied a statistical content analysis to thirty randomly selected blessings given to equal numbers of female and male recipients by the first three patriarchs of the church, Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and William Smith. Using 431 distinct themes identified in these blessings, they ran a content analysis on every line of the selected blessings in order to see which were the most prominent. Twenty preeminent themes emerged: “salvation and

eternal life; lineage; posterity; Zion; priesthood; faith; spirit; affliction; husband; material blessings; spiritual blessings; knowledge and understanding; end times; Israel; good name and reputation; power; kingdom; gospel; covenants; and angels” (177). All of these themes, they suggest, show that early Mormons lived in a worldview of “ultrasupernatural beliefs” where the “oracular prophecy” of Joseph Smith spoke to them directly and authoritatively (7–8). These themes reinforced the democratic power of the priesthood by means of the powerful concept of restorationism. The patriarchs assured recipients if they remained faithful during the surrounding difficulties, opposition, and violence, they would see Zion established and find eternal happiness and power (86).

Shepherd and Shepherd also used their statistical methodology in order to explore if the first three patriarchs emphasized different themes, or if they emphasized different themes to men versus to women. These focused questions suggest the ways that this kind of statistical analysis can be used to zero in on cultural patterns and historical trends that are hard to track in more qualitative approaches. And here, I think, lies the greatest strength and greatest (fruitful) frustration with this book. Shepherd and Shepherd say explicitly that they have taken the first step of analyzing the large collection of blessings gathered by Marquardt. They offer their findings as incentive for other scholars to fill in the historical and cultural context, to explain the importance of these themes and the trends. The reader, thus, is left with many important questions. Do we, for instance, accept Shepherd and Shepherd’s preliminary explanation for why angels appear more often in women’s blessings than in men’s: that in the early Church men were away so often on Church duties that patriarchs felt moved to assure women of supernatural protection? Perhaps instead, for example, this simply demonstrates more general cultural expectations that women were more spiritually inclined and connected than were men, more “naturally” attracted to and attracting angels.

Shepherd and Shepherd suggest other lines of inquiry. Citing Bates and Smith, they note that the themes of patriarchal blessings have shifted from “ultrasupernatural” promises to “inspired guidance” and exhortations to recipients about Church service, education, proper gender roles, and good family life (118–19). They argue that patriarchal blessings are no longer a commitment mechanism

within the Church. Rather, they have become a kind of rite of passage into Mormon adulthood, while temple rituals and general conferences have become contemporary forms of commitment mechanisms. Their conclusions suggest that scholars may need to look to other places to find the potent alchemical collaboration between members and leaders in today's church: temple rituals and general conferences, but perhaps also in the way local to general leaders and members interact, make decisions, and reach agreement within the bureaucratic structures of today's church.

I also wonder if scholars need to pay more attention to the ritual aspect of these blessings and how this has changed through time. Shepherd and Shepherd explain that in the earliest era patriarchal blessings were given in semi-public, group settings; they were "quasi-public affairs" (57). Often entire families gathered together for a blessing meeting in which all members were given and/or heard each other's blessings. In these settings, "Church members' commitments were publicly reiterated and mutually reinforced" (58). Shepherd and Shepherd note that these blessings are now private affairs between the individual and the patriarch and that the content of the blessings is also considered private, unless shared by the recipient. The public setting seems to have been an essential component of the way that patriarchal blessings served as commitment mechanisms. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz would argue, this public ritual moment was a crucial place where members and leaders together created the new LDS worldview that they were self-consciously assuming. Even more intriguing is the idea that blessings have become rites of passage and quite private. This is rather unusual for rites of passage, rituals that often have some kind of public or communal dimension to them. Is this evidence of the shift from "oracular prophecy" to "inspired guidance" in the Church, demonstrating a more controlled, rationalized Church that still values private, individual, bounded connection to the divine?

In the best way, Shepherd and Shepherd's book leaves us with many questions and is a spur to researchers seeking to understand better the early Mormon Church and to track changes within this Church through time. Marquardt's two-volume collection is the well-spring of these questions and a source for their potential answers. Neither volume is (nor claims to be) comprehensive of the patriarchal blessings given within the Church. Nevertheless, they are both

invaluable resources. Marquardt has done an enormous service for scholars in collecting and publishing patriarchal blessings from the full span of Church history. Shepherd and Shepherd's book is an excellent example of how Marquardt's persistence is inspiring new paths of inquiry. The first volume is a collection of blessings given by the first three patriarchs of the Church (Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and William Smith) from 1834 to 1845 and recorded in a notebook as the first official record of patriarchal blessings. There are also some fascinating blessings by Joseph Smith Jr. and Oliver Cowdery in this volume. The second volume covers the years 1844 to 1995 and includes the blessings of Church patriarchs as well as stake patriarchs, additional blessings by Joseph Smith Sr. and Hyrum Smith that came to light after publication of the first volume, minutes of a meeting of patriarchs from 1958, excerpts from the Church handbooks of 1981, 2000, and 2010 on the duties of patriarchs, as well as, in the introduction, extensive quotes from primary sources relating to the conflict between Heber J. Grant, the Twelve, and Eldred G. Smith about how much the Twelve had the power to supervise and control the office and person of the patriarch and how much the patriarch was an autonomous function based on lineal descent and charismatic and traditional authority. Marquardt has arranged the blessings chronologically and by patriarchs for whom at least three blessings exist, along with chapters containing blessings of patriarchs for whom less than three blessings exist. This arrangement allows the reader to zero in on differences between patriarchs and changes in themes through time. The books are printed in user-friendly larger print, something that makes the sheer volume of blessings somewhat less overwhelming. My only complaint is that misspelled words are only sometimes corrected. This left me wondering if other misspelled words were found as such in the original or the result of copyediting lapses, something that is inevitable with such a large collection of material.

This is a fascinating and riveting (though sometimes repetitive) collection of primary sources. From a careful qualitative reading, many of Shepherd and Shepherd's quantitative conclusions are supported. Their top twenty themes are, indeed, central in most of the early blessings. These early blessings overflow with restorationism and the power of the priesthood. In 1845, to Sarah Jane Hall, William Smith promised: "thou art a Josephite and will receive an exal-

tation with that Royal blood when the Israel of God are redeemed and if thou wilt abide the law of thy Companion one in whom there is no guile none shall take thy place or deprive thee of an everlasting inheritance" (*Early Blessings* 273). Shepherd and Shepherd's contention that these blessings functioned as commitment mechanisms is likewise bolstered in the way the patriarchs talk about the blessings within the blessings themselves. Patriarchs describe their prophetic words as valuable resources to be remembered, treasured, and recalled in times of trouble or distress (*Early Blessings* 268).

Marquardt's volumes force the reader to look at the other two works with a wider lens. Marquardt, for instance, complicates even more Bates and Smith's Weberian analysis. Describing the conflict between Eldred G. Smith, the Twelve, and Heber J. Grant, Marquardt highlights the often-informal authority held by women and how this kind of authority influenced the processes of rationalization. During this final conflict, two women had pivotal roles. Some in the Twelve felt that Eldred G. Smith was dissatisfied with the diminished authority of the patriarchal office because his mother had sowed seeds of discontent during the time he waited, was passed over, and then finally assumed the office (*Later Blessings* xlvi). Eldred G. Smith's secretary was also prominent in the final conflict between Eldred G. Smith, the Twelve, and the Presidency. Smith blamed her for continuing old practices that were points of contention with the Twelve, suggesting, for instance, that she too quickly called in stake patriarchs to give blessings in his stead and in his office space when he was unavailable (*Later Blessings* xli). While it is hard to gauge the actual influence of these women who emerge briefly from the background, this speaks to the way women's non-institutional authority continues to complicate the patriarchal bureaucratic and traditional authority structures of the church. Beneath the surface level of patriarchal authority in the LDS Church lies a myriad of complex moving parts that simultaneously support and undermine it.

The full blessings also demonstrate what we lose if we only read the analyses of Bates and Smith and the Shepherds. The blessings allow us to step more fully into the worldviews and conversations of leaders and members from any era. As Shepherd and Shepherd suggest and as the blessings so vibrantly demonstrate, in the early years, Church members stood at the end of ordinary time; the extraordinary language and imagery of the Bible helped express

this experience. God and Jesus Christ were not distant realities, but present, interested, and connected. Joseph Smith Sr. promised Wilford Woodruff: “Yea the Lord of Glory shall appear unto thee. Thou shalt put thy hands upon his feet and feel his wounds with thy hands that thou mayest become a special witness of his name” (*Early Blessings* 155). Divine and evil forms of the supernatural were loosed upon the landscape and God’s chosen people had to endure the battle, a battle for the eternal life of the individual, the community, and the world. The early patriarchs effectively wove the destiny of individuals into this larger theological and historical discourse. William Smith spun out for Joseph West a tale of rich detail, showing how West’s personal faithfulness had ultimate impact:

[T]hou shalt stand in the way of the wicked & like the roaring lion that cometh up from the thicket whose Angry growl maketh the forest to tremble shall thy voice be heard and many shall fear the Lord of hosts and mighty princes shall bow to the mild scepter of the Gospel and humble themselves to the dust and with the Israel of God shall they come to Zion and the ships of Tarshish shall bring them and their Silver & their Gold with them to the place of the Mount Zion wherein dwelleth righteousness. (*Early Blessings* 428)

In this ritualized narrative, West became a key player in the ultimate eschatological drama.

Marquardt’s collection is a treasure trove of new directions for research. The blessings and the sustained wrangling between Church patriarchs, the Twelve, and the presidency (described by Bates and Smith and the Shepherds), for example, reminded me of something that I noticed when doing primary source dissertation research in diaries of nineteenth-century Mormon men and women, as well as in Church periodicals: Hyrum Smith was very prominent in the early Church. This is an obvious but grossly under-studied fact. In their diaries and public writings, early members often paired Joseph Smith with Hyrum Smith as a partnership presidency echoing the missionary pairings that began in the nineteenth century and continue today. Jan Shipps and Richard Bushman, among others, have written eloquently about how the early Church was founded and supported by the Smith family as a whole.<sup>2</sup> But in the hearts and minds of early generations of Church members the two brothers stood out from other Smith family members as a kind of



prophetic unit. Patriarchs picked up this fraternal pairing as they exhorted young males to avenge the death of the two brothers (*Later Blessings* 210), but also as they described a recipient's post-mortal life. Stake patriarch William G. Perkins promised Anthony W. Ivins, for instance, that he would be caught up by God at the dedication of the temple and that "there you will see Joseph and Hyrum and many of the Latter day Saints [sic] with their resurrected bodies" (*Later Blessings* 205).

The prominence of Hyrum Smith in these blessings speaks to the institutional conflict that Marquardt and Bates and Smith detail. It helps explain why members of the Twelve and the Presidency were eager to rationalize the office of church patriarch as a position under the Twelve and without administrative duties. They were wrestling with a powerful collective memory and historical narrative that paired the president and patriarch. A critical mass of members envisioned this pairing at the inner circle of Church leadership and history. It was ironic, but not surprising that the brother whose descendants followed the LDS Church to Utah was the one inevitably (in the Weberian model) elided from the Church's historical narrative. This suggests that the eventual eradication of the office of Church patriarch was a part of a larger campaign by Church leadership to secure their traditional and bureaucratic authority by downplaying in historical narratives and public discourse Hyrum Smith who most early Mormons believed would have been Joseph Smith Jr.'s successor to the presidency had he not died with his younger brother in a Carthage jail. Marquardt's collection helps demonstrate that scholars need to explore in more depth the role of Hyrum Smith in the early Church, as well as his recession in Church history and, related, theology.

In these blessings, we also see intriguing shifts in how patriarchs and members envisioned the afterlife and the plan of salvation. Early blessings promised recipients eternal happiness in a glorified, supernatural heaven surrounded by an extended network of ancestors and descendants.<sup>3</sup> Later blessings exhorted recipients that they had to continually progress toward godhood even after mortality. These shifts are evidence that the plan of salvation had crystallized with its idea of three estates, focus on temple work for the dead, and learning to be a righteous leader by creating a healthy and happy home environment. With this shift came changes in imagery, lan-

guage, and focus within the blessings. Increasingly, the blessings looked backward to the individual's preexistence, not backward, in restorationist fashion, to biblical narratives and lineages. By the late nineteenth century, blessing recipients were often told that they were choice spirits in their preexistence. They were still informed of their glorious Israelite lineage, but patriarchs also assured them that their preexistent, spiritual ancestry derived from individual merit proved in pre-earth events, often the conflict between God and Lucifer. Dead family members appeared increasingly in the blessings, and recipients were exhorted to be "saviors" to these ancestors in their temple work (*Later Blessings* 471). In the later blessings, parenthood did not assure the recipient of the blessing of eternal glory; rather, the model of divine parenthood assured the recipient that he or she could work toward and, with enough effort, attain eternal, familial glory. As part of this shift, the Mother in Heaven began to show up in blessings, not often, but regularly, as the divine pairing took center stage as the aspirational, eternal domestic model. In 1955, for instance, Christian Hyrum Muhlestein had Reva Lynne Bennett look forward to motherhood in the spirit world:

[Y]our marriage will endure and your relationship will continue in and after the resurrection, and you will have increase and your children will be spirits and when sufficient spirit children will have been born to you to justify the organization of an earth; it will be done then your faithful spirit children will be given the opportunity to go upon that earth and receive a body even as you have done and now enjoy. (*Later Blessings* 490)

By 1995, patriarchs exhorted both men and women to co-create a stable, moral, healthy home life. Bryce Corey Anderson was promised he would be a "father in Israel," paralleling the Mother in Israel role that women were assigned from the very first blessings (499). In these later blessings, members had to create a good home life to assure that they and their children could live in eternal happiness and become divine actors in the plan of salvation. In the course of the two volumes, the reader moves from blessing recipients who were about to be translated, after much suffering, to eternal glory with their families, to recipients who, using free will, were working doggedly to enlarge a progressive and continually expanding plan of salvation.

These themes and shifts, a few among countless others, call for detailed historical, cultural, and à la Shepherd and Shepherd, statistical analyses. These authors and editors have bequeathed to scholars valuable, seemingly inexhaustible questions and answers. They give us new ways to look at the Mormon community, new ways to answer old questions about the role of prophecy in the LDS Church, theological changes, and how members and leaders have (or have not) adjusted to changing times and a changing Church. I look forward to the future conversations that will be generated by this fulcrum of primary and secondary sources.

### Notes

1. Bates and Smith and Shepherd and Shepherd are in conversation with D. Michael Quinn. See D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994); Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997).

2. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 2007).

3. For extended discussion of this early Mormon understanding of the afterlife, see: Samuel M. Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

## Theology as Poetry

Adam S. Miller. *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012. 132 pp. Paper: \$18.95. ISBN: 978-1589581937.

*Reviewed by Robert A. Rees*

*If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire  
can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physical-  
ly as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poet-  
ry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?*

—Emily Dickinson