

“THE PERFECT UNION OF MAN AND
WOMAN”: RECLAMATION AND
COLLABORATION IN JOSEPH SMITH’S
THEOLOGY MAKING

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Any church that is more than a generation old is going to suffer the same challenges that confronted early Christianity: how to preach and teach its gospel to myriad peoples, nationalities, ethnic groups, and societies, without accumulating the cultural trappings of its initial geographical locus. As Joseph Milner has pointed out, the rescue of the “precious ore” of the original theological deposit is made particularly onerous, threatened as it is by rapidly growing mounds of accumulating cultural and “ecclesiastical rubbish.”¹ This includes social accretions, shifting sensibilities and priorities, and the inevitable hand of human intermediaries.

For Joseph Smith, Jr., the task of restoration was the reclamation of the *kerygma* of Christ’s original Gospel, but not just a return to the early Christian *kerygma*. Rather, he was attempting to restore the *Ur-Evangelium* itself—the gospel preached to and by the couple, Adam and Eve (Moses 6:9). In the present paper, I wish to recapitulate a common thread in Joseph’s early vision, one that may already be too

1. Joseph Milner, *The History of the Church of Christ*, vol. 2 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1812), v.; Joseph Milner, *The History of the Church of Christ*, vol. 3 (Boston: Farrand, Mallory, and Co., 1809), 221.

obscure and in need of excavation and celebration. Central to Joseph's creative energies was a profound commitment to an ideal of cosmic as well as human collaboration. His personal mode of leadership increasingly shifted from autocratic to collaborative—and that mode infused both his most radical theologizing and his hopes for Church comity itself. His manner of producing scripture, his reconceived doctrine of the Trinity, and his hopes for the Nauvoo Women's Relief Society all attest to Joseph's proclivity for collaborative scriptural, theological, and ecclesiastical restoration.

Though Smith was without parallel in his revelatory capacities (by one count he experienced seventy-six documented visions),² he increasingly insisted on democratizing that gift. As one scholar remarked, "Joseph Smith was the Henry Ford of revelation. He wanted every home to have one, and the revelation he had in mind was the revelation he'd had, which was seeing God."³ Richard Bushman has noted how "Smith did not attempt to monopolize the prophetic office. It was as if he intended to reduce his own role and infuse the church bureaucracy with his charismatic powers."⁴ This he principally effected through the formation of councils and quorums equal in authority—and revelatory responsibility—to that which he and his presidency possessed.⁵ Most remarkable of all, perhaps, was Smith's readiness to turn what revelations he did receive and record

2. They are treated in Alexander L. Baugh, "Parting the Veil: Joseph Smith's Seventy-Six Documented Visionary Experiences," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations 1820–1844*, edited by John W. Welch and Erick B. Carlson (Provo and Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2005), 265–326.

3. Interview Kathleen Flake, "The Mormons," *PBS Frontline/American Experience* (Apr. 30, 2007), retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/flake.html>.

4. Richard Bushman, "Joseph Smith and His Visions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terry L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 118.

5. This practice is most clearly evident in his revelation on priesthood, D&C 107.

into cooperative editing projects. With his full sanction and participation, the “Revelation Books” wherein his divine dictations were recorded bear the evidence of half a dozen editors’ handwriting—including his own—engaged in the revision of his pronouncements.⁶

It was in that work of scriptural production that Joseph recognized that theological reclamation necessarily entailed fracturing the Christian canon to allow for excision, emendation, and addition. Arguably, the most important work of reclamation and re-conceptualization is Joseph’s understanding of the nature and attributes of the three members of the Godhead whose own collaborative work and glory are “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Smith believed that the true nature and attributes of the Trinity, the truly “plain and precious things,” were either buried, revised, camouflaged, or expunged from the biblical text (1 Nephi 13). Part of his reclamation entailed a restoration of the Divine Feminine together with a revision of contemporary conceptions of priesthood power and authority in conjunction with “keys” Joseph believed had been lost following the advent of Christianity. Joseph saw himself as midwife in the restoration of the priesthood of the *Ur-Evangelium*. Within this framework, he envisioned collaborative roles for women and men within the ecclesiastical structure and ministry of the nascent LDS Church, evidenced in partial form in the initiatory, endowment, and sealing rites of the LDS temple.

Reclamation of Divine Collaboration

In answer to William Dever’s question “Did God have a Wife?” the LDS faith responds with a resounding affirmative.⁷ Relatively recent excavation of the symbols and modes of worship attributed to the Divine Feminine

6. See *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Manuscript and Revelation Books, Facsimile Edition*, edited by Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009).

7. William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005).

both within and outside the ancient Hebrew tradition, together with salient clues within the biblical text, are helping to support Joseph's reclamation of God, the Mother, from the textual absence to which she has been consigned. As Joseph's theology never emerged *ex nihilo*, neither is it reasonable to infer his re-introduction of the doctrine of Heavenly Mother to be without canonical and, given Joseph's penchant for rupturing boundaries, extra-canonical precedent. Joseph showed himself to be quite happy trolling every possible resource in order to reclaim what he considered was most plain and precious (D&C 91:1).⁸

Joseph's theology was Trinitarian, but in a radically re-conceptualized way. A conventional trinity, in its thrice-reiterated maleness, could never have produced the collaborative vision of priesthood that Joseph developed. It is, therefore, crucial, for both historical context and theological rationale, to recognize that Joseph reconstitutes the Godhead of Christendom as a Heavenly Father who co-presides with a Heavenly Mother. In 1878, Apostle Erastus Snow stated: "'What,' says one, 'do you mean we should understand that Deity consists of man and woman? Most certainly I do. If I believe anything that God has ever said about himself . . . I must believe that deity consists of man and woman. . . . There can be no God except he is composed of man and woman *united*, and there is not in all the eternities that exist, or ever will be a God in any other way, . . . except they be made of these two component parts: a man and a woman; the male and the female'" (emphasis mine).⁹ In his 1876 general conference address, Brigham Young suggested a striking equality within that Godhead, when he talked of "eternal mothers" and "eternal daughters . . . prepared to frame earth's like unto ours."¹⁰

8. Among Joseph's reading material is Willam Hone, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament* (London: Hone, 1821). For Smith's library, see Kenneth W. Godfrey, "A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute," *Brigham Young University Studies* 14 (Spring 1974): 386–89.

9. Erastus Snow, Mar. 3, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 19:269–70.

10. Richard S. Van Wagoner, ed., *Complete Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Petit Foundation, 2009), 5:3092.

Prescient but not surprising, therefore, is the merging of Smith's reconstituted Godhead with the traditional Trinity. Elder Charles W. Penrose drew an unexpected inference from Joseph's new theology when he suggested an identification of the Holy Spirit with Heavenly Mother. He responded to a Mr. Kinsman's assertion that "the members of the Trinity are . . . men" by stating that the third member of the Godhead—the Holy Spirit—was the feminine member of the Trinity: "If the divine image, to be complete, had to reflect a female as well as a male element, it is self-evident that both must be contained in the Deity. And they are. For the divine Spirit that in the morning of creation 'moved upon the face of the waters,' bringing forth life and order, is . . . the feminine gender, whatever modern theology may think of it."¹¹ Penrose may have been relying upon Joseph's re-working of the creation narrative in the book of Abraham, where "movement" is replaced with "brooding"—a striking image of a mother bird during the incubation period of her offspring. (One remembers in this context Gerard Manley Hopkins's lovely allusion to the Holy Spirit who, "over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.")¹²

Even though recorded third-hand, the following account suggests that the prophet, Joseph, while not expressing the same identification as Penrose, was projecting the same reconstituted heavenly family:

One day the Prophet, Joseph, asked [Zebedee Coltrin] and Sidney Rigdon to accompany him into the Woods to pray. When they had reached a secluded spot Joseph laid down on his back and stretched out his arms. He told the brethren to lie one on each arm, and then shut their eyes. After they had prayed he told them to open their eyes. They did so and saw a brilliant light surrounding a pedestal which seemed

11. "Women in Heaven," *Millennial Star* 64 (Jun. 26, 1902): 410, retrieved from <https://archive.org/stream/millennialstar6426eng#page/408/mode/2up>. Penrose, who was editor at the time this editorial was written, is likely the author.

12. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," *Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 70.

to rest on the earth. They closed their eyes and again prayed. They then saw, on opening them, the Father seated upon a throne; they prayed again and on looking saw the Mother also; after praying and looking the fourth time they saw the Savior added to the group.¹³

V. H. Cassler has written, “What we have taken as absence was presence all along, but we did not have the eyes to see it.”¹⁴ Even within our tradition, glimpses of Smith’s radical innovation have neither been sufficiently recognized nor appreciated. One such unrecognized symbol resides on the threshold of the celestial room in the Salt Lake Temple. Just above the veil on the west wall stands a remarkable, six-foot statue of a woman, holding what looks very much like a palm frond. She is flanked by two easily discernible cherubs to whom she is linked by garlands of colorful, open flowers. While chubby cherubs are ubiquitous in Renaissance art and could, therefore, be mistaken as merely decorative, the number and placement of the cherubs in the celestial room of the temple draw one back to the majestic, fearful Cherubim—guardians of the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies of the First Temple. The Lady of the Temple is positioned at the portal of the veil—the representation of the torn body of the Lord, Jesus Christ—through which all kindred, nations, tongues, and people shall pass into the celestial kingdom (Hebrews 10:20, Matthew 27:50–51). The original statue was purchased by Joseph Don Carlos Young, who was called by the Church Presidency to succeed Truman O. Angell as decorator of the temple interior. Young purchased the winged statue named “The Angel of Peace” and two cherubs on a visit to New York in 1877. However, during a dream vision

13. Abraham H. Cannon, Journal, Aug. 25, 1880, LDS archives, quoted in Linda P. Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 66; see also Maxine Hanks, *Woman and Authority* (Salt Lake: Signature, 1992).

14. V. H. Cassler, “Plato’s Son, Augustine’s Heir: ‘A Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology?’” *Square Two* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2012), retrieved from <http://squaresquaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerPlatosSon.html>.

one night Young recorded: "I felt impelled to remove the wings. Now I saw a smile and expression that I never saw before and I can now allow this . . . to be placed there."¹⁵ The enigmatic lady's station at the veil of the temple, replete with crucifixion imagery, makes it unlikely that she represents Eve. Mary, the mortal mother of the Lord, is a possibility, given her maternal relationship to the Messiah. However, the Lady's presence at the entrance to the celestial room, representing the celestial kingdom, suggests someone else. There are several key clues as to her possible identity.

Of note is the palm frond the Lady is holding. Anciently, trees were a potent symbol of Asherah, God the Mother.¹⁶ In fact, the Menorah—the seven-branched lamp—that is reputed to have given light in the original Holy of Holies is fashioned after an almond tree, covered in gold—representing the Tree of Life spoken of at the beginning and end of the biblical text.¹⁷ Not only are flowers fashioned into the Menorah: open flowers are one of the temple's primary decorative motifs.¹⁸ Palm trees also were closely associated with the First Temple with which the interior was liberally decorated together with cherubim: "And it was made with cherubims and palm trees, so that a palm tree was between a

15. Joseph Don Carlos Young, Private Notebook (no date; no pagination), currently in the possession of Richard Wright Young, grandson of Joseph Don Carlos Young, quoted in Alonzo L. Gaskill and Seth G. Soha, "The Woman at the Veil," in *An Eye of Faith: Essays in Honor of Richard O. Cowan*, edited by Kenneth L. Alford and Richard E. Bennett (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 91–111.

16. Daniel Peterson, "Nephi and his Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, 80–81.

17. See Exodus 25:31–37, 37:17–22; Zechariah 4:1–3; Genesis 2:9; Revelation 22:2. See also Margaret Barker, *King of the Jews: Temple Theology in John's Gospel* (London: SPCK, 2014), 34–38. Biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

18. See 1 Kings 6:18, 29, 33.

cherub and a cherub; and every cherub had two faces” (Ezekiel 41:18).¹⁹ Palm fronds also play a conspicuous role in Jesus’ Passion—in particular his dramatic entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the day that begins the week ending in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Savior. The thronging crowds, waving and throwing palm fronds beneath the hooves of the donkey carrying the Messiah, “chant a Hoshi’ahnna’ (Hebrew “Save Us”)—a clear indication that many, if not all, the Jews present recognized that the man astride the donkey was the promised Messiah.²⁰ The palm fronds together with the chant suggest a recognition on the part of the thronging masses of the presence of the goddess Asherah—the Mother of the Lord—whose primary symbol is a tree.²¹

Asherah, or the Divine Feminine, is referred to in Proverbs 4:18 as the “Tree of Life.” Her “fruit is better than gold, even fine gold” (Proverbs 8:19). Those who hold her fast are called happy (a word play on the Hebrew *ashr*). It can be assumed, therefore, that Asherah and Wisdom (Sophia in the Greek) are different names for the same deity.²² According to the book of Proverbs, Wisdom/Asherah is the name of the deity with whom “the Lord founded the earth” (Proverbs 3:19–20). Before the world was, She was. “Long life is in her right hand; /in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life” (Proverbs 3:16–18). Latter-day Saints are enjoined to search for her in the opening chapters of the Doctrine and Covenants because Wisdom holds the keys not only to the mysteries of God but to eternal life (D&C 6:7, 11:7).

Interestingly, the biblical association of Sophia with the Tree of Life finds powerful echo in the Book of Mormon narrative. Nephi begins the

19. See also Ezekiel 40:16, 31.

20. See John 12:12–13. The Hebrew for “Hosanna” is “Hoshi’ahnna” meaning “Save us” as noted in Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (Sheffield: SPCK, 2008), 84.

21. William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 101.

22. E.g., Proverbs 1:20.

account of his vision by expressing an ardent desire to “see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him [God]” (1 Nephi 10:17, 19). Nephi’s narrative starts in the company of the Spirit, who immediately draws his attention to the Tree of Life—“the whiteness [of which] did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow . . . the tree which is precious above all.” Mary, the mortal mother of the Messiah, whom Nephi sees following the vision of the tree (the Asherah), is similarly described as “exceedingly fair and white” (1 Nephi 11:13, 15, 18). After Mary is “carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time,” she is seen bearing the Christ child (1 Nephi 11:19–20). This association of Christ’s birth with the Tree of Life, with its echoes of a Divine Feminine, is not unique to the Book of Mormon. The oldest known visual representation of the Madonna and Child effects the same conjunction. In the Roman catacombs of St. Priscilla, a fresco dated to the second century depicts the mother and child, with a magnificent Tree of Life overarching both.²³ Immediately following Nephi’s vision of Mary and the Christ child, he watches “the heavens open, and the Holy [Spirit] come down out of heaven and abide upon [Christ] in the form of a dove” (1 Nephi 11:25–27). It does not appear to be coincidental that both “Spirit” and “dove” are gendered female in Hebrew, Syriac, and Aramaic.

Augustine also finds his theological heart strings pulled by the provocative power and logic of the Holy Spirit as in some sense the Wife of the Father and Mother of the Son: “For I omit such a thing as to regard the Holy Spirit as the Mother of the Son and the Spouse of the Father; [because] it will perhaps be answered that these things offend us in carnal matters by arousing thoughts of corporeal conception and birth.”²⁴ At about the same time, the early Church Father, Jerome, interpreting

23. See photographs of the fresco at Catacombs of Priscilla, http://www.catacombepiscilla.com/visita_catacomba_en.html.

24. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book VII, ch 5. My gratitude to Rachael Givens Johnson for alerting me to this passage.

Isaiah 11:9 in light of the Gospel of the Hebrews, noted that Jesus spoke of “My mother the holy spirit.”²⁵ Even though Jews returning from the Babylonian captivity were essentially monotheistic, there are suggestions that their belief in a deity that comprised the Father (El), the Mother (Asherah), and the Son (Yahweh) from the First Temple tradition and before persisted. For example, in 1449 Toledo some “conversos” (Jewish converts to Christianity) were alarming their ecclesiastical leaders by refusing to relinquish certain tenets of their previous faith: “In as much as it has been shown that a large portion of the city’s conversos descending from the Jewish line are persons very suspect in the holy Catholic faith; that they hold and believe great errors against the articles of the holy Catholic faith; that they keep the rites and ceremonies of the old law; that they say and affirm that our Savior and Redeemer Jesus Christ was [a] man of their lineage who was killed and whom the Christians worship as God; that they say that there is both a god and a goddess in heaven.”²⁶ As Margaret Barker has stated: “It has become customary to translate and read the Hebrew Scriptures as an account of one male deity, and the feminine presence is not made clear. Had it been the custom to read of a female Spirit or to find Wisdom capitalized, it would have been easier to make the link between the older faith . . . and later developments outside the stream represented by the canonical texts.”²⁷

Reclamation of Ecclesiastical Collaboration

The reciprocal synergy of the Godhead was a catalyst—or at least precursor—to Joseph’s quest for a universal collaboration of male and

25. Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord, vol. 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 104.

26. Kenneth B. Wolf, “Sentencia-Estatuto de Toledo, 1449.” *Medieval Texts in Translation* (2008), retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/canilup/toledo1449>. My gratitude to Rachael Givens Johnson for sharing this quotation with me.

27. Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 331.

female. On March 17, 1842, he took another momentous step in that direction. At that time both male and female members of the Church were actively engaged in the construction of the Nauvoo temple. Women collaborated in the enterprise primarily by contributing financially and by providing the masons with clothing. In addition, they saw to the needs of impoverished members arriving daily seeking refuge. As the number of women engaged in support of temple construction and relief efforts grew, a group of them, at the instigation of Sarah Kimball, formed the Ladies' Society of Nauvoo. Eliza R. Snow drafted the constitution and by-laws and then took them to Joseph, who, while applauding the enterprise, suggested the ladies might prefer something other than a benevolent or sewing society. He invited the sisters to "meet me and a few of the brethren in the Masonic Hall over my store next Thursday afternoon, and I will *organize* the sisters under the priesthood after the *pattern of the priesthood*."²⁸ In other words, just as the male society had been organized after the pattern of the priesthood, the women of the church would form a female society, with Joseph's sanction and blessing, after the same pattern.

Like the men before them, the women were to be organized under the umbrella of the priesthood "without beginning of days or end of years" (Moses 1:3). Joseph further stipulated: "the keys of the kingdom are about to be given to them [the sisters], that they may be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders."²⁹ While it has been argued that the expression "keys of the kingdom" in regard to women refers solely to their initiation into the ordinances of the "greater [or] Holy Priesthood" in the temple, Joseph seemed to attribute to women a priestly standing. In other words, he acted on the assumption that in order to access the priesthood that "holdeth the key of the mysteries

28. Sarah M. Kimball, "Auto-Biography," *Woman's Exponent* 12, no. 7 (Sep. 1, 1883): 51, retrieved from <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/WomansExp/id/10872/rec/17>.

29. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 38, retrieved from <http://josephsmith-papers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book>.

of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God” together with the temple ordinances in which “the power of godliness is manifest,” one would already need to be a priest (D&C 84:19–22). At least, there is evidence that this is how Joseph understood access to priesthood power and authority.

On March 31, 1842, Joseph announced to the inchoate Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, first, his recognition that collaboration between men and women was key to spiritual and ecclesiastical progress—“All must act in concert or nothing can be done,” he said. Second, “the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood” as delineated in Doctrine and Covenants 84 (given in Kirtland on September 22 and 23, 1832). And, third, in order to accomplish the above, “the Society was to become a kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s day—as in Paul’s day.” Eliza R. Snow understood that the women’s Society or priesthood would enable women to become “Queens of Queens, and Priestesses unto the Most High God.”³⁰

Joseph’s conception of female authority may have been tied to his understanding of the New Testament. That women as well as men held Church offices in “Paul’s day” has become apparent with the recent, more accurate translations of the Greek New Testament and research into early Christian ecclesiology. In Ephesians chapter four, Paul enumerates the gifts of the Spirit imparted by the Lord before His ascension: “some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the *unity* of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to maturity” (Ephesians 4:11–13). Women as well as men were to be found in possession of each of these “gifts.” Peter Brown demonstrates that, unlike pagans and Jews, “They

30. Eliza R. Snow, “An Address,” *Woman’s Exponent* 2, no. 8 (Sep. 15, 1873): 63, retrieved from <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/WomansExp/id/15710/rec/31>.

welcomed women as patrons and . . . offered women roles in which they could act as collaborators.”³¹

In his letter to the Romans, Paul sends greetings to Andronicus and Junia (perhaps Julia), commending them for their faith and stating that “they are prominent among the apostles.”³² Later writers would masculinize the name, but Chrysostom in the late fourth century had no problem praising “the devotion of this woman” who was “worthy to be called an apostle.”³³ In the second book of Acts, Luke records the following: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18). The apostle Paul considered the gift of prophecy one of the greatest spiritual gifts: “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts,” he said, “and especially that you may prophecy [for] those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3). Indeed, Orson Pratt stated in 1876 that “there never was a genuine Christian Church unless it had Prophets and Prophetesses.”³⁴ It is, therefore, not surprising to find them mentioned in the New Testament. In Acts 21, we learn that the four unmarried daughters of Philip the evangelist possessed “the gift of prophesy” (Acts 21:8–9).

The primary role of evangelists was to teach the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Raymond Brown has noted that in the Gospel of John the Samaritan, women serve “a real missionary function,” while the women at Christ’s tomb are given “a quasi-apostolic role.”³⁵ As Kevin Giles puts it, “the Synoptic authors agree that it was women

31. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 145.

32. Romans 16:7.

33. John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Romans 31,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, VI: Romans*, edited by Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 358.

34. Orson Pratt, Mar. 26, 1876, *Journal of Discourses* 18:171.

35. Raymond Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 691–92.

who first found the empty tomb. And Matthew and John record that Jesus first appeared to women. The encounter between the risen Christ and the women is drawn as a commissioning scene. The Lord says, ‘Go and tell my brethren’ (Matthew 28:10, cf. John 20:17). The women are chosen and commissioned by the risen Christ to be the first to proclaim, ‘He is risen.’”³⁶

Deacons are also listed among the offices in the nascent Christian Church, and women are also included. In his letter to the Romans, Paul commends Phoebe, “a deacon or minister of the church at Cenchræe” (Romans 16:1). The terms “pastors” and “teachers” are joined grammatically in Ephesians 4:11. It appears that the term “pastor” in the New Testament was the universal term referring to spiritual leadership. Among the female pastor-teachers, Priscilla is singled out for her theological acumen, instructing (together with—possibly her husband—Aquila) the erudite and eloquent Apollos of Alexandria “more accurately . . . in the way of God” (Acts 18:18, 24–26). Significantly, of the six times this couple is mentioned, Priscilla precedes Aquila in four of them—according her prominence over Aquila either in ministry or social status—or both. Rodney Stark stated in his book *The Rise of Christianity* that “It is well known that the early Church attracted an unusual number of high status women Some of [whom] lived in relatively spacious homes,” to which they welcomed parishioners.³⁷ Priscilla is not the only woman mentioned in connection with church leadership. In addition to Priscilla we learn of Mark’s mother (Acts 12:12), Lydia from Philippi (Acts 16:14–15, 40), and Nympha in Paul’s letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:15). The apostle John addresses a letter to the Elect or Chosen Lady

36. Kevin Giles, *Patterns of Ministry among the First Christians* (Victoria: Collins Dove, 1989), 167.

37. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), 107.

and her children (congregation) in 2 John 1:1. All apparently function as leaders of the Church.

The title translated as “Lady” in the New Testament is the equivalent to the title “Lord,” generally denoting social standing but possibly, in an ecclesiastical sense, denoting someone in a position of church leadership.³⁸ According to Stanley Grenz, the nascent Christian Church “radically altered the position of women, elevating them to a partnership with men unparalleled in first-century society.”³⁹ It appears that Joseph was engaged in the same endeavor in mid-nineteenth-century America. During the inaugural meeting of the Relief Society, after reading 2 John 1:1 Joseph stated that “this is why she [Emma] was called an Elect Lady is because [she was] elected to preside.”⁴⁰ While it can be argued that the aforementioned are all gifts of the Spirit that do not necessarily involve priesthood, there is evidence that Joseph saw the Spirit as directing the implementation of these gifts into specific priesthood offices.

I mention these historical precedents because it is clear that Joseph Smith was aware of them and that they influenced his directive to Emma that “If any Officers are wanted to carry out the designs of the Institution, let them be appointed and set apart, as Deacons, Teachers &c. are among us.”⁴¹ On April 28, 1842, after reading 1 Corinthians 12 to the Society, he gave “instructions respecting the different offices, and the necessity of every individual acting in the sphere allotted him or her; and filling the several offices to which they were appointed.”⁴²

38. For example, 2 John 1:1, 4, 13; 3 John 1:4; 2.

39. Stanley R. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjebo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 78.

40. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 9.

41. *Ibid.*, 8.

42. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 115.

And so we find that the striking degree of collaboration between men and women in the early Christian Church is replicated in the founding of the LDS Church. In this regard, Bishop Newel K. Whitney's words are significant: "It takes *all* to restore the Priesthood . . . without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth."⁴³ This implies a much broader role for women in the Church structure than temple service alone. In Joseph's journal account following the Female Relief Society meeting of Thursday, April 28, 1842, he writes: "Gave a lecture on the pries[t] hood shewing how the Sisters would come in possession of the priviliges & blessings & gifts of the priesthood—&c that the signs should follow them. such as healing the sick casting out devils &c."⁴⁴ Commenting on Doctrine and Covenants 25, which Joseph read at the inaugural meeting of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, he stated that Emma "was ordain'd at the time, the Revelation was given"—that is, Emma was ordained not by man but by God to the position of Elect Lady ("and thou art an elect lady, whom *I* have called [or chosen]" [D&C 25:3]) as Joseph was ordained/chosen by God to the position of First Elder. It is clear from Emma's remarks two years later at the Female Relief Society meeting of March 16, 1844, that she recognized that her ordination to the position of Elect Lady with its attendant power, privileges, and authority were divinely bestowed: "if thier ever was any authourity on the Earth [I] had it—and had [it] yet."⁴⁵

The second Relief Society president, Eliza R. Snow, who gained and retained possession of the Nauvoo Relief Society minutes, also recognized that Emma's authority to preside over the Female Relief Society gave the women's organization independence: "The Relief Society is

43. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 58.

44. Joseph Smith, Journal, Apr. 28, 1842, in Andrew H. Hedges, et al., eds., *Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, edited by Dean C. Jessee, et al. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 52 (hereafter JSP, J2).

45. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 126.

designed to be a self-governing organization: to relieve the Bishops as well as to relieve the poor, to deal with its members, correct abuses, etc. If difficulties arise between members of a branch which they cannot settle between the members themselves, aided by the teachers, instead of troubling the Bishop, the matter should be referred to their president and her counselors.”⁴⁶ Reynolds Cahoon, a close affiliate of Joseph, understood “that the inclusion of women within the [ecclesiastical] structure of the church organization reflected the divine pattern of the perfect union of man and woman.” Indeed, Cahoon continued, “the Order of the Priesthood . . . which encompasses powers, keys, ordinances, offices, duties, organizations, and attitudes . . . is not complete without it [the Relief Society]”.⁴⁷

The source of women’s ordination, Joseph suggested, was the Holy Spirit. He understood the women to belong to an order comparable to or pertaining to the priesthood, based on the ordinance of confirmation and receipt of the Holy Spirit. To the Nauvoo women, he suggested that the gift of the Holy Spirit enabled them to “administer in that authority which is conferr’d on them.”⁴⁸ The idea that priesthood power and authority were bestowed through the medium of the Holy Spirit was commonly accepted among both Protestants and Catholics at that time. The nineteenth-century Quaker, William Gibbons, articulated the broadly accepted view that “There is but one source from which ministerial power and authority, ever was, is, or can be derived, and

46. E. R. Snow Smith, “To Branches of the Relief Society (republished by request, and permission of President Lorenzo Snow),” *The Woman’s Exponent* 27, no. 23 (Sep. 15, 1884): 140, retrieved from <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/WomansExp/id/33963/rec/1>.

47. Quoted in Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 39, 50.

48. Ehat and Cook, *Words*, 115. As Ehat and Cook point out, there seems little alternative to reading the “confirmation” in his expression as a reference to the gift of the Holy Ghost (141).

that is the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁹ For, “it was by and through this holy unction, that all the prophets spake from Moses to Malachi.”⁵⁰ *The Reformed Presbyterian Magazine* cites this “holy unction” as “not only the fact but the origin of our priesthood” claiming to be made “priests by the Great High Priest Himself . . . transmitted through the consecration and seal of the Holy Spirit.”⁵¹

Such a link between the priesthood and the gift of the Holy Spirit is traced back to the early Christian Church, based on two New Testament passages. In John 20, the resurrected Christ commissions His disciples to go into the world proclaiming the Gospel, working miracles, and remitting sins in the same manner He was sent by His Father—through the bestowal of the Holy Spirit: “As my Father has sent me, so send I you. When he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21–23). Peter preached that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38). And so to the Relief Society sisters Joseph “ask’d . . . if they could not see by this sweeping stroke, that wherein they are ordained, it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer’d on them . . . and let every thing roll on.”⁵² He called this authority “the

49. William Gibbons, *Truth Advocated in Letters Addressed to the Presbyterians* (Philadelphia: Joseph Rakenstraw, 1822), 107. Quoted in Benjamin Keogh, “The Holy Priesthood, The Holy Ghost, and the Holy Community,” Mormon Scholars Foundation Summer Seminar paper, Brigham Young University, Jul. 23, 2015, n.p.

50. Gibbons, *Truth*, 85.

51. “Hours With Holy Scripture,” *The Reformed Presbyterian Magazine* (Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter & Co, 1866), 45. Quoted in Keogh, “The Holy Priesthood, The Holy Ghost and the Holy Community.”

52. On April 28 Joseph again visited the Relief Society meeting and discoursed on the topic of “different offices, and the necessity of every individual acting in the sphere allotted to him or her.” Given what follows it is evident that Joseph is addressing the different spiritual gifts allotted to each member of the community. For, he continues that “the disposition of man [is] to look with

power of the Holy Priesthood & the Holy Ghost,” in a unified expression.⁵³ Elsewhere he stated that “There is a prist-Hood with the Holy Ghost and a key.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Joseph presses the point even further. In a *Times and Seasons* article, he wrote that the gift of the Holy Ghost “was necessary both to ‘make’ and ‘to organize the priesthood.’”⁵⁵ It was under the direction of the Holy Spirit that Joseph was helping to organize—or, more accurately, re-organize—women in the priesthood.

For Joseph, the organization of the Female Relief Society was fundamental to the successful collaboration of the male and female quorums: “I have desired to organize the Sisters in the order of the Priesthood. I now have *the key* by which I can do it. The organization of the Church of Christ was never perfect until the women were organized.”⁵⁶ It was this key Joseph “turned” to the Elect Lady, Emma, and her presidency with which the gates to the priesthood powers and privileges promised to the Female Relief Society could now be opened. The injunction given to recipients of priesthood privileges in Doctrine and Covenants 27 could, therefore, also apply equally to the nascent Female Relief Society to whom the keys of the kingdom were also promised.⁵⁷

jealous eyes upon the standing of others” and “the reason these remarks were being made, was that some little thing was circulating in the Society,” complaints that “some [women] were not going right in laying hands on the sick &c,” instead of rejoicing that “the sick could be heal’d” (*Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 35–36).

53. Ehat and Cook, *Words*, 7.

54. *Ibid.*, 64 (emphasis mine).

55. Joseph Smith, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” *Times and Seasons*, Jun. 15, 1842. Quoted in “The Holy Priesthood, The Holy Ghost and the Holy Community,” Keogh.

56. Sarah Kimball, “Reminiscence, March 17, 1882,” in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History*, edited by Jill Mulvay Derr, et al. (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 495; emphasis mine.

57. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 40; D&C 27:13–18.

The fact that the Female Relief Society was inaugurated during the same period and setting as the founding of the Nauvoo Masonic Lodge is helpful in understanding its intended purpose. Joseph had been raised to the Third Degree of Freemasonry (Master Mason) the day before this auspicious meeting.⁵⁸ And a plausible argument has been made that the prophet considered the principal tenets of Masonry—Truth, Friendship (or Brotherly Love), and Relief—to be in complete harmony with the reclamation of the *Ur-Evangelium*.⁵⁹ It can, therefore, be argued that Friendship, “the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism,” formed the sacred bond between the male and female priesthood quorums in their efforts to proclaim truth, bless the afflicted, and alleviate suffering by providing relief as they worked side by side on their united goal to build the Nauvoo temple, assist those in need, preach the Gospel, excavate truth, and establish Zion.⁶⁰

The organization of the female society also finds instructive parallels with the creation story in the books of Genesis and Abraham. Abraham states that “the Gods took counsel among themselves and said: Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness; and we will give *them* dominion. . . . So the Gods went down to organize man[kind] in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male and female to form they them” (Abraham 4:26–27). In the second biblical creation narrative, Eve is created after Adam when it was decided by the Gods that “it was not good for man to be [act] alone” (Genesis 2:18). After Adam and Eve were organized they were given the family name of Adam. He “called *their* name Adam” (Genesis 5:2). Adam is the family name, the couple’s surname. (One can note here the precedent set by

58. Cheryl L. Bruno, “Keeping a Secret: Freemasonry, Polygamy, and the Nauvoo Relief Society, 1842–44,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 159.

59. Don Bradley has illuminated these connections in “The Grand Fundamental Principles of Mormonism: Joseph Smith’s Unfinished Reformation,” *Sunstone* (Apr. 2006): 32–41.

60. Ehat and Cook, *Words*, 234.

“God” as a family name evidenced in the appellation: God, the Father; God, the Son; and God, the Holy Spirit). Erastus Snow’s remark bears repeating here: “Deity consists of man and woman. . . . There never was a God, and there never will be in all eternities, except they are made of these two component parts; a man and a woman; the male and the female.”⁶¹

The divinely decreed identity of the couple, Adam, is one of complementarity, two beings separated by a creative act and then reconstituted as one by divine sacrament. Only later does the name Adam come to denote the individual male rather than the couple. It is, perhaps, in this context of Adam as the family name that the following scripture from the book of Moses should be read: “And thus [they were] baptized, and the Spirit of God descended upon [them], and . . . [they were] born of the Spirit, and became quickened. . . . And they heard a voice out of heaven, saying: [ye are] baptized with fire, and with the Holy Ghost. This is the record of the Father, and the Son, from henceforth and forever; And [ye are] after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity. Behold, [ye are] one in me, [children] of God; and thus may all become my children” (Moses 6:65–68).

In Moses, we learn that Eve labored *with* Adam. They worship together. They pray together. They grieve the loss of Cain together. Together they preach the gospel to their children (Moses 5:12). The right to preside over the human family was given jointly to Eve and Adam, as were the sacred rights of the temple: “And thus all things were confirmed unto [the couple] Adam, by an holy ordinance” (Moses 5:59). The sacerdotal nature of “ordinance” implies that Adam and Eve were also to collaborate in the powers inherent in priesthood. They were both clothed in holy garments representing the male and female images of the Creator Gods. Adam and Eve, therefore, represent the divine union of the God, El, and His Wife, variously known as Asherah

61. Snow, *Journal of Discourses* 19:266.

(The Tree of Life), El Shaddai (God Almighty),⁶² Shekhina (The Holy Spirit),⁶³ and Sophia (Wisdom). As Heber C. Kimball said, “‘What a strange doctrine,’ says one ‘that we should be taught to be one!’ I tell you there is no way for us to prosper and prevail in the last day only to learn to act in Union.”⁶⁴

It is this union that Joseph appears to be attempting to restore with the organization of the Female Relief Society. The Nauvoo Relief Society minutes indicate that Joseph considered himself to be authorizing the women of the Church to form an institution fully commensurate with the male institutions he had organized earlier. The name the founding mothers chose for their organization was the *Female Relief Society of Nauvoo*, possibly suggesting their recognition that what was being organized was the full and equal counterpart to the already operating male priesthood quorums.⁶⁵ John Taylor’s suggestion to name the female quorum “The Nauvoo Female Benevolent Society” in lieu of the Relief Society presidency’s proposal “The Nauvoo Female Relief Society” was rejected outright by the female presidency. “The popularity of the word benevolent is one great objection,” adding that we “do not wish to have it call’d after other Societies in the world” for “we design to act in the

62. For example, Exodus 6:3. For a discussion of Shaddai/Shadday as a female name, see Harriet Lutzky, “Shadday as a Goddess Epithet” in *Vetus Testamentum* 48, Fasc. 1 (Jan. 1998): 15–16.

63. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 105–06.

64. Heber C. Kimball, Nov. 29, 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:102.

65. Considering the male priesthood to be the “Male Relief Society” is no stretch. The profound influence of Masonry on Smith, his choice of the Masonic Lodge for organizational purposes, the association of Masonic thought with “Relief,” and the women’s choice to employ that term explicitly in their organization’s name, all suggest that the male organization was effectively in Smith’s conception a “male Relief Society.”

name of the Lord—to relieve the wants of the distressed, and do all the good we can.”⁶⁶

It appears likely that the second president of the Female Relief Society recognized exactly that. As Eliza R. Snow told a gathering of Relief Society sisters on March 17, 1842, the Relief Society “was no trifling thing, but an organization after the order of Heaven.”⁶⁷ Indeed, Eliza stated:

Although the name may be of modern date, the institution is of ancient origin. We were told by our martyred prophet, that the same organization existed in the church anciently, allusions to which are made in some of the epistles recorded in the New Testament, making use of the title, “elect lady”. . . . This is an organization that cannot exist without the priesthood, from the fact that it derives all its authority and influence from that source. When the Priesthood was taken from the earth, this institution as well as every other appendage to the true *order* of the church of Jesus Christ on the earth, became extinct, and had never been restored until now.⁶⁸

In her poem, “The Female Relief Society: What is it?” Eliza expresses her understanding that the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo is the legitimate counterpart to the male organization by emphasizing the word “order” in the sixth and last stanza. She does so by enlarging the word in such a way that it immediately draws attention to itself, implying that she understands the “Relief Society” to be an order of the priesthood.⁶⁹ The “Chosen Lady”: Emma is so called “because [she was] elected to

66. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 11–12.

67. Eighth Ward, Liberty Stake, Relief Society Minutes and Records, 1867–1969, vol. 1, May 12, 1868. In *First Fifty Years*, 270.

68. Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society,” Apr. 18 and 20, 1868, in *First Fifty Years*, 271 (emphasis mine).

69. Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society of Nauvoo: What is it?” in *First Fifty Years*, 135.

preside” as Joseph, the First Elder, was also elected to preside.⁷⁰ In the words of President John Taylor, “this Institution was organiz’d according to the law of Heaven—according to a revelation previously given to Mrs. E. Smith, appointing her to this important calling—[with] . . . all things moving forward in . . . a glorious manner.”⁷¹

The female counterpart of the priesthood would be linked to that of the male order in the appropriated grand fundamental of Masonry: *friendship*. One could construe that the name for the women’s organization, “The Female Relief Society, was chosen with the Masonic fundamentals of “truth,” “friendship,” and “relief” in mind—therefore empowering the female and male organizations to work together in mutual support, encouraging each other and meeting together in council—patterned after the Divine Council presided over by El, El Shaddai/Asherah, and Yehovah. If that collaborative vision did not yet come to fruition, it did not go unnoticed by those who constituted the second generation of Relief Society sisters who were very familiar with the founding events of their organization; Susa Young Gates wrote that “the privileges and powers outlined by the Prophet in those first meetings [of the Relief Society] have never been granted to women in full even yet.”⁷²

In turning “the key” to Emma as president of the Female Relief Society, Joseph encouraged Emma to “be a pattern of virtue; and possess all the qualifications necessary for her to stand and *preside* and dignify her Office.” In her article for the *Young Woman’s Journal*, Susa Young Gates, in her recapitulation of Doctrine and Covenants 25, reminds her young, female readership that Emma was not only called to be a scribe but a “counselor” to the prophet and that she was “ordained to expound

70. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 9.

71. *Ibid.*, 14.

72. Susa Young Gates, “The Open Door for Women,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 16 (Mar. 3, 1905): 117; retrieved <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/YWJ/id/14738/rec/16>.

the scriptures. Not only set apart but ordained!”⁷³ With Emma in possession of the keys to preside over the Female Relief Society, it was now possible to create a “kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s day—as in Paul’s day.”⁷⁴ As in the ancient church of Adam and Eve envisioned by Joseph and, as in the early Christian Church, women would share the burdens of administering the affairs of the kingdom together with ministering to their congregations, the sick, the poor and the needy, and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷⁵

Indeed, Relief Society sisters performed a vital role in their ministrations to the poor and the sick—including the pronouncement of blessings of healing. For example, Helen Mar Kimball Whitney records being blessed at the hands of Sister Persis Young, Brigham’s niece, who “had been impressed by the Spirit to come and administer to me . . . She rebuked my weakness . . . and commanded me to be made whole, pronouncing health and many other blessings upon me. . . . From that morning I went to work as though nothing had been the matter.”⁷⁶ At the Nauvoo Relief Society meeting of April 28, 1842 Joseph Smith had promised that “if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on.”⁷⁷ Women and men would also be endowed to perform the saving ordinances performed initially in the Masonic Lodge and then in the newly constructed Nauvoo Temple in order to redeem “all nations, kindreds, tongues and people” culminating in the sealing of the human family to each other and to the Divine Family, thereby fulfilling their collaborative roles as “Saviours on Mount Zion.”

73. Gates, “Open Door,” 116.

74. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 22.

75. Ehat and Cook, *Words*, 110.

76. Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14, no. 14 (Dec. 15, 1885), 106, retrieved from <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/WomansExp/id/12881/rec/69>.

77. *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 36.

As Susa Young Gates noted, “there were mighty things wrought in those long-ago days in this Church. Every great and gracious principle of the Gospel—every truth and force for good—all these were conceived and born in the mighty brain and great heart of that master-mind of the nineteenth century, Joseph Smith, *the development and expansion of these truths he left to others.*” Susa then added that Joseph “was never jealous or grudging in his attitude to woman. . . . He brought from the Heavenly store-house that bread of life which should feed her soul, if she would eat and lift her from the low estate of centuries of servitude and ignominy into equal partnership and equal liberty with man.”⁷⁸

78. Gates, “Open Door,” 116.