

THE THEOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY OF “THE FAMILY: A PROCLAMATION TO THE WORLD”

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On Reading “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”

When President Gordon B. Hinckley read “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” during the general Relief Society meeting held September 23, 1995, few would have predicted the cultural weight that it would still carry for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) nearly twenty-five years later. For many in the LDS Church, this relatively short proclamation (only 630 words) is the defining statement on a variety of social issues: marriage, homosexuality, abortion, gender roles, domestic abuse, etc. Many members of the LDS Church recall the proclamation’s release as a defining “where were you” moment in life; the church experience of an entire generation of youth and young adults has been shaped profoundly by this statement.

Despite the authoritative status of the proclamation as a document, there is not an authoritative interpretation. The proclamation is regularly referenced in general conference and in local meetings, and it has been examined by many LDS (and non-LDS) scholars, advocates, and critics, with each of these parties coming to different conclusions. This should not be surprising. As many theories of textual interpretation have demonstrated, decoding a text is the result of an interaction between the text and the reader that reveals as least as much about the reader and the reader’s context as it does the text itself. There is nothing inherently wrong with such a textual transaction. In fact, there is no way we could do otherwise.

This realization that interpretation of a text is an interaction between the text and the reader arises out of literary theory. But this view has been influential in other fields as well. For instance, scholars of scripture also leverage the philosophical, methodological, and hermeneutical tools of literary theorists to better understand sacred texts. For instance, feminist readings of a text might help expose the male-centered nature of texts by reading it through the lens of contemporary concerns. But it can be difficult to realize that the text acts as a mirror. Too often, individuals do not recognize their confirmation bias and instead claim that their readings are both authoritative and fully self-evident. And just as often, these self-fulfilling interpretations are then weaponized and used to launch attacks against individuals and/or social positions that oppose the interpreter's worldview.

Because of the sensitivity and polemical nature of the issues upon which the proclamation touches, it will likely remain a disputed text—particularly on issues such as gender roles, Heavenly Mother/Father, and homosexuality—regardless of any single person's efforts to crowd out other readings. But in the spirit of embracing learning “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118), I hope to offer two, perhaps under-recognized, ways to examine the proclamation that, taken together, may help open this text and create more space for individual and group exploration and understanding.

First, I want to explore the social environment in which the proclamation was created and released. Second, I will apply a feminist technique for reading the Pauline epistles, that of reading for “theological trajectory,” to see where the proclamation may be leading us. To be clear, it would be disingenuous and inaccurate to claim that this analysis and my own perspectives are free from bias. I cannot escape my context any more than the next person. That said, my goal is not to claim these approaches to the proclamation as *the authoritative* way to understand it but simply to foreground ideas that may help us see the proclamation in new ways.

Social Environment

Following the end of World War II, the Western/European vision of the family began to shift. Where families were once commonly understood to be multigenerational, co-habituating social groups, the 1950s and 1960s saw a normalization and idealization of the “nuclear family”: a married couple with children. Multigenerational families—at least in affluent, white America and Europe—were no longer viewed as the “standard” household arrangement. Research has shown that this idealized version of family life was never universal, not even in the 1950s,¹ and it is an increasingly inaccurate picture of America’s family structure today.² However, the basic notions of a breadwinner father, caregiver mother, and obedient children—the nuclear family—are foundational to the proclamation. Fathers are to “preside over their families . . . and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection.” Mothers are “primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.” Indeed, these “divine” roles for husband and wife theologize very specific Western/European gender roles and enshrine a very specific Western vision of what a family looks like. The proclamation is a product of its time (mid-1990s) and place (a developed Western nation): it reflects a post-World War II Western/European family ethos and an LDS theological perspective grounded in twentieth-century social issues.

To be fair, the proclamation alludes to alternative family structures. However, those allusions cast alternatives to the nuclear family as

1. Philip Cohen, “Family Diversity is the New Normal for America’s Children,” *Council on Contemporary Families*, Sept. 4, 2014, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/the-new-normal/>. Cohen questions the notion of the idealized family structure that developed as part of the suburban ethos in the 1950s and ’60s and suggests that there was no “typical” family.

2. Pew Research Center, “The American Family Today,” Dec. 17, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>. See also research from the IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council) in Steve Olson, ed., *Toward an Integrated Science of Research on Families: Workshop Report* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011), 7–20.

less-than-complete and often the result of some sort of calamity: “disability, death, or other circumstances”—in other words, not the way God intended. And though it also references extended families—which still remain part of the basic family unit in most of the world today—the proclamation distances them by simply saying they should “lend support when needed.” The implication is that extended families are separate from the husband/wife household, not regularly involved in its day-to-day activities, and not part of the heavenly unit. In short, the proclamation seems to imagine a heavenly family that strikingly similar to the twentieth-century Western ideal: a noble father as the head of the household, a supportive and caring mother by his side, and a brood of well-behaved children.

The proclamation’s Western/European/twentieth-century notion of family would not have worked and does not work for many, many situations in the Church’s past and present. Between 1843 and 1877 while Brigham Young was president of the Church, an authoritative document on marriage and family would have certainly included overt references to, and a powerful defense of, plural marriage. Additionally, the proclamation’s view of extended family is not consistent with living situations in Latin America and parts of Africa (regions of rapid Church growth), where the percentage of individuals in living in extended families range from 25 to 75 percent, with extended families helping to provide “an important measure of social and economic support.”³ Further, the proclamation’s picture of the ideal family is not consistent with the family structures portrayed in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, which are most often described as communities of interrelated individuals living in close proximity to each other. Given this dissonance, one approach would be to dismiss these alternative family structures (e.g., the extended-family households and ancient

3. Mindy E. Scott, W. Bradford Wilcox, Renee Ryberg, and Laurie DeRose, “Executive Summary,” in *World Family Map 2015: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes* (New York: Child Trends and Social Trends Institute, 2015), 3, 12.

family structures of the Bible and Book of Mormon) as flawed and contrary to divine will. However, another, and I believe more productive, approach is to recognize that the proclamation portrays a culturally specific vision of family that can be easily situated within a particular time and place and is not reflective of many historical and contemporary family structures.

The proclamation is also properly contextualized within the culture wars, specifically the gay marriage debate that raged through the 1990s and 2000s. In 1995, Utah became the first state to pass a state-level “Defense of Marriage Act,” though twelve others “previously had approved statutes defining marriage as between one man and one woman.”⁴ In September 1996, the US Congress passed the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which upheld a state’s right to ban same-sex marriage and defined marriage, for federal government purposes, as the union between one man and one woman.⁵ By 1998 the majority of states had either a constitutional amendment or statutory language banning same-sex marriage.⁶ Given this social context, it is not surprising that the very first statement in the proclamation is *not* about “families” but rather a definition and theological defense of *marriage*: “that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God.” Families are included later in the sentence; however, the reference is not a description of what constitutes a family because that was not in dispute. Concerns stemming from the 1990s culture wars played a role in the formation of the proclamation.

Lastly, in the years immediately leading up to the release of the proclamation, Latter-day Saint leaders spoke frequently about the decline of families. In general conference it was not uncommon to hear statements about the “terrible trends” of familial decline—i.e., the general movement away from the idealized family—and the “ghastly

4. Pew Research Center, “Same-Sex Marriage, State by State,” June 26, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/26/same-sex-marriage-state-by-state/>.

5. Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act was deemed unconstitutional on June 26, 2013 by the United States Supreme Court.

6. Pew Research Center, “Same-Sex Marriage, State by State.”

momentum” such trends are likely to produce in society.⁷ Thus we see in the proclamation language warning about the “disintegration of the family” and the statement that non-traditional family structures will harm “individuals, communities, and nations.” However, more recent general conference talks that address the family use far less drastic language. For comparison, between 1993 and 1995, there were four different general conference talks, all given by apostles or the Church president, that expressed specific concern about the “disintegration” of the family or home.⁸ From 2016 to 2018, there were none.⁹

The lack of mention of the “disintegration of the family” is not because the world is making a dramatic movement back toward the idealized nuclear family—indeed, we continue to see a movement *away from* that ideal. Instead, I believe that Church leaders are simply becoming more open in acknowledging and making room for the variable family structures found among Church members. Consider, for instance, Henry B. Eyring’s October 2018 general conference talk “Women and Gospel Learning in the Home” wherein he recognizes the various social situations in which women live and notes the possibilities for the potential good

7. Neal A. Maxwell, “Take Especial Care of your Family,” Apr. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1994/04/take-especial-care-of-your-family?lang=eng>.

8. A search for “families” on the Citation Index (<http://scriptures.byu.edu/>) limited to general conference talks between 1993 and 1995 yielded ninety-one results. Four talks specifically addressed the “disintegration” of the family: James E. Faust, “Father, Come Home,” Apr. 1993, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1993/04/father-come-home?lang=eng>; Boyd K. Packer, “The Father and the Family,” Apr. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1994/04/the-father-and-the-family?lang=eng>; Howard W. Hunter, “Exceeding Great and Precious Promises,” Oct. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1994/10/exceeding-great-and-precious-promises?lang=eng>; and Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Strong against the Wiles of the World,” Oct. 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/stand-strong-against-the-wiles-of-the-world?lang=eng>.

9. Most references you find prior to 2016 are simply quotations from the proclamation rather than unique language on the family that makes a case independent of the proclamation.

these women can bring to their homes, churches, communities, and workplaces.¹⁰ Similarly, Neil L. Andersen’s April 2016 general conference talk “Whoso Receiveth Them, Receiveth Me” acknowledges the “complex family configurations” around the world and asserts that “with millions of members and the diversity we have in the children of the Church, we need to be even more thoughtful and sensitive.”¹¹ These statements, and others like them, by Church leaders are different in tone and substance from the “family disintegration” language of the mid-1990s.

In sum, the proclamation reflects the social assumptions and conventions of the time and place in which it was produced. Written at a different time, in a different location, by different people, an authoritative statement on marriage and family would reflect different priorities and focal points. To be clear: *this does not mean that the proclamation is not inspired*. But prophets and their prophetic oracles come out of some social context.¹² Acknowledgment of this situatedness should encourage flexibility in interpreting the proclamation for our time and place and create the expectation that future statements on family structure—which will inevitably be released in different social environments—will reflect and respond to these differences.

Theological Trajectory

The proclamation’s apparent reinforcing, absolutizing, eternalizing, and deifying of contemporary gendered stereotypes and heteronormativity has presented a challenge to feminists and LGBTQ individuals. However,

10. Henry B. Eyring, “Women and Gospel Learning in the Home,” Oct. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/women-and-gospel-learning-in-the-home?lang=eng>.

11. Neil L. Andersen, “Whoso Receiveth Them, Receiveth Me,” Apr. 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/04/whoso-receiveth-them-receiveth-me?lang=eng>.

12. Consider the difference between Amos’s message to the Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE and section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Amos’s preaching against the use of “high places” is contextualized to the time and place in which he preached just as much as Joseph Smith’s statements about tobacco and alcohol are specific to his time and place.

feminist biblical scholars, who have had similar challenges with Paul's writings, have developed many creative and thoughtful strategies for interpreting gendered texts. One particular feminist technique for reading Pauline texts championed by Sandra Polaski offers a powerful tool for examining the proclamation, what she calls the "theological trajectory" of a text.

Paul's writings, or those attributed to Paul, contain numerous passages that seem to diminish women's roles in the Church.¹³ In her examination of Paul, Polaski suggests avenues to expose and counter male oppression in a text. First, she argues for reading *thematically*, that is to say, restoring "the woman's voice or critiqu[ing] the woman's suppression within the texts of male literary culture."¹⁴ In practice, thematic analysis re-centers the discussion of a text on the cultural context and social situatedness of its creation. Second, Polaski argues that readers must then learn to read *strategically*, seeking "a different reading altogether from the one that patriarchy has promoted."¹⁵ Polaski suggests that this sort of dramatic re-vision of a text, one that privileges social context, allows readers to see the gendered language in a text as a set of debated positions that reflect the world that the writer knows, not necessarily the one the writer intends.¹⁶ As Phyllis Tribble might say, texts become descriptive, not prescriptive.¹⁷ This strategy strips a text of oppressive power and allows readers to "imagine [a writer, in this case Paul] and his interpreters as fully engaged in the messier political

13. See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 14:33–35, Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22, 1 Timothy 2:9–12, 1 Timothy 5:14, and Titus 2:4–5. See also Rebecca Moore, *Women in Christian Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 53–56.

14. Sandra Hack Polaski, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2005), 5.

15. Polaski. *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 5.

16. Polaski. *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 108.

17. Phyllis Tribble, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 13 (1973): 80.

subjectivities of the diverse communities to which he wrote and those that have subsequently interpreted him.”¹⁸

A text’s theological trajectory goes beyond any one specific passage. Polaski suggests that readers can boldly reread challenging texts by uncovering the more fundamental principles on which the texts are built. This requires readers to understand texts as part of a specific social situation rather than a set of dogmatic, unbending universal principles. Further, as readers look deep into the text to see the principles upon which the text is based, they will necessarily recognize that these principles must be applied differently in different social situations. For Paul’s writings, Polaski suggests that readers see “the radical equality [Paul] posits between Jew and Gentile” and then apply the “theological trajectory” toward which the texts points to a understand a “similarly radical equality between . . . male and female.”¹⁹ Polaski looks at Paul’s writings “not so much to see where they (and their author and first recipients) *stand*. I look to see where the texts *point!*”²⁰

What is the *theological trajectory* of the statements in the family proclamation? Where is the proclamation *leading us*? By going through this exercise, I believe that readers can see the proclamation in a new light: as a living, flexible set of principles, not a monolith of social morality. Let me offer a few specific and powerful examples applying theological trajectory.

- The proclamation notes that “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God.” Since Mormons believe in a gendered deity, there must be both a male image of God and a female image of God if this statement is to be coherent. When considered alongside the reference to “heavenly parents,” this language clearly *points toward* an increased discussion about, and examination of, a Heavenly Mother

18. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Laura S. Nasrallah, “Beyond the Heroic Paul: Toward a Feminist and Decolonizing Approach to the Letters of Paul,” in *The Colonized Apostle: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes*, edited by Christopher D. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 173.

19. Polaski, *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 4.

20. Polaski, *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 11, italics in the original.

who has more than a passive role in our eternal lives. It also *points toward* increased use of feminine imagery and language in LDS God-talk. Finally, the recognition that godliness is inclusive of gender differences may *point toward* the breaking down of the theological barriers that currently limit female and LGBTQ members' full participation in the priesthood and priesthood ordinances.

- The proclamation notes that gender “is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” However, as I have noted elsewhere,²¹ it does not say that gender is *the* essential characteristic of identity and purpose nor is there any explicit link between gender and priesthood (in fact, there is no mention of priesthood at all in the proclamation). The trajectory of this realization *points toward* increasing equality in ecclesiastical responsibilities, fewer (or no) gender-specific callings, and potentially the structuring of priesthood offices for women. For instance, this might include calling women as Sunday School president or men as Primary president, having women serve as the leader of a ward or stake, creating a regional leadership function for women (comparable to the Area Seventies), allowing women to serve in all General Authority positions (Quorums of the Seventy, Presiding Bishopric, apostles, etc.), or having young women assume responsibilities now only reserved for young men, such as preparing, passing, or blessing the sacrament. Further, if gender is only one of many characteristics that are essential to our individual purpose, this language *points toward* a dismantling of the stigmas and exclusion that too often accompany Church participation for those in the LGBTQ community.
- The proclamation delineates a father-breadwinner/mother-caregiver paradigm. At the same time, it also states: “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs. . . . In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.” Just on its face, this statement opens the doors for wives to “help” the husbands with breadwinning responsibilities and for husbands to “help” the wives with caregiving responsibilities. However, the statement *points toward* situations where breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities are decided by the individual circumstance of a specific family rather than dictated in a universal, gendered statement that applies to all families.

21. M. David Huston, “Generation X and Framing Gender in the Church: My Personal Journey,” *Sunstone* 186 (Spring 2018): 12.

- Perhaps most interestingly, the proclamation’s primary argument can be summarized as: “Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.” This statement seems to *point toward* the idea that gender-specific roles and idealized family structures are far, far less important than the activities and qualities that characterize successful family life. Thus, this statement *points toward* the fairly remarkable view that *quality* relationships (both with other family members and with our heavenly parents) matter much more than any particular organizational schema and potentially more than whether, or to whom, one is married. For instance, a same-sex couple or a single mother or father raising a family that is founded on “faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities” may be *more* pleasing to God than a family that follows traditional father/mother structure but lacks those attributes.

While some might raise the concern that this sort of reading leads us “beyond the text,” “beyond the text” is where the living tradition of scripture is found. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, is replete with fulfillment citations that come from the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea (among others).²² These scriptures cited by Matthew certainly meant something in the time in which they were uttered—they had a contemporaneous meaning—but Matthew looked “beyond the text” to see where these oracles were pointing and suggested that they were pointing to Jesus. For many modern Christians, including LDS readers, Matthew’s trajectory-analysis that points to Jesus now seems self-evident—in fact, there are many Christians who cannot understand the Old Testament scriptures cited by Matthew as anything other than a reference to Jesus—but in its day, it was an act of interpretation and

22. See, for example, Matthew 1:22–23; 2:15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; and 27:9–10. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 112.

re-vision. Just as Matthew's process of reconsidering prior prophetic oracles to see where those texts might lead helped early Christians embrace the "newness" of Jesus' advent, we can re-see the family proclamation in new and exciting ways to embrace the "newness" that is to come in our understanding of families.

Conclusion

In her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Tribble observes of scripture, "interpretation of its content is forever changing, since new occasions teach new duties and contexts alter texts, liberating them from frozen constructions."²³ This same optimism and vision of freedom should fill LDS members worldwide. We are a people who deeply value our "living church"²⁴ and who believe that God "will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."²⁵ Certainly some of those revelations will come as we reconsider the words of the past. The family proclamation is not meant to be a "frozen construction" leveraged by individuals to support preexisting biases or a weapon against those who do not share political or ideological perspectives. Rather, by carefully unpacking the proclamation through understanding the social situatedness of that text, we are liberated to look far into the future and consider where the proclamation is pointing.

23. Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 202.

24. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30.

25. Articles of Faith 1:9.

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