

*If we relegate the Heavenly Mother to the dustbin of theology, we visit this same treatment upon her daughters—and upon all the outcast and despised.*

# IS THERE A PLACE FOR HEAVENLY MOTHER IN MORMON THEOLOGY?

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO DISCOURSES OF POWER

By Margaret Merrill Toscano

**W**HY ARE MOST MORMON THEOLOGIANs white males? And what does this question have to do with the nature of Mormon theology and how it is done?

Mormon theology is most often seen in either descriptive, prescriptive, or speculative terms; that is, it is either an explanation of Mormon doctrine (descriptive), an explication of what Mormons should believe and accept as doctrine (prescriptive), or an exploration of the implications of Mormon doctrine and its meaning (speculative). All three approaches can be employed by orthodox and liberal Mormons alike. Although the groups may argue about what texts, doctrines, and approaches are most legitimate, they share two premises: that theology involves a search for truth—whether it be the truth of historical context or ultimate divine truth—and that truth is always knowable.

While I value all three types of theologizing and recognize their importance in helping us understand both historical and metaphysical truths, neither the approaches themselves nor the truths they seek to discover are value free. That is, they are conditioned by authority structures (whether ecclesiastic, academic, or cultural) that predetermine what gets included in Mormon theological discourse and who is allowed to do it. Too seldom do we consider how power structures influence not only what we are allowed to express but the nature of knowledge itself and how we perceive it.<sup>1</sup> Seldom do we ask what ideas we have failed to consider, because society's organi-

zation creates blinders that block out a variety of perspectives from our view.

Power structures set up frameworks for how we think about things and whether or not we can even conceptualize, let alone promulgate, certain possibilities. Knowledge is not separate from human relationships, and all relationships are defined at least in part by power. This means that knowledge is not simply a list of objective propositions; it is intertwined with the way people relate to each other and how they create hierarchies. This also means that knowledge cannot be separated from ethics; knowledge always has moral implications for how individuals are treated.<sup>2</sup> How we conceptualize the relationships among God and the members of a religious community determines the nature of theology and vice versa. An example may help clarify my point.

In a recent *Ensign* article, President Hinckley outlines the four theological foundations of Mormonism—the “Four Cornerstones of Faith.” The first is the “testimony of Jesus Christ as the Son of God”; the second is the “First Vision of the Prophet Joseph Smith”; the “third cornerstone is the Book of Mormon”; and the fourth is “the restoration to earth of priesthood power and authority.”<sup>3</sup> While these four propositions may appear fairly neutral, they all have implications for how women are positioned in the Church organization since all four cornerstones center on male figures (who are represented as white). This non-neutrality becomes more obvious when we look at the four pictures the *Ensign* uses to illustrate each of the principles. The first and largest is a loving picture of Christ holding a staff (*The Lord Is My Shepherd* by Simon Dewey); the second shows a young Joseph Smith on his knees before God (*Joseph Smith's First Vision* by Greg Olsen); the third portrays the prophet Mormon writing (*Mormon Abridging the Plates* by Tom Lovell); and the fourth depicts John the Baptist bestowing



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the priesthood on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (*The Restoration of the Priesthood* by Del Parson). Note, too, that all four portraits are drawn by male artists and that President Hinckley's photograph begins the article. The absence of female figures underscores their exclusion from spiritual service in assisting God in his work and even raises the question of how these basic gospel principles apply to women.<sup>4</sup>

In asserting the interrelationship between knowledge and power, I am drawing on work that has colored academic discourse for the past thirty years, influenced by theorists such as Michel Foucault, for whom knowledge is always a form of power and the search for knowledge is indicative of the will to power. For Foucault, the question is always: How do power relationships set up conditions for the production of knowledge? How do such relationships open and close spaces for participation in discourse and the construction of cultural identity?<sup>5</sup> In other words, knowledge is not a set of mere abstractions but the way material reality shapes a person's identity within a community and the person's position and ability to speak.

**I** BELIEVE FOUCAULT'S insights have great potential for illuminating how authority structures predetermine who and what gets included in Mormon theological discourse.<sup>6</sup> Throughout this essay, I use the concept of a Heavenly Mother as a metaphor for what commonly gets marginalized and excluded in such discussions. In so doing, my purpose is not to develop a Heavenly Mother theology but rather to use the Heavenly Mother doctrine as a test case for how theological legitimacy is established in Mormon discourse and to explore why certain ideas and people get excluded in the process. Though I focus here on gender, this metaphor also contains clear implications for issues of legitimization and exclusion with regard to race and class. Moreover, by linking Mother in Heaven with larger issues of theological methodology and authorization, I want to suggest that gender relationships do not merely affect how women function within the LDS community but that they also fashion the way men interact with each other.

What follows is an expansion of a talk I gave at the Mormon Theology Conference, held 19–20 March 2004 and co-sponsored by the Utah Valley State College Religious Studies Program and the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology (SMPT). Not only was I the only woman participant on the program, but I was also apparently the only woman who submitted a proposal. Moreover, the audience was predominantly male, with about twelve men for every woman. Thus the conference itself was an enactment of my premise that there is something about the power and authority structure of the LDS community that discourages women from full participation in theological and philosophical discourse, not only in Church settings but in academic ones, too. Ironically, and perhaps predictably, the majority of the all-male planning committee initially balked at including my paper at all. Some criticized its logic while others saw it as too controversial and critical of the Church. (My status as an excommunicated

Mormon feminist did nothing to lessen the planners' concerns.) Although they made me jump through more hoops than any male participant had to, fortunately in the end, they included me in the program, maybe only to avoid the criticism of gender bias, which at least can serve as a starting place for dealing with the question of how power structures shape theological discourse.<sup>7</sup>

In Mormonism, the relationship between power and knowledge is crucial. In fact, the main problem any scholar faces in addressing Mormon theology is that of *authorization*. Since legitimate authority is central both to LDS Church structure and self-definition, any Mormon theologian must establish both the personal authority to speak and the authority of the texts upon which his or her theology is based. Typically, Mormon theology is established in two ways: first, by statements of Church priesthood authorities and, second, by unofficial statements of Church scholars (a broad category ranging from work found in conservative publications, such as *BYU Studies* or *Deseret Book's* fare, to what appears in more liberal presses or magazines).<sup>8</sup> I also suggest that the membership as a whole has an important role in what assumes importance in Mormon discourse, creating a third type of authorization.

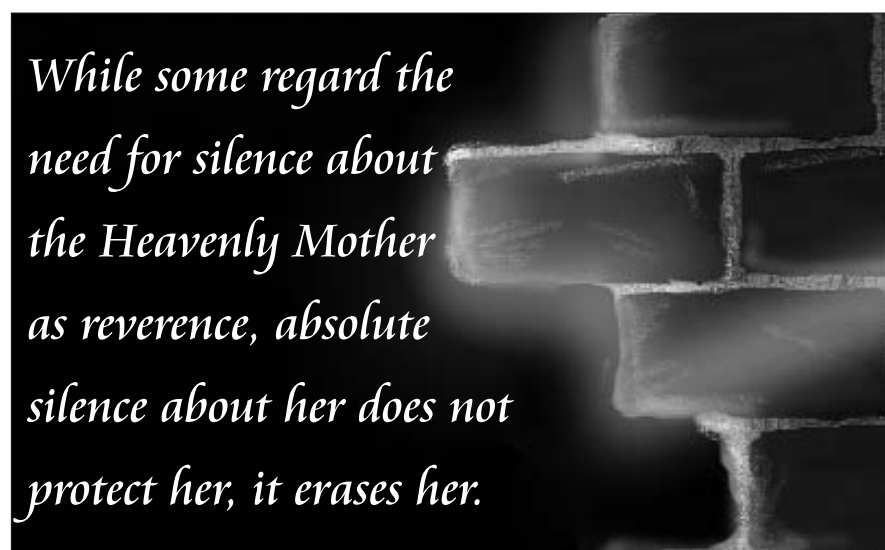
Revelation from the prophet signifies ultimate authorization. But official or semi-official pronouncements by General Authorities or other Church leaders also carry enormous authoritative weight; this second category would include signed and unsigned statements found in Church publications (official manuals, magazines, and so forth). While official authorization may appear to be fairly straightforward—either a doctrine is accepted or not—the validity of the concept of the Heavenly Mother provides an illustration of the complexity of such authorization. Joseph Smith himself likely introduced the doctrine of Heavenly Mother; subsequent Church priesthood authorities have reiterated her existence; and the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* includes an entry on the subject, asserting that “the belief in a living Mother in Heaven is implicit in Latter-day Saint thought.”<sup>9</sup> All of these factors solidly establish the Heavenly Mother doctrine as mainstream. However, a recent informal Internet survey reveals that most Latter-day Saints believe discourse about the Heavenly Mother to be forbidden, which renders the doctrine controversial or at least problematic. In describing her findings, Doe Daughtrey, the survey's author, confirms what most of us have observed in our own interactions in LDS meetings and discussions:

After posting a list of questions as to the relevance of Heavenly Mother to Mormons today on Beliefnet.com, I was not surprised to be repeatedly warned by faithful Mormons that I had chosen an inappropriate topic and to hear almost verbatim statements regarding her sacrality and the necessity of her protection. Several of them warned me away from discussion about Heavenly Mother after seeking advice from their local church leaders.<sup>10</sup>

While no General Authority has made an official statement denying belief in a Heavenly Mother nor stating that her existence is too sacred to discuss, several factors may influence the

current trend that sees even a mention of Heavenly Mother as treading on forbidden ground. Members take their cues about what is acceptable doctrine from talks of General Authorities and official Church manuals and magazines. A word search on the Church's website, [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org), yields only twenty-six direct references to either "Heavenly Mother" or "Mother in Heaven" in the past thirty years of Church publications.<sup>11</sup> Such sparse referencing to the Mother in Heaven implies that she should not be a topic of major concern for members of the Church.

The most recent reference to her was made by President Gordon B. Hinckley in a talk given at the General Women's Meeting in October of 1991 and printed in that year's November *Ensign*. President Hinckley there responds to a letter addressed to then-Church president Ezra Taft Benson



from a fourteen-year-old girl, "Virginia" (a pseudonym), who asks, "Are men more important than women?" As part of his response, President Hinckley legitimizes the doctrine of the Heavenly Mother by attributing it to Joseph Smith and adding his own belief: "Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. That doctrine rests well with me." But he then limits the scope of the Heavenly Mother by explaining that "in light of the instruction we have received from the Lord Himself, I regard it as inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our Mother in Heaven."

While President Hinckley says this prohibition in no way "belittles or denigrates her," it surely makes her secondary in some way to Heavenly Father, as does President Hinckley's assertion that men have a "governing responsibility" over women (though he says men are not supposed to rule despotically). While he does not forbid discussion about Heavenly Mother, he does mark her position as problematic, especially given the way he contextualizes his comments about her. After assuring Virginia that women are of equal worth with men to their Heavenly Father, who loves them, and after advising her that she should talk to her Father in prayer, President Hinckley

uses the mention of prayer as his segue to the inappropriateness of praying to the Heavenly Mother, privately or in public. He then remarks that those who have done so "are well-meaning, but they are misguided."<sup>12</sup>

For Church members eager to follow their leaders to the letter of the law, President Hinckley's prohibition can easily be read to mean that any who pursue the topic of the Heavenly Mother are also "misguided." Add to this a grassroots feeling that Heavenly Mother is too sacred to talk about because her husband does not want her name "taken in vain" like his is<sup>13</sup> (a rationale that itself reflects a notion of male control), and the result is the disappearance of specific references to the Heavenly Mother altogether in Church publications since 1991. No doubt the publicly discussed excommunications of feminists like Janice Allred, Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, Maxine Hanks, and me, all of whom were disciplined in part simply for talking about the Heavenly Mother, adds to the general sense that discourse about her is strictly forbidden.

While I have never seen any study that documents when or how the idea developed in the Church that Heavenly Mother cannot be talked about because she is too sacred, my sense is that it began in the 1960s and 1970s, at about the same time that there was a resurgence of interest in feminist questions in the Church, accompanied by the renewed interest of some women to search for the divine feminine.<sup>14</sup> I see the language of sacred taboo as part of a backlash and an expression of fear on the part of leaders and members that feminism might creep into the Church and disrupt current structures.<sup>15</sup> While some regard the need for silence about the Heavenly Mother as

reverence, absolute silence about her does not protect her, it erases her. Temples may be considered too sacred to reveal much of what goes on inside, but still we constantly talk about them, put up pictures of them, attend them, and devote resources to them—all of which reinforce their importance and sacredness. But we do not accord such treatment to the Mother in Heaven, which convinces me that all arguments about her sacredness are a cover-up for something else.<sup>16</sup> Insisting on silence about Heavenly Mother is iconoclastic—the smashing of a sacred image. It does not matter whether the doctrine of the Heavenly Mother remains part of official LDS theology or not; if there are no private or public occasions on which we can invoke her name and image, Mother in Heaven will surely fade from our memory.

This willingness by members to expand the taboo about the Heavenly Mother indicates that they themselves have a say in authorizing theology. Not every statement of a prophet gets promoted or even obeyed, in spite of the almost obsessive desire many Latter-day Saints have "to follow the leaders." For example, President Kimball's 1978 speech against hunting, while causing a stir initially, was quickly forgotten.<sup>17</sup> Mormon hunters as a group have never been subject to Church disci-

pline, at least to my knowledge, while Mormon feminists have. Ironically, though the principle of common consent is nearly void in official Church meetings, since members are expected simply to sustain the decisions of their Church leaders, if the members do not emphasize and promulgate their leaders' teachings, the authority of those teachings eventually fades away. Therefore, in a subtle way, the membership as a whole plays a role in authorizing Mormon theology—more as a matter of practice than of verbal agreement or dissent. But practice in due course reshapes stated belief. While most LDS people may acknowledge the soundness of President Benson's 1987 directive about women staying home with children rather than joining the workforce, economic realities justify disobedience when two incomes are needed to meet basic family needs or single mothers are faced with being the sole support.<sup>18</sup> In fact, many women in the workforce do not perceive themselves as disobeying prophetic injunction as long as they agree with the principle of the primacy of motherhood. Thus, faithful LDS women rationalize, "I would rather stay home, but my particular circumstances don't allow me that luxury." While the desire of the heart may be more important spiritually, actual practice is more crucial for defining religion sociologically. Ironically, a career woman who advocates conservative values will be seen as less of a threat to the Church than a full-time homemaker who questions women's roles. Nonetheless, the conservative career woman is still reshaping the image of what a Mormon woman is and can be.<sup>19</sup>

The recent LDS interest in the theme of the divine feminine in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, as manifest by the highly popular lecture series at BYU attended by more than a thousand people, may also show the power of members "voting with their feet" about certain ideas. Why so much enthusiasm for Dan Brown's book?<sup>20</sup> I believe it reveals the hunger that develops when a psychologically important element of religion is suppressed. Jewish scholar Raphael Patai, in his book *The Hebrew Goddess*, suggests that the "human craving for a divine mother" may explain the ongoing reemergence of feminine images to depict God within the highly masculine and monotheistic faith of Judaism.<sup>21</sup> While LDS people may not express their interest in the divine feminine by speaking directly about the Mormon Mother God, they can redirect their interest in an acceptable manner through participating in discussions about the way other traditions treat the feminine divine.

**M**ORMON SCHOLARS ALSO play a vital role in unofficially authorizing theology because the LDS community at large inevitably adopts some ideas that enter the membership's consciousness indirectly through scholarly discourse.<sup>22</sup> Typically scholars have taken two approaches: first, exegesis of past authoritative statements, and second, Mormon philosophical theology. A good example of the exegesis of authoritative statements is Linda Wilcox's seminal essay "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven." Although such exegetical efforts are vital as intellectual history and as groundwork for clarifying theological possibilities, they generally do not examine power issues directly because they

are descriptive rather than analytic.

Mormon philosophical theology is likewise limited due to its dependency on the Enlightenment paradigm that assumes that reason alone can unlock the truths of the universe. Therefore, this kind of typology typically has been able to validate only certain ideas and methodologies, in particular a systematic approach that favors logic and objectivity.<sup>23</sup> I do not wish to devalue this approach, but mean only to point out that some perspective is lost when one view monopolizes. Here the loss may be the suppression of poetic, mythic, and bodily ways of knowing. Ironically, while Mormon philosophical theology has argued against an absolutist, disembodied God, it has retreated back to this concept when dealing with gender. The God of Mormon philosophical writing is usually male but sexless and thus, in a curious way, both instantiated in gender while simultaneously beyond gender.

Blake Ostler's recent book, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*,<sup>24</sup> provides a striking illustration of this point. In 485 pages of text, Ostler provides no discussion whatsoever of the question of God's gender although he refers to God by the male pronoun throughout, thereby underscoring not only God's anthropomorphism but also his maleness. In fairness to Ostler's fine book, his purpose is to contrast Mormon notions of God with traditional Christian notions, especially in relation to such thorny issues as God's foreknowledge, human free will, the problem of timelessness and immutability, and the relation of these concerns to Christology. However, his failure to engage with recent Christian discussions of God's gender is significant. While Ostler claims he is discussing the ways in which the Mormon concept of God differs from that of traditional Christianity, he does not present Mormonism's unique view of an embodied God whose gender is more than a metaphor or longstanding narrative tradition, as held by other Christian sects.

According to Mormon scripture, God has "a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's" (D&C 130:22). This assertion, it seems to me, has both positive and negative significance. On the one hand, it valorizes human embodiment. Because it posits the incarnation not only of the earthly Christ but of the Heavenly Father himself, Mormon theology does not share with orthodox Christianity a negative assessment of the body or of human experience.<sup>25</sup> Of course, as Ostler states, God's body must have qualities that transcend those of a mortal body; in other words, it must be a "spiritualized" body subject neither to time or death; and I agree with Ostler that Christ fully reflects the nature of God in all respects. However, the question Ostler's book raises, though unstated and unexplored, is whether or not the valorization in God of the body is meant also as a preference for the male body over the female body. Where does the Mormon notion of an embodied God put women? Can women reflect God? Ostler's book presents us with a chart that shows how the "Sons of God" go through the same process as the "Son of God" in order to return to God's presence and be glorified. But what about women? Ostler's chart makes no reference to them.

Traditional Christians argue that gender is merely an

ephemeral expression of mortal embodiment and that God and salvation are beyond gender; therefore, women need not worry about the potential for eternal subordination. But Mormon doctrine is otherwise. It asserts, according to the official “Proclamation on the Family,” that gender “is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”<sup>26</sup> This Proclamation also states that each human being is “created in the image of God” as “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents.” But the Proclamation further states that it is the male God alone, the Eternal Father, who is worshiped and whose plan governs and guides his children along the path toward immortality. What then of the Heavenly Mother? Is she at all involved in the salvation of her children? Is she an “equal partner” with her divine spouse as the Proclamation says earthly men and women are to be? How can she be an equal partner if she is absent from or invisible in the work of the Godhead? More important for our discussion here, does her absence impinge upon the

find it difficult to see how they participate in God’s work. Let me give you one pertinent example, of which there are countless others. The Doctrine and Covenants sets forth the following characteristics of the inheritors of celestial glory:

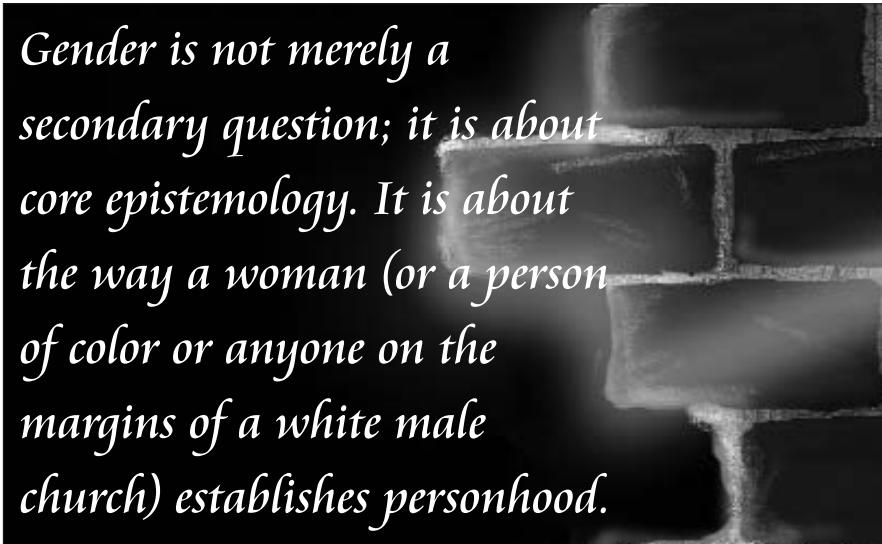
They are they who are the church of the Firstborn. They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory; and are priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son. Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s. (D&C 76: 54–59)

The language in this passage is not merely male-centered; it is priesthood-conditioned. Inheritors of the celestial glory are identified as priests, a condition that raises the question whether women, barred as they are from priesthood, are included in this group of exalted beings. You may answer “yes,” that certainly a passage like this must include women because it is describing entrance into the celestial kingdom, which we know by tradition is open to men and women alike.

But this interpretation is not obvious from the text. For a woman to understand and be edified by this text, she must first *read herself into it*. She must shoulder the extra burden that male priesthood holders do not carry of imagining herself in a description of heaven which does not in fact include her literally. This is why gender is not merely a secondary question; it is about core epistemology. It is about the way a woman (or a person of color or anyone on the margins of a white male

church) establishes personhood. Every act of reading a canonical text demands the re-construction of female subjectivity. In such a power structure, a woman’s status as a full person is always in question, always unstable, always tenuous. Women must always cope with the nagging question: Do I have the right to insert myself into this textual space? Can I assume that these promises apply to me? Or are these promises reserved for men only—for priesthood holders, as this instance in D&C 76 could imply? Again the Heavenly Mother is illustrative. Women who need a model for connecting themselves to the divine and celestial glory are forbidden to create a picture of God that includes their femaleness. Men are not under this same prohibition and are in fact encouraged to see themselves in the image of God (as illustrated by Ostler’s chart).

Interestingly, fourteen-year-old “Virginia,” to whom President Hinckley directed his talk discussed above, refers to the male language in D&C 76. Virginia perceives the issue clearly when she expresses her worry that in “the scriptures, I could not seem to find anywhere whether women may enter



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authority that women may assume in Mormon theological discourse? Does gender matter when it comes to how theology is done? Why the dearth of women theologians? Since it certainly cannot be because of their lack of intelligence and is not likely due to a lack of interest, we can only conclude that it is the authority structure of the LDS community that discourages women from full participation in theological and philosophical discourse. In a world where Heavenly Mother is cut off from communicating with her children, how can women talk authoritatively about God? This situation certainly affects women’s individual sense of their own worth; and for the community as a whole, the absence of women’s voices in matters of doctrine limits Mormon theology, both in its methodology and its fruits. The ethical implications of women’s absence in matters of theology are profoundly disturbing. This absence creates a class system where at least half of the Church is denied the benefits of full citizenship.

Because LDS texts focus on males, both as figures of authority and as depictions of the normative person, women can

into the celestial kingdom if they are worthy. Also, when someone such as Joseph Smith had a vision of the celestial kingdom, he only seemed to see men there.”<sup>27</sup> President Hinckley assures Virginia that women are included and tells her not to “be disturbed, my dear young friend, by the fact that the word *man* and the word *men* are used in scripture without also mentioning the words *woman* and *women*. I emphasize that these terms are generic, including both sexes.”<sup>28</sup> He then goes on to explain that this type of generic use of “man” was common historically, and he cites the phrase “all men are created equal” from the Declaration of Independence to show that such usage must include “men, women, and children.”

President Hinckley could not have chosen a worse example of historical equality and a better example for showing how exclusive language reflects and promotes discrimination.<sup>29</sup> Surely he must remember that it took almost two hundred years, a civil war, several constitutional amendments, and major Supreme Court decisions to demonstrate legally that the “self-evident” equality of “all men” under the law in America includes all races and genders. What seems to me to be President Hinckley’s genuine and openhearted concern for this young woman’s sense of her own worth (he did not have to address the question at all) is undermined by the overpowering evidence of male privilege and value in the talk itself, as demonstrated by the scriptures quoted, the subordination of Heavenly Mother to Heavenly Father throughout, and the overall structure of male authority that circumscribes every level of text and subtext. How can women believe that they “occupy a high and sacred place in the eternal plan of God, our Father in Heaven” when his plan seems to leave out the Heavenly Mother? Can they expect a better place than she is given? The very fact that men do not need to be assured of their worth and equal position evidences the imbalance.

**I**F EVERY ACT of reading a religious text for a Mormon woman must involve reestablishing her personhood in order to occupy the space of a good Mormon, then what extra burdens must she carry in order to occupy the space of a good Mormon theologian? This problem is further complicated because the models available to LDS women are almost all male. The Book of Mormon is a powerful text that presents us with prophetic figures who do not simply proclaim the word of God but seek to explain it in rational terms. Nephi, Alma, and Mormon are all examples of profound theologians. But once again, does this male pattern imply that women are excluded from this role? Virginia can write only to a male prophet to get an authoritative answer to her concerns about women’s place in the LDS religion. Only two females speak at each general conference amid a sea of males who outrank them in authority and number. The BYU Religion Department has only five full-time female faculty members among sixty-seven males (of whom, only one is non-white); and the BYU Philosophy Department includes no women faculty. Clearly the absence of women in authoritative positions and authoritative discourse makes it difficult for younger women to imagine themselves as theologians. But even worse, the lack of women

theologians reinforces the idea that to men alone belongs the power to teach, define, or explore what the LDS religion is. In addition, the lack of women’s perspectives limits the pool from which creative answers to religious problems can be drawn.

A basic assumption of feminist theory is that power resides in the ability to name; authority is related to authorship, etymologically and culturally. For this reason, feminist theologians of other traditions have emphasized the importance of women speaking for God if equality is ever to be achieved in the religious realm. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, a leading Latina *mujerista* (womanist) theologian, asserts:

What has guided *mujerista* theology from the beginning are those wonderful words of Miriam in the book of Numbers, “Has Yahweh indeed spoken only through Moses?” (Num. 12:2). Well aware of the fact that she suffered severe penalties for daring to scold Moses, for daring to claim that Yahweh also spoke to her and through her, our sister Miriam invites *mujerista* theologians to throw our lot with the people of God and to hope that, just as in her case, the authorities will catch up with us, that they will eventually also see that we have no leprosy, that we are clean.<sup>30</sup>

As the words of Isasi-Diaz imply, one of the primary functions of feminist theologians is to develop hermeneutical techniques for reading women into sacred texts and sacred spaces. What may not be evident from Isasi-Diaz’s statement is her desire to do this from a believing perspective. Many mainstream LDS people assume that feminism is at odds with religion in general and Mormonism in particular. However, my reading in feminist theologies and my conversations with feminists of other religious persuasions has convinced me that most women who try to reinterpret religion as favorable to women do so because they have found many positive aspects in their traditions and therefore do not want to reject the whole because of gender inequality.<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains the irony that religious traditions, and the biblical tradition in particular, have empowered women as well as oppressed them:

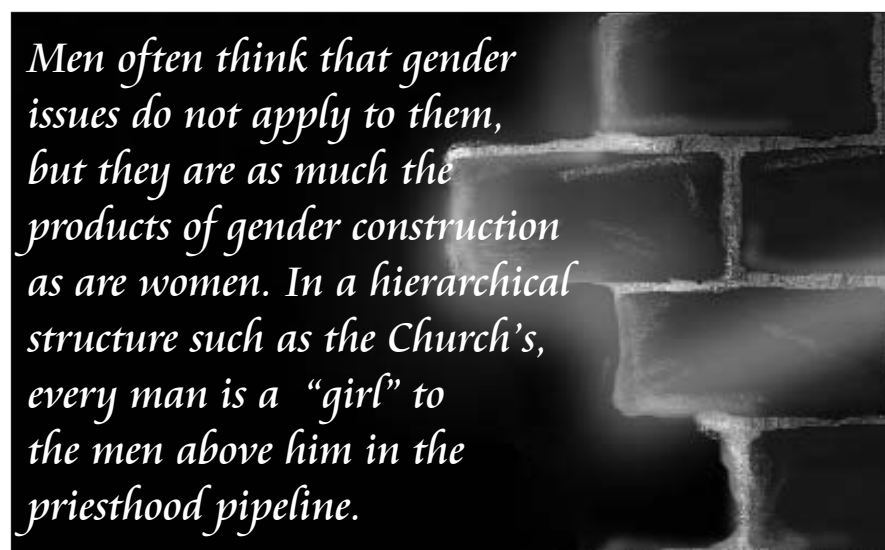
Reclaiming the Bible as a feminist heritage and resource is only possible because it has not functioned only to legitimate the oppression of all women: free-born, slave, black and white, native American, European and Asian, immigrant, poor, working-class and middle-class, Third World and First World women. It has also provided authorization and legitimization for women who have rejected slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, colonial exploitation, and misogyny as unbiblical and against God’s will. The Bible has inspired and continues to inspire countless women to speak out and to struggle against injustice, exploitation, and stereotyping.<sup>32</sup>

Such women claim that the love they experience through God and their religious community is what compels them to stay and work for change from within.

Women have used three main techniques to reclaim a role in defining religion for themselves and other marginalized

groups. The first is what is sometimes called “reconstructive theology,” or what Schüssler-Fiorenza also calls a “hermeneutics of remembrance.”<sup>33</sup> This approach uses historical-critical methodology to uncover the social-political layers that underlie the biblical text and other church traditions to reveal which elements are products of the patriarchal cultures out of which church traditions emerge and which elements are central to the ongoing universal Christian, Jewish, or Muslim message. Proponents of this approach also use literary and rhetorical techniques to remember and recover texts and patterns favorable to women, such as the important role of women in the ministry of Jesus or other historical instances of women’s theological and revelatory presence, (e.g., the role of mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen or Teresa of Avila).

The second hermeneutical approach borrows from philosophical feminism, such as that of Sandra Harding, to question the very foundations of western metaphysics, with its use of objective, rational modes of discourse that have traditionally privileged males.<sup>34</sup> The best voices in this approach do not suggest abandoning reason and systematic thought, nor do they assert that women are irrational. Rather, they insist on an ongoing questioning of the way reality is defined and a deconstruction of the methods we use to discover and construct it. In theological terms, this means looking at the underlying as-



*Men often think that gender issues do not apply to them, but they are as much the products of gender construction as are women. In a hierarchical structure such as the Church’s, every man is a “girl” to the men above him in the priesthood pipeline.*

sumptions behind privileged doctrines. It means always asking how certain ideas reach center stage and remain prominent. It means examining how language and cultural values shape theory.

The third approach is represented well by Latinas/Chicanas who connect with the liberationist theology movement and assert their right to construct theories of religion on an equal footing with men. They add gender concerns to the class issues raised by male liberationist theologians, arguing that both kinds of equality arise out of Christian texts of redemption and justice. Jesus’s treatment of the outcast and poor in the New Testament forms the center of this gospel message. Maria Pilar Aquino explains:

The core content and ultimate finality of God’s revelation is resumed in the term salvation. As the most precious gift of God to humans and to the world around us, salvation is understood by Latina feminist theology as liberation from every oppression. Thus the historical process of liberation from poverty, social injustice, and exclusion becomes the most effective and credible manifestation of God’s salvation.<sup>35</sup>

What all three of these approaches—the reconstructive, the philosophical, and the liberationist—have in common is the belief that theology begins with the lived experiences of the people of God or, in other words, that practice and theory are not separate. Certainly theoretical principles should inform the behavior of a believer (“whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them”—Matthew 7:12). In the same way, if the experience of the believer is at odds with principle (“Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak”—I Corinthians 14:34), then the believer should question and seek further enlightenment.

**B**UT CAN THESE approaches appropriately apply to Mormon theology, which is so thoroughly embedded in hierarchical structures? In other words, is feminist theology at odds with LDS doctrine? I do not think so for three reasons. First, Mormonism asserts an open canon and acknowledges that even scriptural texts can contain the “mistakes of men”—human “weakness,” as the prophet Moroni calls it (Ether 12). The importance of pairing these two beliefs—the need for ongoing revelation and the possibility of error—cannot be overstated. Continuing revelation then is not merely the addition of new doctrine but also the clarification, correction, recontextualization, and perhaps even the rejection of existing doctrine. Under this theory, the 1978 revelation on priesthood and blacks does not have to be asserted as God suddenly changing his mind. Rather, we should be able to admit that the prohibitive policy itself was the result of our own prejudice. Taking responsibility for our mistakes opens the door for new revelation.<sup>36</sup>

The second reason for seeing compatibility between feminist concerns and LDS doctrine is that Mormon scriptural texts reinforce the most important biblical texts of equality. For example, the famous Pauline statement that in Christ Jesus there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28) is expanded by the prophet Nephi, who teaches: “For none of these iniquities come of the Lord . . . he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33).

In fact, the Book of Mormon can easily be read as a text of liberation because of its ongoing motif of connecting spiritual liberation with political and class liberation (which is also ironic, considering that women are less visible in the Book of Mormon than in the Bible). The first section of the Doctrine and Covenants continues this theme by declaring that God “is no respecter of persons” and that the purpose of the Restoration is that “weak things” might “break down the mighty and strong” and that every person “might speak in the name of God” (D&C 1:19, 20).


My third reason for believing that feminist theology is not inimical to Mormonism is that current prophets have reasserted women’s dignity and equal worth with men. As the Proclamation on the Family states, they are to be “equal partners,” which is the goal of feminist theologies as well.

However, while I sincerely believe that in theory feminist theology is compatible with Mormon doctrine, in practice I also believe that no such compatibility now exists. Though in theory Mormonism asserts that all are alike unto God and that women are equal partners with men, in current practice, Mormonism is, at best, a religion of “separate but equal” genders, as illustrated by the Proclamation, which divides the roles of men and women into the traditional public and private realms and puts men in a proprietary position over women. Men are to “preside,” “provide,” and “protect,” while women are “primarily responsible” for nurturing children. And the Heavenly Mother has even fewer privileges than her daughters because she is the silent and invisible parent in the Proclamation and the heavenly home.<sup>37</sup> Further, by making Heavenly Mother a taboo topic, questions about the meaning of gender and of women’s theological role are also rendered taboo. Today, all discussions of Heavenly Mother are seen by Church members and authorities as the dangerous concerns only of radical feminists. There is no space within the Church where one can argue that “separate but equal” inevitably creates a hierarchy privileging the powerful and disenfranchising the weak—there is no space to argue that “separate but equal” is no more an ethical policy when applied to the genders of a church than when applied to the races of a nation.

**T**O MY INITIAL question—“Is there a place for Mother in Heaven in Mormon theology?”—I conclude that the weight of Church practice and authority says no. When I began this inquiry, my purpose was to develop a methodological model that balances the Mormon demand for official authorization with the theological need for rigorous philosophical analysis. I had hoped that in doing so, I could create a model that is cognizant of LDS sensibilities about authority but that could also suggest ways in which theologizing could be more open to and inclusive of women, people of color, or others who are disenfranchised. Sadly, my efforts have failed, and I must admit defeat for now. No amount of theorizing can change the dominant pattern in a church that accepts the present status quo as God’s will. Further, if the majority of LDS women do

not feel that they are in a subordinate position and are content with their present role in Mormon culture and discourse, then it would be unethical for me to try to define them otherwise. Nevertheless, my own ethical sense compels me to explain what I see as the way in which the current structure is at odds with the demands of Christ’s gospel. In spite of my present discouragement, I continue to write because a small part of me still hopes that others will see the gap between Christ’s injunctions for love and inclusion and the Church’s stratified hierarchy. Much of my discouragement comes from my awareness of the allure of power. Why should men give up their power and share it with women? The LDS Church currently has one of the highest rates of male activity of any American religious organization. If women had priesthood, would men see it as less desirable? Would their activity rate drop if they didn’t preside?

I recognize that in this essay, I am reopening the “old issues” that many think feminists have complained about too much already. However, by framing the question of sexism within the larger question of how power structures determine theological legitimacy, I have hoped to show the danger of letting authority hold sway over truth or beauty or love, not just for women, but for all. Though I have used the Heavenly Mother as a metaphor for whatever is currently marginalized and for whoever is disenfranchised, beaten, and left by the side of the road to die, men as well as women can occupy this spot. Men often think that gender issues do not apply to them, but they are as much the products of gender construction as are women. In a hierarchical structure such as the Church’s, every man is a “girl” to the men above him in the priesthood pipeline. Every doctrine is capable of becoming taboo like the Heavenly Mother, not on the basis of truth or logic or even popular disregard, but if it is pronounced such by those with the power to make it unspeakable. And every person can be labeled apostate when disagreement with any authority is made a sign of sin. Once the weight of authority is against a doctrine or a person, the only compelling argument for inclusion is an ethical one, based on principles of justice and love.<sup>37</sup> But can love ever prevail over power?

If we relegate the Heavenly Mother, her daughters, people of color, the poor, the outcast, the ignorant, the despised—the least of us—to the trash bin of theology and culture, then we visit this same treatment upon Jesus Christ and the Heavenly Father, whom we claim to honor above all. Christ said, “As ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me.” This is both a cursing and a blessing, depending on where we stand. We worship not by prayer alone, but through our answer to the Lord’s call to “succor the weak, lift up the hands that hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5). We are Christ’s so long as we do the work of Christ, which is to empower the powerless and to relieve the pain of any who suffer. To fall short of this ideal is not only to fail to live Christ’s gospel but to create bad theology as well. 



## NOTES

1. This means that liberal Mormons and liberal publications also limit both the free expression of ideas and the type of knowledge that is circulated. What I am saying is that ethics demands that we liberal Mormons should turn our complaints about the Church's control of knowledge on ourselves. We must ask ourselves whether we have done what we have condemned in others. Do we truly want to open discussions with those with whom we disagree?

2. Emmanuel Levinas's famous idea that ethics are prior to epistemology succinctly states my point.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Four Cornerstones of Faith," *Ensign*, February 2004, 3.

4. President Hinckley says that the fourth cornerstone, priesthood, "is the power and the authority to govern in the affairs of the kingdom of God" and that the "qualification for eligibility is obedience to the commandments of God." He emphasizes all men may receive it, regardless of their "station in life," the "color of their skin," or "the nation in which they live." Gender, then, is the one difference that disqualifies half of the Church.

5. I am simplifying Foucault's complex theory, represented by such books as, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) or *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon (Sussex, England: Harvester Press, 1980). For a more accessible introduction to Foucault's thought, see Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

6. This does not mean that I find his theories fully sufficient. Feminists have critiqued Foucault for failing to engage sufficiently with the way gender relates to his theory. Also, from an LDS perspective, Foucault's theories are fairly deterministic since they downplay human agency.

7. I owe my inclusion mostly to the strong support of Brian Birch and Dennis Potter, UVSC faculty members and two of SMPT's founders.

8. While the term "independent publication" often implies a more liberal press, such as SUNSTONE, *Dialogue*, or Signature Books, in one sense, anything not published by the Church itself is "independent" of direct Church control. However, the common use of the term to designate "liberal" is telling because it implies that such publications are not *dependent enough* on Church strictures. Thus there are layers of perceived legitimacy in non-official publications, perceptions based simply on what seems to rely on Church and priesthood approval and theological guidelines.

9. Linda P. Wilcox gives the best history of the reception of the Heavenly Mother doctrine. She explains the problems with attributing it to Joseph Smith and outlines the statements by other Church leaders. See Linda P. Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 3–21. Elaine Cannon is the author of the encyclopedia entry: *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 2, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. "Mother in Heaven."

10. Taken from her paper, "Bodies, Parts, and Passions," delivered at the 2002 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (tape #SL02–254). Daughtrey's query generated a total of about forty posts on Beliefnet.com.

11. The result here is misleading, in reality, representing an even smaller number. Two references in talks by Mark E. Petersen describe the belief in a Mother God as a characteristic of early Christian dissenting groups. And most of the others are quoting or referencing two authoritative statements, one by Orson F. Whitney and one by Spencer W. Kimball.

12. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," *Ensign*, November 1991, 97.

13. President Hinckley could be interpreted as contradicting this idea in his talk in the November 1991 *Ensign* when he says that "none of us can add to or diminish the glory of her of whom we have no revealed knowledge."

14. Linda Wilcox quotes a 1960 statement from an LDS seminary teacher who speculates that "the name of our Mother in Heaven has been withheld" because of the way God the Father's and Jesus Christ's names have been profaned. (See Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," 7.) Whether he is the source of the idea or is reflecting a prevalent belief is hard to say. See also Melvin R. Brooks, *LDS Reference Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 3:142.

15. In Daughtrey's work on the disappearing discourse about the Heavenly Mother (cited above), Daughtrey asserts that the LDS Church's interest in covering up the Heavenly Mother doctrine is related to its desire to be seen as Christian by Protestant denominations, which means erasing anything that may seem "weird" to Protestant sensibilities, such as a plurality of gods. While I agree with Daughtrey, I still believe that the fear of feminism may be an even stronger reason to eliminate discourse about the Heavenly Mother.

16. Mary Douglas's classic *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) still offers insight. She says that taboos result from a desire for order as much as from fear and that the object or person under taboo may be considered dangerous and polluted as well as holy.

17. Spencer W. Kimball, "Fundamental Principles to Ponder and Live," *Ensign*, November 1978, 43–46.

18. First given as an address at a Church-wide fireside, 22 February 1987, his remarks were later reprinted in Ezra Taft Benson, *Come Listen to a Prophet's Voice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1990): 25–37.

19. Divorce and birth control practices among LDS people are other examples of how practice subtly reshapes belief. Where Joseph Fielding Smith advised my generation not to practice birth control at all, most LDS people today see birth control as a perfectly acceptable element of prayerful family planning.

20. The marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene is obviously a topic of interest as well. But once again, this idea makes women more visible and central to Christianity.

21. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed., enlarged (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).

22. Most likely, Mormon scholars in the mainstream have a more direct influence.

23. A panel on postmodernism at the March Mormon Theology Conference did suggest that there are other approaches for Mormon theology. But these have not dominated Mormon theological discourse, which instead has tended to follow the pattern set by philosophical thinkers such as Sterling McMurrin, who exemplifies the tendency to position Mormon theology within the Enlightenment paradigm. Typical of his generation, McMurrin also uses exclusively male language to describe the norm—a pattern that few have broken away from since.

24. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001).

25. Paul Toscano and I treat the importance of Mormonism's contribution in our book, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990).

26. The Family: A Proclamation to the World. The full text is available on the Church's website at: <http://www.lds.org/library/display/0,4945,161-1-11-1,00.html>.

27. Hinckley, "Daughters of God."

28. If this is true, we could ask why the terms "God" or "Heavenly Father" do not include the feminine. If they do, then praying to Heavenly Father could include the Heavenly Mother, too.

29. Lynne Whitesides, Martha Esplin, and I interacted with President Hinckley's talk in a 1992 panel discussion, "Finding Our Bodies, Hearts, Voices: A Three Part-Invention," published in the *The Mormon Women's Forum: A Feminist Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (September 1993):18–22.

30. Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, eds., *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95.

31. In the new book, *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion*, ed. Ann Braude (New York: Palgrave, 2004), leading women theologians of various faiths describe their feminist journeys. This book emerged from a 2002 Harvard Conference in which I was privileged to participate. I was profoundly moved by the spirituality and commitment of all these women.

32. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xiii.

33. *Ibid.*, xx.

34. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003).

35. Maria Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 151.

36. Of course, the Church has never admitted a mistake in its past policy on blacks and the priesthood. This adds, in my opinion, to our ongoing race problems. See roundtable discussion, "Speak the Truth and Shame the Devil," SUNSTONE, May 2003, 28–39.

37. I am profoundly moved by Emmanuel Levinas's assertion that a "face to face" relationship with the Other demands an "I-Thou" relationship. This kind of relationship provides the only immunity against the objectification of others as commodities to be eliminated when they do not readily fit into a privileged power system, theological or otherwise. To read about this theme in Levinas, see especially *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), and *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).