

# Woman's Place in Brigham Young's World

Jill Mulvay Derr

For more than a century those who have written about Brigham Young inevitably have taken an interest in his relationships with women, at least within the connubial context. To his American contemporaries Young became the personification of Latter-day Saint involvement in plural marriage or polygamy. They portrayed him as a despot with a harem, a man who had "outraged decency and riven asunder the most sacred social and domestic ties."<sup>1</sup> Horace Greeley, who visited the Mormons in 1859, criticized President Young for esteeming so lightly the opinions of his wives and other women and considered his apparent restriction of woman to the single office of childbearing and its accessories as an inevitable consequence of polygamy.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. C. V. Waite, a traveler who lived among the Mormons a few years later, agreed that polygamous marriages could only degrade women. "Instead of being a companion to man . . . she becomes, under this system, merely the minister to his passions and physical comfort." Waite characterized Brigham Young as foremost among the oppressors of women. "He declares that women have no souls—that they are not responsible beings, that they cannot save themselves, nor be saved except through man's intervention," she wrote.<sup>3</sup>

Even twentieth century biographers of Brigham Young have looked at his attitudes towards women almost exclusively in terms of his practice and explanation of polygamy. M. R. Werner's *Brigham Young* (1925) devoted three of thirteen chapters to polygamy and made no mention of Young's involvement in reorganizing the Relief Society, the official Church organization for Mormon women. Stanley P. Hirshson's biography of Brigham Young, *Lion of*

---

Jill Mulvay Derr is a research historian at the Church Historical Department.

<sup>1</sup>Mrs. T. B. H. [Fanny] Stenhouse, *Tell It All: The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism* (Cincinnati: Queen City Publishing, 1874), p. 273.

<sup>2</sup>Horace Greeley, "Two Hours with Brigham Young," *Daily Tribune* (New York), 20 August 1859, as quoted in William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen, eds., *Among the Mormons: Historical Accounts by Contemporary Observers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 327.

<sup>3</sup>Mrs. C. V. Waite, *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem; or an Authentic History of Brigham Young and His Numerous Wives and Children* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1866), pp. 217-18.

*the Lord* (1969) considered polygamy in three of the book's fifteen chapters and mentioned the Relief Society only briefly as the women's advocate for retrenchment and plural marriage.<sup>4</sup> Though neither of these biographies is in any sense definitive, they are both indicative of a prevailing assumption about Brigham Young that has lived on for more than a century: that he was an oppressor of women.

The recent involvement of historians in women's studies has sparked new interest in the lives of Mormon women. The period that has received the most attention from current scholars is the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, the time when Mormon women emerged into public life.<sup>5</sup> The administration of Brigham Young coincides with the first part of this span, and with good reason. Young himself was in part responsible for the increased sphere of activity of nineteenth century Mormon women. His own people were convinced of that. In fact, Mormon *Woman's Exponent* editor Louisa Lula Greene Richards heralded Young as "the most genuine, impartial and practical 'Woman's Rights Man' upon the American Continent."<sup>6</sup>

Opposing views of Brigham Young as feminist and anti-feminist are both in a sense correct. Each represents certain aspects of Young's attitudes toward women, but neither represents the whole. Young's vision was one of ultimate human liberation to which personal choice and responsibility were integral. But equally necessary for the freedom promised with a knowledge of the truth (John 8:32) were obedience and submission to the order of the Kingdom of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This freedom-submission paradox pervaded Young's attitudes toward the Mormon women he addressed and with whom he worked in various contexts.

He spoke of individual women as daughters of God, free agents, beings with the same eternal possibilities as men. Yet, within the family context, he insisted that wives submit themselves to their husbands and chided mothers who pursued personal interests at the expense of their children. As the Mormon commu-

---

<sup>4</sup>M. R. Werner, *Brigham Young* (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1925); Stanley P. Hirshson, *The Lion of the Lord: A Biography of Brigham Young* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

<sup>5</sup>The first such study was Leonard J. Arrington's "The Economic Role of Pioneer Mormon Women," *Western Humanities Review* 9 (Spring 1955):145-64. More recent studies include Claudia L. Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press Ltd., 1976); Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "The Eliza Enigma: The Life and Legend of Eliza R. Snow," *Essays on the American West, 1974-1975*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976); Jill C. Mulvay, "The Liberal Shall Be Blessed: Sarah M. Kimball," and Sherilyn Cox Bennion, "The Woman's Exponent: Forty-two Years of Speaking for Women," both in *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1976). The *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1970) issue was fully devoted to women's studies with several articles treating this period.

<sup>6</sup>Louisa G. Richards, "Work for Women," *Woman's Exponent* 1 (15 April 1873):172.



nity increased in complexity, Young gave sisters the resources and encouragement to pursue roles outside their homes. This mélange of prescriptive behavior for women has never significantly blurred the monolithic image of Young as an oppressor of women, though in recent years some Church members have attempted to resurrect Young as a woman's rights advocate. A more careful appraisal of Brigham Young must not only acknowledge the apparent incongruities in his prescriptions for women, but assess to what extent he resolved them.

At least as often as he addressed men and women separately Brigham Young addressed them jointly, speaking to "ladies and gentlemen," or more likely to "brethren and sisters." They were "sons and daughters, legitimately so, of our Father in heaven."<sup>7</sup> These children of divine parents (Young, like Joseph Smith, acknowledged a Mother as well as a Father in Heaven<sup>8</sup>) came to earth endowed with assorted talents and abilities that were not necessarily sex-differentiated. Speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues, and healing were spiritual gifts practiced by both men and women with the approval of President Young.<sup>9</sup> He preached that women and men alike had access to the promptings of the Holy Ghost ("Let every man and woman, without exception, obtain that Spirit. . .") and that their exaltation in the next life to godhood (the ultimate promise for righteous Saints) was predicated upon their personal choices in this life. "Now those men, or those women," he emphasized,

who know no more about the power of God, and the influences of the Holy Spirit, than to be led entirely by another person, suspending their own understanding, and pinning their faith upon another's sleeve, will never be capable of entering into the celestial glory, to be crowned as they anticipate; they will never be capable of becoming Gods.<sup>10</sup>

Not only were spiritual resources available to women and men alike, but both were capable of developing more temporal skills. Young indicated that some Mormon sisters "if they had the privilege of studying, would make just as good mathematicians or

---

<sup>7</sup>Brigham Young, sermon of 8 August 1852, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855-86), 3:93 (cited hereafter as *JD*).

<sup>8</sup>Brigham Young taught men could become gods and women "Eves" or "queens of heaven." Brigham Young, "A Few Words of Doctrine," 8 October 1861, Brigham Young Papers, Archives of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (cited hereafter as Church Archives); see also *JD* 3:365. The clearest statement of the Mother in Heaven concept, Eliza R. Snow's hymn, "O My Father," or, as she titled it, "The Eternal Father and Mother," was said to be Young's favorite hymn. See "Deseret Theological Institute," *Deseret News*, 27 June 1855; and Heber J. Grant, "Favorite Hymns," *Improvement Era* 17 (June 1914): 777.

<sup>9</sup>*JD* 3:364 (22 June 1856); *JD* 13:155 (14 November 1869).

<sup>10</sup>*JD* 7:160 (29 May 1859); *JD* 1:312 (20 February 1853).

accountants as any man; and we think they ought to have the privilege to study these branches of knowledge that they may develop the powers with which they are endowed.”<sup>11</sup> Susa Young Gates, daughter of Brigham and journalist and suffragist of national renown, said her father was “always proud to recognize and acclaim the woman of gifts and encourage her to use them to the fullest extent for the establishment of righteousness on earth.”<sup>12</sup>

Young’s emphasis on individual freedom and development was offered within a context ever present in Mormondom: the Kingdom of God was in fact a kingdom governed by “the Government of the Son of God,” “a heavenly institution among men”—the priesthood.<sup>13</sup> The presence of the priesthood among the Latter-day Saints was what designated them as God’s covenant people. For Young it was the priesthood that “forms, fashions, makes, creates, produces, protects and holds in existence the inhabitants of the earth in a pure and holy form of government preparatory to their entering the kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>14</sup> According to Young, Saints who subjected themselves to be governed by the priesthood would “live strictly according to its pure system of laws and ordinances” until they were unified as one. He promised: “The man that honors his Priesthood, the woman that honors her Priesthood will receive an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of God.” Those who numbered themselves among the Saints, whether or not they held government (priesthood) offices, would gain blessings by honoring and obeying the “pure system of government” by which the Saints were governed.<sup>15</sup>

From the time the priesthood was restored to Joseph Smith its offices were available only to males. Like their Puritan counterparts two centuries earlier, Mormon women found themselves at the bottom of a hierarchically ordered system. The Mormon order extended from the First Presidency, with the responsibility of governing the entire Church, through stake presidents and bishops with governmental responsibility for specific geographic regions, to the individual father whose priesthood responsibility was righteous government of his family. Women assumed the responsibility for governing children and for heading households in the absence of their husbands, a frequent occurrence in Mormon society. This divinely designated order did not necessarily imply that females

---

<sup>11</sup>JD 13:61 (18 July 1869).

<sup>12</sup>Susa Young Gates and Leah D. Widtsoe, *The Life Story of Brigham Young* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 293, 296; see also JD 7:162 (5 June 1859).

<sup>13</sup>JD 10:320 (31 July 1864); JD 9:330 (3 August 1862).

<sup>14</sup>JD 13:281 (30 October 1870).

<sup>15</sup>JD 11:249 (17 June 1866); JD 17:119 (28 June 1874).



were intellectually or spiritually inferior to males.<sup>16</sup> Brigham Young himself acknowledged "that many women are smarter than their husbands," though it was "not the privilege of a woman to dictate the husband."<sup>17</sup>

The number of Young's sermons pointing to the gifts and responsibilities of men and women would seem to indicate that for him this governmental system did not necessarily detract from the individual worth and agency of women. Nevertheless, critics who accused Young of placing women in a secondary or inferior position, particularly within the marital relationship, were not without some justification. "The man is the head of the woman," Young declared, tying into a Christian tradition that dates back to Paul.<sup>18</sup> "Let our wives be the weaker vessels," he said, "and the men be men, and show the women by their superior ability that God gives husbands wisdom and ability to lead their wives into his presence."<sup>19</sup> According to Young the father was to be "the head of the family, the master of his own household" and the wives and children were to "say amen to what he says, and be subject to his dictates, instead of their dictating the man, instead of their trying to govern him."<sup>20</sup>

Woman was under the obligation to follow her husband because of the order set forth by the first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. "There is a curse upon the woman that is not upon the man," said Young, "namely, that 'her whole affections shall be towards her husband,' and what is the next? 'He shall rule over you.'"<sup>21</sup> This explanation for woman's secondary position within marriage was so popularly held during the nineteenth century that feminists headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton published volumes of *The Woman's Bible* in 1895 and 1898, attempting to analyze and reinterpret this and other passages from the Old Testament that seemed degrading to women.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Feminist scholar Mary Ryan observed of the American Puritan community: "No individual of either sex, could presume to be one among equals in the seventeenth-century community. . . . Within the church, all parishioners were subservient to the minister and found their destined places somewhere within the hierarchy of elders, deacons, and the general congregation. . . . Within the household, the ranks descended from the patriarchal father to his wife, the mistress of the household, and on to children and then to servants and any other non-kinsmen who resided in the home. . . . Within this hierarchical *Weltanschauung* of the seventeenth century, inequality was not the peculiar stigma of womanhood, but rather a social expectation for both sexes." Mary Ryan, *Womanhood in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: New Viewpoints, Franklin Watts, 1975), pp. 40–41.

<sup>17</sup>JD 9:39 (7 April 1861); JD 17:159 (9 August 1874).

<sup>18</sup>JD 11:271 (19 August 1866). See Ephesians 5:23.

<sup>19</sup>JD 9:308 (15 June 1862). See also 1 Peter 3:7.

<sup>20</sup>JD 4:55 (21 September 1856).

<sup>21</sup>JD 4:57 (21 September 1856).

<sup>22</sup>See Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), pp. 47, 220.

Certainly President Young's statements regarding the dominant role of the husband were not radical for his time. Ironically, one of his female critics tried to describe the ideal position of woman in contrast with what was prescribed by Young:

The position of woman, and her duties in life, are well-defined in New Testament Scriptures. If married, she is to direct her household affairs, raise up children, be subject unto her husband, and use all due benevolence toward him; but his duties are equally well-defined.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of contrast is what is striking, especially since Brigham Young did take time to define the responsibilities of the Mormon husband. For example, while he taught that a man should place himself at the head of his family, as the master of his household, he also counseled each man to treat his family "as an angel would treat them." "A man is not made to be worshipped by his family," said Young. A man was to be good and upright so he could earn the respect of his family. They were not obligated to follow him in unrighteousness.<sup>24</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Young was sensitive to woman's dependence on man. He remarked on several occasions that such dependence was not only hard on women, but sometimes harmful. "I do not know what the Lord could have put upon women worse than he did upon Mother Eve, where he told her: 'Thy desire shall be to thy husband,' " said Young, noting that he "would be glad if it were otherwise."<sup>25</sup> He saw that the female sex had long been deceived and "trodden under foot of man" and that "it is in their nature to confide in and look to the sterner sex for guidance, and thus they are more liable to be led astray and ruined."<sup>26</sup> And he preached the curse "never will be taken from the human family until the mission is fulfilled, and our Master and our Lord is perfectly satisfied with our work." One implication of this was that woman's essential, "uncursed" nature was not marked by dependence upon man.<sup>27</sup>

Whether the notion of the curse upon woman was vitally Mormon or simply reflected the traditions of the larger culture in

---

<sup>23</sup>Waite, *The Mormon Prophet*, p. 223. This was in accordance with a whole set of behavioral norms for nineteenth century women. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

<sup>24</sup>*JD* 4:55 (21 September 1856); *JD* 14:106 (8 August 1869).

<sup>25</sup>*JD* 16:167 (31 August 1873).

<sup>26</sup>*JD* 11:271 (19 August 1866); *JD* 12:194 (6 April 1869).

<sup>27</sup>*JD* 15:132 (18 August 1872). Earlier he had said "there is one thing she [woman] cannot away with, at least not so far as I am concerned, and that is, 'and he shall rule over thee.'" *JD* 9:195 (9 February 1862). But the former view was the one Mormon women advocated through the 1870s without objection from Young. See Jill C. Mulvay, "Eliza R. Snow and the Woman Question," *BYU Studies* 16 (Winter 1976):261, 264. Latter-day Saints leaders, male and female, became increasingly silent on the matter of the curse toward the turn of the century.



which Brigham Young lived, it explained the great number of weak, male-clinging and abused women he encountered and it provided a biblical precedent for placing the man at the head of his family. This biblical precedent complemented the Latter-day Saint concept of priesthood government with males as officeholders. Thus the patriarchal family became part of a larger family-community with Brigham Young—"the controller and master of affairs here, under Heaven's direction"—at its head. Male and female submitted to a graded and ranked system, a "beautiful order," where all worked "for the good of the whole more than for individual aggrandizement."<sup>28</sup> This was strikingly different from the larger American society where women were admonished to be submissive for the sake of an order that was nonexistent outside the family unit.<sup>29</sup>

Though Brigham Young saw woman's dependence upon man as a possible problem, he could not conceive a solution outside of adherence to the order of the kingdom. Total independence was no more an option for women than it was for men who chose to be part of the system. So while Young allowed that women should develop their talents, seek their own inspiration from the Holy Spirit and make their own choices, according to Young a "woman of faith and knowledge" would say, "It is a law that man shall rule over me; his word is my law, and I must obey him; he must rule over me; this is upon me and I will submit to it." Young emphasized that by rule he did "not mean with an iron hand, but merely to take the lead," "in kindness and with pleasant words."<sup>30</sup>

But Young's message was interpreted variously. Some inferred from his statements that the patriarchal order of God's community, particularly within the family, was not arbitrary (that is, as God had decreed it without offering men any explanations). Martha Spence Heywood, plural wife and schoolteacher in Nephi, Utah, confided to her diary her reaction after hearing Brigham Young discuss the matter:

Before he spoke, supposing that he would, I prayed my Heavenly Father that I might get instruction that would suit my particular circumstances and I felt that I did and had the very thing pointed out that I needed . . . especially the principle that a woman be she ever so smart, she cannot know more than her husband if he magnifies

---

<sup>28</sup>*JD* 1:48 (9 April 1852); *JD* 12:153 (12 January 1868).

<sup>29</sup>The "Cult of True Womanhood," as set forth by Welter, made piety, purity, submission, and domesticity values for women but not for men. See Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood." In Mormonism these were common values for men and women, though Young was prone to teach that women were of a more refined nature than men, a little purer and more pious. *JD* 12:194 (6 April 1868); *JD* 14:120 (21 May 1871); *JD* 18:233 (15 August 1876).

<sup>30</sup>*JD* 16:167 (31 August 1873); *JD* 9:195 (9 February 1862); *JD* 9:39 (7 April 1861).

his Priesthood. That God never in any, any age of the world endowed woman with knowledge above the man.<sup>31</sup>

Young may not have taught intellectual or spiritual inferiority but some of his followers heard it. Wrote Fanny Stenhouse, a woman whose twenty years as a Mormon culminated in apostasy: "I thought that I might perhaps derive some consolation from the sermons in the Tabernacle—something that might shed a softer light upon my rugged pathway. But instead of obtaining consolation, I heard that which aroused every feeling of my soul to rebellion."<sup>32</sup>

If some female members of his community were troubled by what Young had to say, it is not surprising that non-Mormons were appalled as they filtered his words through their own perceptions of Mormon polygamy, turning the household-heading husband into a tyrant and the submissive wife into a subjugated woman. The fact that as many as twenty percent of his listeners were living in polygamy did affect what Young had to say to them. According to Mormon doctrine woman could not be exalted without man. Neither could a Mormon man be exalted without a woman. All were exhorted to marry and Mormons prided themselves upon their marriage system which allowed "every virtuous woman" to have "a husband to whom she can look for guidance and protection."<sup>33</sup> But plural marriage posed peculiar problems and Young particularly was aware of them. "Where is the man who has wives, and all of them think he is doing just right to them?" Young asked. "I do not know such a man"; he continued, "I know it is not your humble servant." He said he found "the whole subject of the marriage relation . . . a hard matter to reach."<sup>34</sup>

Though he was committed to a pure union between husband and wife without any "alienation of affection," Young knew from experience that a polygamous husband could not meet all of a wife's needs for companionship. "I feel more lonely and more unreconciled to my lot than ever," one of Brigham's wives wrote him in 1853, "and as I am not essential to your comfort or your convenience I desire you will give me to some other good man who has less cares." This wife did not divorce or leave Young, though under the system of plural marriage divorce was liberally extended as an option for dissatisfied women. Four of Brigham's

---

<sup>31</sup>Martha Spence Heywood journal, 27 April 1856, photocopy of typescript, Church Archives.

<sup>32</sup>Stenhouse, *Tell It All*, p. 343.

<sup>33</sup>*JD* 11:268 (19 August 1866).

<sup>34</sup>*JD* 17:159–60 (9 August 1874); *JD* 2:90 (6 October 1854).



wives did eventually leave or divorce him.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps because even within his own family he could see no way of meeting expectations for intimacy, he advised women not to worry about it, but to turn their attention elsewhere, especially toward their children. "Are you tormenting yourselves by thinking that your husbands do not love you?" Young once asked. "I would not care whether they loved a particle or not; but I would cry out, like one of old, in the joy of my heart, 'I have got a man from the Lord!'"<sup>36</sup>

Young's emphasis on woman's child-bearing/child-rearing role received as much criticism as anything he taught, and yet in no other area were Young's teachings so nearly identical with the ideals of the larger society. "The mothers are the machinery that give zest to the whole man, and guide the destinies and lives of men upon the earth," proclaimed Young in 1877.<sup>37</sup> "She controls the destiny of every community," one Henry C. Wright had written in 1870 in *The Empire of the Mother over the Character and Destiny of the Race*. While *Godey's Lady's Book* described mothers as "those builders of the human temple who lay the foundation for an eternity of glory or of shame," Young counseled that "it is the mother's influence that is most effective in moulding the mind of the child for good or for evil."<sup>38</sup> Young's admonitions to pregnant women and nursing mothers to be faithful and prayerful that their infants might enjoy a happy influence could have appeared in any number of contemporary women's magazines and mothers' manuals. In antebellum America motherhood was seen as woman's "one duty and function . . . that alone for which she was created." Even nineteenth century feminists came to use the importance of motherhood as a basis for their reforms in education and civil rights. So, in his time, Young was not anti-feminist when he stated that the woman who rose at the resurrection to find that her duty as a wife and mother had been sacrificed in order to pursue any other duty would find her "whole life had been a failure."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>Emily D. Young to Brigham Young, 24 February 1853, Brigham Young Family Correspondence, Church Archives. Jeffery O. Johnson's "The Wives of Brigham Young," photocopy of typescript, Church Archives, is an informative listing including wives' birth and death dates, date of marriage to Brigham Young, number of children born to each marriage, and wives' other husbands and children. Johnson, who based his listing on sealing records, includes fifty-five women as wives, though only about sixteen of these were connubial wives. On divorce see Lawrence Foster, "A Little-Known Defense of Polygamy from the Mormon Press in 1842," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 30. Foster compares early ideas about divorce within the plural marriage system with some of Young's later statements on the matter. It should also be noted that Brigham Young told women never to seal themselves to a man they did not want to be sealed to. *JD* 6:307 (8 April 1853).

<sup>36</sup>*JD* 9:37 (7 April 1861).

<sup>37</sup>*JD* 19:72 (19 July 1877).

<sup>38</sup>*Godey's Lady's Book* as quoted by Ryan, *Womanhood in America*, p. 165. *JD* 18:263 (8 October 1876).

<sup>39</sup>Susa Young Gates, "Editor's Department," *Young Woman's Journal* 5 (June 1894):449.



Why then did contemporary critics find Young's emphasis on woman's role as mother so disgusting? Because the closer polygamy-practicing Mormons came to laying claim to the ideals of the American family, the more threatening seemed their "distortions." The raising up of children—posterity—was put forth by Mormons as one of the major purposes of polygamy. Women had the privilege of bringing into mortality God's spirit children, Young taught, "that God may have a royal priesthood, a royal people, on the earth. That is what plurality of wives is for."<sup>40</sup>

Disturbing, too, in a culture that so lavishly and exclusively praised women for motherhood, was the fact that Mormon motherhood was not the glory of woman only, but of the man as well. "The more women and children a man has, the more glory," one critic summarized it.<sup>41</sup> From time to time Young counseled fathers to take the responsibility for training the children who would bring them honor, but he told mothers they bore the major responsibility for raising righteous children. Admittedly Young emphasized for men more often than for women that the "greatest gift of God" hereafter would be "posterity to an eternal continuance." To whom did the glory of posterity belong? In a recent study of the accommodation of religion to women Barbara Welter suggested that the projecting of the marital relationship into eternity with parenthood as the highest mutual goal gave Mormon women greater status in their role here and hereafter.<sup>42</sup> However, for nineteenth century onlookers this distortion of motherhood by requiring women to share their one claim to fame with men, and polygamous men at that, was untenable.

Finally, Young's critics felt that he emphasized child-bearing and child-rearing at the expense of the marital relationship. Stenhouse said that Saints were told that "the great object of marriage . . . was the increase of children" and that other aspects of marriage such as "the companionship of soul; the indissoluble union of two existences—were never presented." Certainly Young made it clear that most women would be happier if they worried less about their husbands and more about their children. While he did not deny that a romantic and close relationship might exist between a husband and a plural wife, he was not willing to engender such expectations in women whose husbands were regularly called away from home for Church service. He continually admonished men to humor and "happify" their wives, but Stenhouse was

---

<sup>40</sup>JD 9:37 (7 April 1861).

<sup>41</sup>Waite, *The Mormon Prophet and His Harem*, p. 218.

<sup>42</sup>JD 1:67-68 (8 April 1852); JD 8:63 (20 May 1860). Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion," Mary S. Hartman and Lois W. Banner, eds., *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 149-50.



not far from Young himself when she affirmed that woman's aspirations for intimacy "had nothing to do with the hard, cruel facts of their life in Polygamy."<sup>43</sup> Ironically, perhaps, independence for women was a common by-product of the marital system that left them so often on their own to manage family, farms, and businesses.

For Brigham Young, woman's place was with the family, in the home, but it was also with the larger family-community, in the kingdom. Women submitted to the well-ordered kingdom, but the kingdom in turn gave them new freedom, particularly during the last decade of Brigham Young's administration.

Between 1861, when the telegraph linked Utah to the rest of the United States, and 1869 when the transcontinental railroad forged the bond with steel ties, soldier-miners came to Utah as troops of the Third California Volunteers, commanded by Colonel Patrick Connor who promised to "invite hither a large Gentile and loyal population, sufficient by peaceful means and through the ballot-box to overwhelm the Mormons."<sup>44</sup> The coming of the gentiles was inevitable, but the disintegration of the kingdom was not.

"I do not know how long it will be before we call upon the brethren and sisters to enter upon business in an entirely different way from what they have done," Young postulated at April conference in 1867.<sup>45</sup> The following December he announced, "We have sisters now engaged in several of our telegraph offices, and we wish them to learn not only to act as operators but to keep the books of our offices."<sup>46</sup> While ten years earlier the Mormons had taken to the surrounding mountains to stave off the Utah Expedition, they would now fight on an economic front and the draft was to be without regard for sex. "Let us . . . no longer sit with hands folded, wasting time, for it is the duty of every man and of every woman to do all that is possible to promote the kingdom of God on the earth," said Young.<sup>47</sup>

Through this emphasis on cooperative building of the economic kingdom Brigham Young extended to women significant opportunities for personal and collective growth and advancement—

---

<sup>43</sup>Stenhouse, *Tell It All*, pp. 343–44. William Lawrence Foster's excellent dissertation, "Between Two Worlds: The Origin of Shaker Celibacy, Oneida Community Complex Marriage and Mormon Polygamy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1976) confirms that "by partially breaking down exclusive direct emotional involvements in family affairs in favor of Church business, polygamy may well have contributed significantly to the long-range demands of centralized planning and to the rapid establishment of religious and communal order" (p. 384).

<sup>44</sup>Connor to R. C. Drum, Assistant Adjutant General, U.S. Army, 21 July 1864, cited in Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 473.

<sup>45</sup>JD 12:32 (8 April 1867).

<sup>46</sup>JD 12:116 (8 December 1867).

<sup>47</sup>JD 18:77 (31 August 1875).

first, through allowing them spiritual and economic influence within the Church organization and second, through encouraging women's education for and involvement in a variety of trades and professions.

The Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had been organized by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the spring of 1842 and had functioned much as other literary, benevolent and antislavery societies of the time. Its labors were "deferred" by Brigham Young following the 1844 death of Joseph Smith because Emma Smith, society president, refused to follow priesthood counsel.<sup>48</sup> The decision to reinstate an official organization for Mormon females in the male-governed Mormon community was suspended until 1854 when Young discovered that local Relief Societies could be a fine community resource.<sup>49</sup> By December 1867 he had decided they were a resource the kingdom could not do without and he then announced that women and their bishops should immediately organize societies in local wards. "We have many talented women among us," he said, "and we wish their help in this matter. . . . you will find that the sisters will be the mainspring of the movement."<sup>50</sup> Young's statement was prophetic. As a domestic revolution swept the United States in the years following the Civil War (including the development of gas lighting, domestic plumbing, canning, improved stoves, washtubs, and sewing machines) American women would increasingly turn their energies toward women's clubs while Mormon women would come to claim the Relief Society as their unique women's organization.

Young commissioned one of his wives, Eliza R. Snow, who had served as secretary to the Nauvoo society but whose willingness to obey the priesthood was unwavering, to instruct bishops in the format of the organization and teach the women their responsibilities. Their first responsibility was, as indicated by their name, to provide relief to the poor. Young encouraged them in this endeavor, particularly in finding for those in need "something to do that will enable them to sustain themselves."<sup>51</sup> He also challenged the women to sustain the self-sufficiency of the Mormon commu-

---

<sup>48</sup>This was presumably due to the confusion of that time, but also undoubtedly because Joseph Smith's wife Emma who presided over the society and wielded tremendous influence over the women did not support Young's claim to Church leadership and had already used her position to further her antipolygamy sentiments. John Taylor address to women's conference, 17 July 1880, *Woman's Exponent* 9 (1 September 1880):55.

<sup>49</sup>A study of early Relief Societies was recently completed by Richard Jensen, "The Indian Relief Society Movement, 1854-55," manuscript, files of the Church Historian, Church Archives.

<sup>50</sup>*JD* 12:115 (8 December 1867).

<sup>51</sup>*JD* 14:107 (8 August 1869).



nity through retrenchment. They could help fight the economic battle by making and wearing homemade hats and clothes rather than goods imported from the eastern states. They were to set their own fashions, to be thrifty in their households, and to find ways to do their own carding, spinning, weaving, and knitting. "What is there in these respects that the members of the Female Relief Society cannot accomplish," asked Young.<sup>52</sup>

This need to adapt economically Young presented as a religious obligation counseling both men and women to cease their extravagance. He praised those women who were willing to "help build up the Kingdom of God" by wisely attending to their household affairs. "Every woman in this Church can be useful to the Church if she has a mind to be," Young concluded.<sup>53</sup>

Women may not have found themselves feeling useful to the kingdom by merely donning homemade hats and dresses. Many of them steered clear of Young's suggested apparel and his reproofs were frequent, though he freely acknowledged that he could not even control his own family's taste for finery. What did give women a new sense of usefulness was their involvement in cooperative home industry, an effort which gave them for the first time business and financial responsibility within the Church. With money they had raised from fairs and parties women imported knitting machinery, raised silk, set up tailoring establishments, bought, stored and sold grain, made everything from straw hats to shoes, and bought property and built their own cooperatives where they could sell their homemade goods on commission.<sup>54</sup>

By 1876 Eliza R. Snow reported that 110 branches of the Relief Society had disbursed \$82,397 over a seven to eight year period: seventy-three percent of which was to relieve and support the poor, sixteen percent for building purposes, seven percent to help the poor emigrate, and the remainder for other charities and missionary work.<sup>55</sup> That a great deal of what the women did came as a direct result of President Young's prompting and prodding is without question.

"President Young recommends silk culture as one very profitable branch for the sisters, and offers, free of charge, all the cuttings they wish, from the Mulberry orchard on his farm," Eliza R. Snow editorialized in the *Mormon Woman's Exponent* in 1875.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>JD 14:104 (8 August 1869).

<sup>53</sup>JD11:352 (6 April 1867).

<sup>54</sup>See Arrington, "The Economic Role of Pioneer Mormon Women."

<sup>55</sup>Eliza R. Snow, "The Relief Society," 1876, holograph, Special Collections, Western Americana, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>56</sup>Eliza R. Snow, "To Every Branch of the Relief Society in Zion," *Woman's Exponent* 3 (1 April 1875):164.

Sericulture became a "mission" for the Relief Society sisters which they carried out for nearly a decade. Utah women maintained their involvement in the silk industry until it faded from the state after the turn of the century. They took pride in the tablecloths, scarves, and dresses that came from their countless hours of labor with mulberry leaves and cocoons.

"At the suggestion of President Brigham Young we would call the attention of the women of this Territory to the subject of saving grain," wrote Emmeline B. Wells, the woman commissioned by Young to head up the grain storage program in 1876.<sup>57</sup> The program was Emmeline's project, not Brigham's, and over a period of forty-two years resulted in the storage of several hundred thousand bushels of grain in woman-made granaries scattered throughout the Church. The grain was sent to earthquake and famine victims in San Francisco and China, and the remaining two hundred thousand bushels was sold to the U.S. government at the close of World War I. For fifty years beyond that time the Relief Society operated solely on interest from the sale of the wheat.

One final example of Young's prodding is the Relief Society cooperative established in Salt Lake City to serve all the women of the territory. In 1876, when Relief Society women had just completed a summer-long display of their homemade goods in commemoration of the nation's centennial, Brigham Young addressed them:

It would be very gratifying to us if you could form an association to start business in the capacity of disposing of Home-made Articles such as are manufactured among ourselves. . . . If you can not be satisfied with the selection of Sisters from among yourselves to take charge, we will render you assistance by furnishing a competent man for the transaction of the financial matters of this Establishment.<sup>58</sup>

The Relief Society Mercantile Association opened the Woman's Commission Store within a month and operated it themselves.

That the women took these "stewardships" seriously as their own is shown in the spunk they manifested in doing business with Young himself. Fifteenth Ward Relief Society president Sarah M. Kimball read Young's suggestion for the storing of grain by women and immediately contacted him to head her ward's subscription list for funds. "The more I weigh it the more my faith increases in our (the women's) power to accomplish in this direction with your (the men's) assistance."<sup>59</sup> It was a nice reversal of

---

<sup>57</sup>Emmeline B. Wells, "Sisters Be In Earnest," *Woman's Exponent* 5 (15 October 1876):76.

<sup>58</sup>Brigham Young to the President and Members of the Relief Societies. . . , 4 October 1876, Brigham Young Letterbooks, Volume 14, Church Archives.

<sup>59</sup>S. M. Kimball to President Young, 26 October 1876, holograph, Brigham Young Correspondence, Church Archives.



supportive roles. Eliza R. Snow, who took it upon herself to manage the Woman's Commission Store, wrote to Young to explain to him that he could not dictate the terms of commission on the goods from his woolen mill. "Although we are novices in the mercantile business, we are not green enough for that kind of management."<sup>60</sup>

Young knew that Mormon women were inexperienced in public affairs; they needed the guidance of assigned tasks, he felt, especially in these early years of their involvement outside the home. But he did not present them with detailed programs and though he expected them to account for their stewardships, he did not oversee their work. The growth of the women as individuals was a critical part of building the Kingdom of God. "The females are capable of doing immense good if they will," he said, "but if you sit down and say 'husband, or father, do it for me' or 'brother, do it for me, for I am not going to do it' when life is through you will weep and wail, for you will be judged according to your works, and having done nothing you will receive nothing."<sup>61</sup> Statements such as: "We wish to develop the powers of the ladies to the fullest extent, and to control them for the building of the Kingdom of God," or "If we can succeed in guiding their [the ladies'] ideas correctly it will be an advantage to the whole community," underscore the fact that Young's primary motive was ever the growth of the kingdom, but they also reveal his faith that only through Saints building God's kingdom could God build Saints.<sup>62</sup>

"If I had my way I would have every man and woman employed in doing something to support themselves," Brigham Young told a group of St. George Saints. At approximately the same time he began the reorganization of the Relief Society in 1867, Brigham Young began emphasizing vocational and professional education for women. In reference to business classes opening at the University of Deseret, Young announced in December 1867 that he hoped young and middle-aged students, male and female, could learn the art of bookkeeping and acquire a good mercantile education.<sup>63</sup> Young's general epistle to Church members for January-February 1868 applauded the admission of women to the school:

---

<sup>60</sup>Eliza R. Snow to Prest. B. Young, 10 February 1877, holograph, Brigham Young Correspondence, Church Archives.

<sup>61</sup>Brigham Young sermon, 5 August 1869, in *Deseret News Weekly*, 11 August 1869.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>Brigham Young Unpublished Sermons, ca. 1876-1877, St. George, manuscript, Church Archives; *JD* 12:116 (8 December 1867).

In addition to a knowledge of the elementary branches of education and a thorough understanding of housewifery, we wish the sisters, so far as their inclinations and circumstances may permit, to learn bookkeeping, telegraphy, reporting, typesetting, clerking in stores and banks, and every branch of knowledge and kind of employment suited to their sex and according to their several tastes and capacities. . . . Thus trained, all without distinction of sex, will have an open field, without jostling and oppression, for acquiring all the knowledge and doing all the good their physical and mental capacities and surrounding circumstances will permit.<sup>64</sup>

For Young, a division of community labor among men and women would enable the community to function more efficiently. He saw women particularly better-suited than men to some trades. He had "seen women in the harvest field, ploughing, raking, and making hay." This he found unbecoming: "This hard laborious work belongs to men," he said. But he was sure that a woman could pick up type and make a book. "I know that many arguments are used against this," Young admitted, "and we are told that a woman cannot make a coat, vest or a pair of pantaloons. I dispute this. . . . Tell me they can not pull a thread tight enough, and that they can not press hard enough to press a coat, it is all folly and nonsense." Young liked to see women involved in telegraphy and clerking, because he could not abide "great big, fat lazy men" doing such light work. Besides, he observed, "a woman can write as well as a man, and spell as well as a man, and better."<sup>65</sup>

"Keep the ladies in their proper places," said Young, which he described as "selling tape and calico, setting type, working the telegraph, keeping books, &c."<sup>66</sup> In addition Young actively encouraged the movement of women into some professional fields, especially medicine. In 1873 Bathsheba Smith reported that "the President had suggested to her that three women from each ward be chosen to form a class for studying physiology and obstetrics."<sup>67</sup> A few weeks later Eliza R. Snow declared that "President Young is requiring the sisters to get students of Medicine. He wants a good many to get a classical education, and then get a degree for Medicine. . . . If they cannot meet their own expenses, we have means of doing so."<sup>68</sup> For several years Young had been teaching that women should attend to the health of their sex.

---

<sup>64</sup>General Epistle, January-February 1868, manuscript, p. 26. Brigham Young Circular Letters, Church Archives.

<sup>65</sup>*JD* 16:16, 21 (7 April 1873).

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>67</sup>*Woman's Exponent* 2 (1 August 1873):35.

<sup>68</sup>"An Address by Miss Eliza R. Snow. . . , August 14, 1873," *Woman's Exponent* 2 (15 September 1873):63.



With the influx of educated gentile doctors following the Civil War and the coming of the railroad, Young realized the Latter-day Saints would need professional doctors in order to remain self-sustaining.

Romania Bunnell Pratt, the first Mormon woman to get professional training under this program, returned to Utah from the Woman's Medical College in New York after her freshman year there. Her finances were depleted and so she paid a visit to President Young who instructed Eliza R. Snow to "see to it that the Relief Societies furnish Sister Pratt with the necessary money to complete her studies." This encouragement came in spite of the fact that Romania had to leave her young children with her own mother in order to complete the training. "We need her here," said Young, "and her talents will be of great use to this people."<sup>69</sup> Having graduated from the Woman's Medical College at Philadelphia, Dr. Pratt returned to Utah in 1877 and announced her intention to practice as well as teach courses in anatomy, physiology, and obstetrics. She later served as resident surgeon of the Deseret Hospital, a hospital founded by the Relief Society as a result of her commitment to the obstetrical care of women and the training of nurses and midwives.

Young also encouraged the movement of women into journalism. When Louisa Lula Greene approached him about commencing a newspaper for Mormon women he gave her the requisite sanction and the *Woman's Exponent*, a semimonthly tabloid, was born. Over a forty-two year period the paper was an outlet for the journalistic and literary endeavors of Mormon women. Young showed an interest in involving women in higher education, appointing Martha Jane Knowlton Coray to a three-member board of directors for Brigham Young Academy when the school opened under his direction in 1875. Two years later he named Ida Ione Cook as one of three trustees for the proposed Brigham Young College in Logan. Cook had just lost the position of Cache County Superintendent of Schools because territorial laws did not allow women to hold public office.<sup>70</sup>

Ever concerned with order Young never stopped prescribing a sphere of activity for women, but over a period of years the sphere he prescribed became wider and wider. During the last decade of his life Young taught that home and family were not the only means whereby a woman could make a contribution to the king-

---

<sup>69</sup>"A Biographical Sketch of R. B. Pratt," *Young Woman's Journal* 2 (September 1891):534.

<sup>70</sup>See Bennion, "The *Woman's Exponent*;" also Jill Mulvey, "The Two Miss Cooks: Pioneer Professionals for Utah Schools," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43 (Fall 1974): 396-409.

dom. "We believe that women are useful, not only to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies," he said,

but that they should stand behind the counter, study law or physic, or become good bookkeepers and be able to do the business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large.<sup>71</sup>

The status of Mormon women decidedly improved during the administration of President Brigham Young. His reorganization of the Relief Society launched women into an era of public activity that involved them in business and gave them new economic status in a community that was itself concerned with economic identity. Within Mormonism's social order where women had previously held no offices, they gained position and visibility as leaders in organizations for women and children. Though women were clearly not admitted to the priesthood, they began to share some of its influence over women through disbursement of funds and counsel at general, stake, and ward levels. It was during this same period that Utah women were granted the elective franchise, though the extent to which Young may have influenced the territorial legislature in passage of the February 1870 act is not clear. He never publicly acknowledged that women were receiving rights long since due to them.<sup>72</sup>

While some Mormon women celebrated Young's advocacy of women's rights, he did not, Henry Ward Beecher-like, latch on to the nineteenth century feminist movement. Most of its ideals were not in conflict with Mormonism and Young did not discourage the involvement of prominent Relief Society women in the national campaign for women's rights. Certainly he felt free to borrow ideas and rhetoric from the movement: women were capable of doing many things tradition had made the work of men; it was time to awaken women to their possibilities. With Young's endorsement and prodding Mormon women joined their American sisters in attending universities, providing medical care for women, running telegraph offices, and staffing a money-making organization that contributed to their church's needs. Yet while Mormon women, and sometimes their national contemporaries, celebrated these advances as feminist victories, Brigham Young never did. His motive in giving opportunity to women was not to move them toward equality with or independence from men.

---

<sup>71</sup>JD 13:61 (18 July 1869).

<sup>72</sup>Beverly Beeton in "Woman Suffrage in the American West, 1869-1896" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1976), pp. 56-58, suggests that the motivation behind the granting of suffrage to Utah women was a pragmatic political consideration rather than a commitment to woman's inherent rights.



Yet Young's lack of adherence to the feminist creed does not mark him an oppressor of women. Young was for his people a prophet and seer, a seer whose ever-present vision and motivation was the Kingdom of God, a holy family-community where individuals did not exist independently of one another. He proclaimed that the priesthood order restored to Latter-day Saints prescribed a system of interdependence through which members working for the common good were individually benefited. The question is whether or not the system he administered did in fact benefit women by encouraging their growth and development.

It would seem that Young's strong emphasis on men and women sustaining the patriarchal order within the family unit did not dramatically forward the advancement of Mormon women. It reiterated the importance of the traditional order within the non-traditional plural marriage system, and while it provided some women with security it offended and confused others. Had order been Young's only concern Mormon women would have been stifled, but Young's predilection for charting the organization was offset if not overshadowed by his commitment to put the organization to work. He used available human resources by distributing responsibilities at every level of the governmental system.

Through the 1850s and '60s Young called upon women to assume responsibility at the family level, to use their personal resources in maintaining households and nurturing Zion's rising generation. But in the years following the Civil War the Mormon family-community demanded additional resources to stave off the growing economic, social, and political influence of non-Mormons. Without deemphasizing the importance of motherhood, Young was quick to shift available female resources to organizational levels other than the family. Relief Societies were formed in every ward and various programs for them, including home industry and commission-cooperatives, grain storage, and obstetrical training, were administered by women working at a general level. In proportion to Young's increased use of women as vital resources, the kingdom grew and the women grew. The hierarchically ordered system of interdependence did allow for woman's development, and applause to Brigham Young for maximizing the system's paradoxical possibilities is long overdue.