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*Women and Mormonism: Historical and
Contemporary Perspectives*

Reviewed by Amy Hoyt

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Book Reviews

Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman, eds. *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Amy Hoyt

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THIS COLLECTION OF TWENTY-ONE PAPERS given at the 2012 conference “Women and the LDS Church: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives” brings together some of the brightest scholars working in a variety of disciplines on the study of Mormon women. The contributors to the volume employ varied methodological and ideological approaches to the topic of Mormon women’s agency. Holbrook and Bowman have organized the book chronologically and methodologically, grouping the papers into four categories: historical methodology, historical narrative, contemporary social sciences, and contemporary personal perspectives. One of the volume’s strengths is that it assembles a wide range of voices to weigh in on Mormon women and agency. As such, it is one of the most diverse books on Mormon women to date.

The opening chapter by Catherine Brekus on the historical agency of Mormon women anchors what follows because nearly every subsequent contributor references her work on that topic. Brekus’s essay asks historians to include Mormon women in their work without portraying them as either “deluded, downtrodden slaves or fiercely independent matriarchs” (p. 16). Brekus makes an important critique here: reducing Mormon women to caricatures of their deeply complex lives is problematic. I also appreciate that Brekus attempts to reimagine historical

agency by suggesting seven aspects that a new definition of agency should have in order to understand a range of agentic practices in which Mormon women engage. Brekus encourages scholars to develop a nuanced portrait of individual and communal agency along a continuum of power bounded by structures. Brekus is correct in calling on scholars to offer complexity to the female Mormon living in the past and offers helpful suggestions on how to think of agency in less bipolar terms.

However, Brekus unintentionally replicates the very notion she is asking scholars to abandon. While she insists that all actions are agentic regardless of whether they sustain religious structures or break them down, she simultaneously critiques scholars of history for “exaggerating the agency of Mormon women.” Herein lies the problem: if agency actually constitutes actions that both affirm and oppose religious structures in individual and communal settings, it is impossible to exaggerate a person’s agency. Brekus writes that agency is “not limited to challenging social structures; it also includes reproducing them” (p. 29). If scholars highlight the positive benefits of women’s participation in polygamy without dealing with the less-than-ideal effects of the practice, it is not an exaggeration of agency but rather a myopic focus on what women gain within the polygamous marriage system. This may seem like a minute difference (one perhaps equally problematic), but it reveals just how deeply liberal and progressive politics have become naturalized within the study of gender in North America. This marriage of liberal politics with American feminism has resulted in American feminist scholars privileging autonomy over community and empowerment over cooperation, particularly for religious women practicing within a highly patriarchal environment.¹

Many contributors to the volume refer to Brekus’s definition of Mormon women’s agency, resulting in a type of “Brekusification” of the discussion surrounding that topic. While they utilize aspects of Brekus’s definition of agency that I also find helpful, by not examining the efficacy

1. Saba Mahmood, *Saba Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

of her entire construction of Mormon women's historical agency, they risk allowing her definition to stand as the definition of agency. Thus a key task for scholars of Mormon women is clarifying the theoretical category of agency. A useful definition of Mormon women's agency needs to include a discussion of the effects of practicing agency in both historical and contemporary methodologies and how agency is practiced (enacted). Scholars of Mormonism and gender should critically engage proposed definitions in order to refine them and push the category of agency toward a meaningful definition that best represents the women they study. This will take time and significant debate. Brekus has given us one definition; we must interrogate it with rigorous debate and propose many more definitions until we find one that usefully describes the women we seek to understand.

Brekus's unintentional oversight reveals a much larger problem in the field of religious studies: historians and theologians typically do not let their work inform one another. This is particularly true in the field of Mormon studies. The work that feminist theologians have done on the theoretical and theological category of agency is overlooked because of the disconnect between these two subfields.² This fractured relationship within Mormon studies stems partly from the risk involved with "doing" theology, particularly feminist theology, and has encouraged scholars of Mormon women to align themselves with a historical method. As scholars, our methodology should reflect the lives of the women we study; and, arguably, theology informs Mormon women's lives as much as, if not more than, historical practices. Mormon studies will never obtain an accurate picture of Mormon women if we do not include theology within the conversation.

Jonathan A. Stapley's chapter, "Women and Mormon Authority," offers an analysis of how women's authority has shifted over time and is certainly a nod to feminist theology. Stapley introduces the concept of different aspects of Mormon women's authority: liturgical, priestly, and ecclesiastical authority, which are all understood in relation to a

2. Amy Hoyt, "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women," *Feminist Theology* 16/1 (2007).

cosmological priesthood. This is a helpful way of seeing how spiritual gifts were authorized for women in the early church; it is also helpful for understanding the changes that women's authority underwent over time.

The most compelling essays in this volume implore scholars to critically engage with Mormon women who are ethnically and racially diverse, as well as with those who live outside North America. These chapters remind readers that research that does not take into account the questions and realities of these women is merely replicating colonial structures by positioning scholars' realities as the dominant narrative of Mormon women.

Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye's outstanding essay, "Culture and Agency in Mormon Women's Lives," examines the relationship between culture and agency for LDS Asian immigrants living in North America and Canada. Inouye calls on scholars of Mormon women to resist placing American Mormon women at the center of all scholarship, since these women cannot and do not accurately represent the majority of Mormon women. I second Inouye's insistence that scholars reach beyond North America to frame their discussions, questions, and theories regarding Mormon women. Scholarship on North American Mormon women is inadequate for drawing general conclusions about Mormon women and is almost completely irrelevant to the majority of Mormon women.

Carine Decoo-Vanwelkenhuysen drives this point home by drawing on both her personal experience and extensive research to demonstrate that the feminist issues that seem essential to North American Mormon feminists are considered passé by Mormon women in Europe. By decentering Mormon women in North America, scholars will be able to more fully understand the lived reality of the majority of Mormon women, as well as the extent to which we risk placing our agenda onto unsuspecting women. As a feminist, I find the reluctance of some women to support feminism hard to come to terms with. As a scholar, I recognize that it is essential to separate my own political agenda from women that I research if I am to accurately reflect their lives and realities. Until feminist scholars allow for the possibility that feminism, particularly feminism based on North American notions

of the liberal human subject, may not adequately address the lives of Mormon women, our scholarship will be irrelevant for the majority of Mormon women who reside outside North America.

Another important chapter in the volume is “A Mormon Woman’s Journey in Sierra Leone,” by Mariama Kallon, with assistance from Riley M. Lorimer. Kallon recounts her experiences as a young woman living through the brutal violence of civil war, including gender-based violence. Kallon’s harrowing and poignant story demonstrates that, for some women, patriarchal religious structures can actually give them hope and a sense of empowerment. Kallon recounts her conversion to the LDS faith and her subsequent knowledge that as a daughter of God she did not need to settle for an abusive man in order to have worth, as many of her women friends in Sierra Leone have done. This is another example of what is at stake; if scholars rely only on a North American feminist model of empowerment, Kallon’s story would not fit the theoretical model.

Women and Mormonism helps orient scholars to the state of the field regarding the study of Mormon women across multiple disciplines and methodologies. It is an important volume and a needed update, offering a glance at the topics currently being grappled with. Holbrook and Bowman have truly helped scholars understand where the field is now situated. They also have encouraged scholars to recognize what is still missing and where we need to be focusing our efforts in order to round out our understanding of Mormon women. Our task now is to create space for scholars working with theological and historical methodologies to engage one another as we decenter North American Mormon women. If we can do this, surely our research will be more nuanced, complex, and interesting. Most importantly, it may be relevant.

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women in Rwanda and South Africa. Amy recently completed a longitudinal ethnographic study of American Latter-day Saint women and is preparing her findings for publication.

Martha Bradley-Evans. *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith/American Prophet, 1839–1844*. Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016.

Reviewed by Richard Lyman Bushman

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MARTHA BRADLEY-EVANS ENCAPSULATES ONE SALIENT THEME of her engaging account of Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo years in the title, *Glorious in Persecution*. Her Joseph is a storyteller, and one of his narratives is about prophethood emerging from persecution. The more he was battered by his enemies, the greater the glory of his calling. “Insults became badges of honor, confirmation that his life was playing out on a mythic stage of opposition” (p. x).

Persecution was not Joseph’s only story. The King Follett sermon, Joseph’s grand account of God and humankind, was another of his captivating tales. Wrapped in these marvelous narratives, people were transported to another realm. The city of Nauvoo became far more than a commercial entrepôt on the Mississippi. The city’s buildings—the temple, the Masonic hall, the Nauvoo Mansion—“became ritualized spaces in but not of the profane world” (pp. 603–4). *Glorious in Persecution* tries to re-create the spell cast by Joseph’s tales of himself and God, and through them, the elevation of the mundane to the spiritual and supernal.

In the preface, Bradley-Evans tells us that she has relied on the Nauvoo volumes of the classic seven-volume *History of the Church*, an unusual choice these days. The *History* has been discredited because it consists of a blend of many sources, including other diaries and letters, as if they were entries from Joseph Smith’s personal journal. In defense of the