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Honors Thesis

WOMEN OF THE SCRIPTURES IN THE RELIEF SOCIETY MAGAZINE: AN
ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN MAINTAINING GENDER NORMS

by
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ABSTRACT

WOMEN OF THE SCRIPTURES IN THE RELIEF SOCIETY MAGAZINE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN MAINTAINING GENDER NORMS

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Bachelor of Science

This paper explores the language used to discuss women from the scriptures in the *Relief Society Magazine*, an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1914 to 1970. More specifically, this paper analyzes the usage of language in relation to the establishment and maintenance of gender norms, particularly those relating to women. This analysis reveals that the following core themes are frequently present throughout discussions of scriptural women in the magazine: the nature of womanhood, motherhood, wifeness, women's roles in religion, the interaction between patriarchy and equality, and gender-neutral spiritual traits. By exploring these themes, trends that likely shaped women's lives within the LDS Church throughout the twentieth century can be more closely considered, including: the gradual reduction in the autonomy of the Relief Society, the increasing prioritization of priesthood hierarchical structure within the LDS Church, the intentional effort by church leaders to enforce traditional gender roles contrary to societal change, and the pivot away from LDS women's civic participation to a more singular focus on the private sphere.

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Introduction

Gender plays an important role within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. From defining a person's purpose in life to exploring their destiny in the eternities, gender norms actively influence the formulation of theology and the presentation of doctrine. During the 20th century, social change in the United States and increasing centralization of authority within the LDS Church called into question key ideas regarding the role of Latter-day Saint women both spiritually and societally. In response, LDS Church leadership—both the male leaders at the top of Church hierarchy and the female leaders who served specifically over the women—sought to clarify and reinforce ideas about women's roles and identities. They did this in part through the *Relief Society Magazine*, an official publication produced by the Relief Society, the organization within the Church for women. One of the ways this occurred was through the usage of women from the scriptures as examples for study and emulation. In lessons, speeches, poems, and articles, various scriptural women were presented as role models for the women of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that scriptural women were only a small part of the publication. As the periodical for the Relief Society, it served as a “catch-all” source that helped keep the women united, containing a wide range of subject matter including church news, current societal events, recipes, fashion tips, advertisements, and doctrinal discussions on a variety of topics. Still, because mentions of scriptural women were nonetheless a presence throughout the magazine's history in a variety of different ways, they still serve as a valuable focus for analysis.

An analysis of the mentions of scriptural women revealed different trends present throughout the magazine's history. The gradual reduction in the autonomy of the Relief Society was one major trend, coupled with the increasing prioritization of priesthood hierarchical structure within the LDS Church, ultimately culminating in an emphasis on

women's role as supporters of the priesthood. The intentional effort by church leaders to enforce traditional gender roles contrary to societal change also manifested as a strong trend throughout the magazine's history, essentially constructing an ideal image of female identity for women to follow. Lastly, the pivot away from LDS women's civic participation to a more singular focus on the private sphere ran parallel with the other themes as they mutually reinforced one another. By analyzing these trends within the empirical data, I explore potential motivations of authors and leaders while also assessing the corresponding influence on female members of the time period. Thus, in this paper, I analyze the language used to discuss and refer to scriptural women within the *Relief Society Magazine* by identifying the major themes surrounding gender that reoccurred throughout the magazine: the inherent nature of womanhood, the importance of motherhood, the nature of wifehood, the role of women in religion, the tension between patriarchy and equality, and, as a point of contrast, gender-neutral spiritual teachings. Additionally, I consider the corresponding impact that these themes may have had on the maintenance of gender norms in the 20th century through a consideration of the contexts of society generally and the LDS Church specifically.

Background of the *Relief Society Magazine*

In order to establish an understanding of the significance of the *Relief Society Magazine* and the role it played in its readers' lives, it is first essential to discuss its parent organization, the Relief Society, and the church within which that organization exists—namely, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith established The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the LDS Church, in April 1830 in Fayette, New York. Smith claimed he was restoring the same church that Jesus Christ had established on the Earth during his

mortal ministry.¹ Although leaders and members of the LDS Church considered the faith as a part of the family of Christian denominations, it was distinctive from its inception for a number of reasons. For the purposes of this paper, two reasons are particularly relevant. First, members of the LDS Church claim that their church is led by a living prophet, similar to the prophets of old found in the biblical text, who possesses priesthood keys, or the authority of God, to act in God's name.² The second distinctive belief is that the Church claims revelation, or the revealing of God's will to human beings, is ongoing, both in guiding the decisions and doctrines of the Church as well as the lives of individual members.³

These two distinctive beliefs that distinguish the LDS Church from many other religions underneath the Christian umbrella are not only central to the faith's core doctrine, but also to the existence of the Relief Society. The Relief Society was founded in 1842 after a group of LDS women led by Sarah M. Kimball approached Joseph Smith, who was serving as prophet, with the intention of forming a women's organization for charity work.⁴ Such organizations were fairly common for women during that time period in the United States.⁵ Upon receiving their request, Smith told the women that God had "something better for them"—an opportunity to be organized into a divinely authorized institution where teaching, service, and preparation for life after death could occur.⁶ While the early years of the Relief Society's development were filled

¹ "About Us: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/about-us?lang=eng>.

² "Prophets," Newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/prophets>.

³ "Prophets," Newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/prophets>.

⁴ "Relief Society: Women's Organizations Research Guide," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 2020, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/training/womens-auxiliary-organizations/relief-society>.

⁵ "'Something Better': The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," in *Daughters in My Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), chap. 3, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/daughters-in-my-kingdom-the-history-and-work-of-relief-society/something-better-the-female-relief-society-of-nauvoo?lang=eng>.

⁶ "Something Better," chap. 2.

with difficulty, including a disbandment of the organization for a period of years, it is sufficient for the purposes of this paper to say that by the early 1900s, women in the LDS Church were actively participating, serving, and learning within the organization's framework.⁷

By the early 1910s and 1920s, the Relief Society oversaw a large part of the Church's social service activities.⁸ The organization was also active in the fight for women's suffrage until the passage of the nineteenth amendment in the United States in 1920. Suffrage and social service activities allowed women to act upon their spiritual convictions through civic participation. Simultaneously, LDS leaders began to focus more on the efficiency of the Church as it grew within the United States and in other countries around the world. A major element of these efforts included a direct and clear initiative to increasingly centralize authority, which continued throughout the 20th century.⁹ As was mentioned earlier, when the Relief Society was established, Joseph Smith had presented it as divinely authorized. While still technically under the direction of male leaders at the highest levels of Church leadership, the women were granted the authority to lead, manage, and make independent decisions regarding budgets, property, and projects that fell under their organization's purview.¹⁰ However, with the increasing focus on the centralization of authority, LDS women's activities became gradually more limited to the domestic sphere. Even though the Relief Society had thus far been an organization that encouraged social and political participation, the focus seemed to gradually shift almost exclusively to women's roles as wives and mothers.¹¹

⁷ "Something Better," chap. 2.

⁸ Colleen McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47.

⁹ Kathryn Shirts, "The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model," *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 2 (April 2018): 104-139, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jmormhist.44.2.0104>.

¹⁰ Jean Anne Waterstradt, "Relief Society's Golden Years: The Magazine," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 99-107, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45227603>.

¹¹ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 66.

Many of the changes that occurred within the Relief Society and in the LDS Church at large in relation to women appeared to be shaped by shifts in American culture. As was mentioned earlier, in the lead-up to 1920, Latter-day Saints were actively working in favor of women's suffrage.¹² In the decade that followed, progressive era ideals were tremendously influential for Latter-day Saint women as LDS leaders such as Susa Young Gates and Leah Widtsoe urged female members to apply scientific principles to homemaking and be civically involved, including through the social services program run by the Relief Society.¹³ Then, from the early 1930s into the mid-1940s, Latter-day Saints were influenced by a national shift in which female-led charity efforts were sidelined in favor of projects run by men.¹⁴ This change, driven by men who believed the Great Depression was too large a crisis for women to handle, caused the arena of charitable work which had previously been led by women to be taken over by male leaders.¹⁵ It is possible that this national transition accelerated the decision of male LDS Church leaders to consolidate women's activities more directly under centralized authority. Still, women were involved in their communities, both in the LDS context and on a national scale. Nevertheless, these efforts never again approached the level of civic engagement by LDS women in previous decades. By the mid-1940s, the construction of a feminine image that would stand against the cultural push toward women entering the workplace became a priority of the Church.¹⁶

While taking jobs to support the war effort had been viewed as patriotic, Church leaders felt that women permanently entering any male sphere would lead to the decline of society and

¹² <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/training/library/latter-day-saint-womens-suffrage-research-guide/suffrage-and-relief-society>

¹³ Kathryn Shirts, "The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe.," 109, 129.

¹⁴ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 57.

¹⁵ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 57.

¹⁶ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 64.

thus actively countered social trends to that effect.¹⁷ Women were to focus on motherhood and activities that mimicked motherhood, deferring to male authority in the home and at Church. Between 1950 and 1970, American women were awakening to a feminine identity crisis, inspired by works such as the *Feminine Mystique*.¹⁸ However, until 1970, the image of the ideal woman constructed by the Church served to largely suppress any overt efforts to change LDS gender roles. LDS women were, for the most part, busily involved with their families and local congregations.¹⁹ Thus, the Relief Society helped establish and maintain the culture within the church surrounding women, their identities, and the importance of family life despite external pressures to the contrary.

The *Relief Society Magazine*, published from 1914 to 1970 as an official publication of the LDS Church, existed throughout this period of change and centralization.²⁰ Given the gendered nature of the transition, with male leaders consolidating authority and female leaders correspondingly losing control over the activities of the Relief Society, discussions of gender roles were fraught with tension throughout the magazine's history. The termination of the magazine's publication eventually occurred when male leaders consolidated it into a general publication for all adults of the Church.²¹ However, during the time it existed, the *Relief Society Magazine* remained one of the main arenas where female autonomy continued to be expressed within the LDS Church. The publication itself contained reports on activities at local and general levels of the church, standardized lessons to be used by women in Relief Society classes, creative works, advertisements, messages from male and female church leaders, and domestic guidance.

¹⁷ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 67.

¹⁸ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 66.

¹⁹ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 66.

²⁰ Patricia Ann Mann, "A History of the Relief Society Magazine: 1914-1970" (Masters diss., Brigham Young University, 1971), 2.

²¹ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 92.

The breadth of topics covered by the publication provides a window into LDS women's lives and priorities, and the longevity of the magazine allows a view into how ideas about gender and women's roles changed over time within the framework of the LDS Church. Since women managed, published, organized, and were the main writers in the magazine, the publication provided a powerful outlet for women's voices and thoughts. Thus, the magazine offers a unique view of this period of LDS history, in addition to the perspectives provided by male authorities and male church historians of the time period.

Given that there was not only immense organizational change but also doctrinal development in the areas of priesthood, family, and leadership within the LDS Church from 1914 through 1970, an additional, less male-centric perspective is especially valuable for the sake of a more complete historical narrative.²² During this time period, the Church shifted from a collection of various organizations, each operating relatively independently, to a hierarchical structure governed clearly and directly by priesthood authority.²³ This transformation was intentional, as the Priesthood Correlation Program, which had been established in the early 1900s with the aim of increasing doctrinal consistency and organizational efficiency, played an increasingly significant role in Church structure as the decades progressed. In fact, the committee members involved with Correlation—as the program was referred to colloquially—eventually began to monitor lesson plans across the Church, including those in the *Relief Society Magazine*, and increasingly reinforced traditional doctrines about male leadership while taking control of programs that had previously been managed independently by Church organizations like the Relief Society.²⁴ Thus, while certain male voices are present in the magazine in the form of

²² Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²³ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 92.

²⁴ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 92.

featured speeches and quotations, this presence is reflective of the reality of LDS women's lives during this time period as they operated within increasingly hierarchical channels of authority. Thus, the magazine itself is a microcosm of the church's development in the same time period, thereby serving as a valuable historical resource both in content and in structure.

Given the amount of change in both the LDS Church and in society at large during the 20th century, LDS women were looking for direction about living their lives and navigating social transitions. The magazine sought to provide this guidance through its wide variety of content with the most direct advice from church leadership coming through the lessons and talks. In turn, members, often unintentionally, demonstrated how this advice from their leaders impacted them through the stories, poems, and play scripts they wrote and submitted to the magazine. Thus, the magazine may be seen in some respects as a conversation between the leadership and body of the female members of the Church.

One of the ways in which leaders and members alike sought to strengthen women's understanding of how the gospel should be applied to female contexts was through the examples of the women of the scriptures. Therefore, an examination of how these scriptural women were discussed offers an opportunity to explore how ideas about womanhood were constructed and presented during this period of immense change. Since the *Relief Society Magazine* was an official publication of the LDS Church, approved by leaders who the membership believed to be called of God, the words and language used to describe and teach about scriptural women was meaningful for readers as they formed their view of women's roles. Given the LDS Church's belief in continuing revelation, reinterpretation of scriptural women could occur frequently within the magazine's pages and still be accepted by the female members. Thus, scriptural women provided leaders with an opportunity to teach with canonized examples that individual

members could find within their own set of scriptures.

Despite the opportunity presented by the women of the scriptures, mentions of these women did decrease over time throughout the magazine's history. As the church became more focused on promoting obedience to male authority figures, greater focus was placed on how leaders taught about womanhood than the actual examples of scriptural women.²⁵ This was especially true as the scope of the Relief Society narrowed. In the early decades of the magazine, the diverse array of experiences had by various scriptural women supported the more outward-focused civic engagement of the organization; however, when the organization's focus was redirected solely on the domestic sphere, fewer women of the scriptures fit directly into that narrower scope.

Notably, Latter-day Saints did not look solely to the Bible for scriptural role models. Since Latter-day Saints also claim additional books of scripture as part of their canon—The Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Covenants—women from these texts could also be used as role models and examples. However, very few women are mentioned in any of these three additional books of scripture. Therefore, other than a few women from The Book of Mormon, most of the women of the scriptures who were referenced in the *Relief Society Magazine* came from the Bible.

Literature Review

Throughout this research project, the search for sources that offer context, background, and analysis of the *Relief Society Magazine* has yielded astonishingly few results. This is in large part due to a general lack of research surrounding 20th century Latter-day Saint women. While

²⁵ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 108.

19th century Latter-day Saint women have more frequently been researched due to their involvement in polygamy, the suffrage movement, and the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, their 20th century counterparts have frequently been overlooked. While there are no definite reasons for this trend, one reasonable conjecture is that, as historians have followed the trend of the Church itself, a greater focus on male leadership and hierarchical structure has decreased the interest and focus on LDS women. Thus, researchers of 20th century Church developments might be less interested in understanding the Relief Society, including its magazine, if they see the organization as having progressively less influence over the Church as a whole throughout the period.

Colleen McDannell, a professor of Religious Studies and History at the University of Utah, wrote the book *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy* seemingly in response to this tremendous gap in research and understanding. The book, though containing one chapter on the early days of the Church to provide a foundational overview, is mostly focused on charting the course of LDS women from the end of polygamy to the 21st century. Its extensive exploration of the nuances of religious life for female church members during the 1900s includes analysis of how gender roles, national politics, church doctrine, and policy changes shaped—and were shaped by—LDS women. Due to the large period of time covered by the book, direct mentions of the *Relief Society Magazine* are few and far between, but the tracking of social movements and church centralization during the years of the magazine's publication provide powerful insights into its content.

A more direct assessment of what the magazine contained can be found in the dissertation of BYU master's degree candidate Patricia Ann Mann entitled "A History of the Relief Society Magazine, 1914-1970." Mann's research, published in 1971 immediately following the

magazine's termination, serves two valuable purposes. First, it attempts to thoroughly assess the magazine's content as well as how the publication was shaped by changes in LDS leadership. Second, it serves as a valuable historical snapshot of how women felt after the magazine was ended, since Mann herself was an LDS woman who shared those sentiments in her thesis. While providing a much-needed focus on the *Relief Society Magazine*, the breadth of Mann's project, seeking to assess over 50 years of content encompassing a variety of subjects, necessarily limited its depth. Mann's thesis therefore serves as a summary of the magazine's content, impact, and influences, but it does not address the role of the women of the scriptures within its pages.

There are a few other sources that briefly discuss the magazine and its impact. A speech given by BYU professor emerita Jean Anne Waterstradt and later published in the independent LDS publication *Dialogue* offers a brief, 9 page reflection on how the author's mother viewed and valued the magazine. Despite its sentimental style, the speech does explore how deeply impactful the magazine could be in the lives of individual Latter-day Saint women. Another *Dialogue* article, "'Changing Times Bring Changing Conditions': Relief Society, 1960 to the Present," written by researcher Tina Hatch, offers a very brief assessment of the emotional distress women felt when the magazine was terminated. Additionally, an article published in the *Journal of Mormon History* by independent scholar Kathryn H. Shirts, "The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model," discusses how some of the core ideas regarding women's relationship to spiritual authority that manifested throughout the *Relief Society Magazine* were initially developed. While each of these sources offer valuable insights, they by no means adequately fill the void in 20th century scholarship on Latter-day Saint women.

In this particular research, I have continued the efforts begun in the aforementioned publications to bring more academic attention and analysis to this vital period in LDS history. As has already been discussed, the 20th century was a period of sociocultural change both within the Church and in the United States at large. Many of the ideas that developed during this time period have likely had a profound impact on 21st century life, even to the present day. This particular study of the language surrounding scriptural women and its impact on gender norms exists at the intersections of gender, religion, and history, and is thereby relevant to the fields of gender studies, sociology, American history, religious history, and more specific historical and sociological studies of the LDS Church. By focusing on women of the scriptures, I analyze how doctrines and cultural trends were projected onto them so that modern LDS women would correspondingly follow the guidance of 20th century Church leaders. Since this outcome was at the heart of the directives for the Relief Society organization as a whole as well as its magazine, the findings of this study offer potential insights on a much larger scale into the experience of 20th century LDS women as they navigated their religious lives.

Methods

To establish the initial list of scriptural women to consider in the *Relief Society Magazine*, I consulted with a BYU religion professor who teaches a course on women in the scriptures and took a class on scriptural women from a BYU Ancient Near Eastern Studies professor. I then gained access to the entire collection of digitized editions of the *Relief Society Magazine* through the Harold B. Lee Library Relief Society Magazine Digital Project at Brigham Young University. Using the search feature provided by the project, I looked for each individual woman or group of women found on my list, with 77 women or groups of women researched in total. For each new search, I entered the name of the woman or a term identifying the

group of women. I then looked through the results generated by the term, extracted from all 57 years of magazine issues. These results ranged from poems and theatrical scripts based around the women to brief mentions of them in lessons and stories. After organizing the results into spreadsheets, with one spreadsheet page for each woman or group, I then began with open coding, recording the themes and main ideas of each collected excerpt. Following this step, I analyzed the results of the open coding and identified major themes that had emerged throughout the data. During this process, a BYU professor cross-coded my data to ensure accuracy and completeness. She listed her notes alongside mine, allowing me to analyze areas where I had overlooked particular themes. Through assessing both sets of notes, I was able to use the identified trends in the empirical data to develop a coding guide, focusing primarily on the themes which related to gender. This resulted in the formulation of 7 codes: womanhood, motherhood, wifehood, women's roles in religion, gender equality, promotion of patriarchy, and gender-neutral characteristics.

After creating the coding guide, I recoded the collected excerpts from the *Relief Society Magazine*, specifically looking at the lines of each entry which directly discussed the women from the scriptures (as opposed to surrounding content). From there, I was able to sort and analyze the data by each of the main themes represented by the codes. I ensured qualitative reliability through the aforementioned cross-coding by the BYU professor, as well as through research on my part into the time period when the magazine was published, particularly with regards to the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also brought tacit knowledge of the Church's culture to the project, having been a lifelong member of the religion. As an added measure, I spoke with multiple women who lived during the time of the *Relief*

Society Magazine's publication and asked them about their memories and encounters with it in order to gain a more complete picture.

Findings & Discussion

Given that ideas regarding gender roles within the LDS Church in the 20th century were based heavily on the increasing focus on the nuclear family culminating in the 1950s, it is unsurprising to see the themes used to discuss women's identities and responsibilities. First and foremost, womanhood itself was built on traditional American understandings of femininity, situating women within the domestic sphere, and echoing the ideals of Victorian motherhood—purity, gentleness, and nurturing care.²⁶ These traits led naturally into a consideration of motherhood as a key theme of female identity, either as a role to be pursued or a role to be embodied and lived fully, depending on a woman's phase of life. Coupled with motherhood was the essential role of wifedom, though "wife" as a title was but a forerunner to that of "mother." In marriage, women found their place in relation to the authority structure: men, as possessors of priesthood authority, or the ability to act in the name of God, within the LDS context were the primary leaders both at church and at home. As spouses, women worked together with men in a complicated relationship: they were in a partnership in which both individuals were generally presented as equally valued but were not equally authoritative.²⁷

In a religious context, women's roles were again fraught with nuance. As disciples of Jesus Christ within the LDS Church, women had access to spiritual gifts, service opportunities, and various rituals used for worship, such as prayer and baptism. At the same time, they were limited in the leadership roles they could occupy, and they did not have the authority to administer ordinances to others. Here again, a clear tension existed in the lived reality of 20th

²⁶ Kathryn Shirts, "The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe," 128.

²⁷ McDannell, *Sister Saints*.

century Latter-day Saint women. This tension is perhaps most clearly represented by two other contradictory, yet coexistent, themes: gender equality and the promotion of patriarchy.

Depending on the time, context, and varied views of different LDS leaders, a woman could be given conflicting messages regarding her place in relation to the men around her. This was especially true during the run of the *Relief Society Magazine* from 1914 to 1970: as time progressed, women's roles within the Church seemed to diminish, while their roles within society seemed to expand.²⁸ Reconciling that tension was complicated for members and leaders alike. Yet, despite all the focus on gender, women in the Relief Society were also often given general counsel which was equally applicable to men: guidance regarding faith, sacrifice, service, and other doctrinal themes. Understanding which topics remained gender neutral is incredibly instructive because it shows the limits of the gendered nature of LDS theology.

All of these various themes were manifested in discussions of scriptural women. How they were presented, the contexts in which they were brought forth, and the emphasis—or lack thereof—paid to particular figures all provide insights into how 20th century leaders and members were actively constructing ideas about gender within LDS theology. While overall trends can be identified, it is important to note that the entire history of the magazine reveals the complexity of these ideas and a variety of opinions held by individual leaders and members. Thus, this research provides a sketch, rather than a detailed snapshot, of how women in the scriptures were used to explore ideas about gender in the way they were discussed throughout the *Relief Society Magazine*.

The sections that follow offer a thematic analysis of the exploration of gendered norms, assessing the aforementioned themes in the following order: womanhood, motherhood,

²⁸ McDannell, *Sister Saints*.

wifehood, women's roles in religion, the interaction of gender equality and patriarchy, and gender-neutral teachings. This order was intentionally chosen and thus deserves explanation. Since ideas about womanhood were found both in the summation of these themes and also in direct dialogue about specific attributes and characteristics thought to be innately feminine, it comes first with the intent of laying a foundation for the themes that follow. Chief among them is motherhood, the most strongly emphasized role found in discussions of women from the scriptures. Wifehood follows motherhood because it is emphasized to a lesser degree, ironically secondary to the motherhood it enables. Since women's roles as wives and mothers were often presented in spiritual terms, women's roles in religion is the theme that follows the previous two, building upon the ideas already presented while also speaking more directly to the place of women within the institutional structure of the Church. Since women's presence within the Church places them directly beneath, but also in collaboration with, their male counterparts, the discussion of the interaction between equality and patriarchy is a helpful follow-up to the prior theme. Lastly, gender neutral teachings are discussed as a point of contrast, placing limits on the gendered themes which have already been explored. Through this particular organization, the themes are meant to build on and inform one another.

Womanhood

The idea of womanhood itself, though shaped by the presence of the other gendered themes, was also explored directly in the magazine through the examples of women from the scriptures. The examples were often used to present selflessness as one of the most dominant ideals of womanhood. This was reinforced by the motto of the Relief Society itself, which had been selected only a few years before the *Relief Society Magazine* began: "Charity Never Faileth."²⁹ This focus on caring for others rather than one's own self-interest could then set the

²⁹ "Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and

stage for the other themes that were presented. If women were conditioned to believe that the core of their identity should be selflessness, that could then inform the way they engaged in motherhood, wifehood, and religious service. It might even have convinced them to be more accepting of patriarchy, especially when they were convinced it was in the best interest of the Church as a whole. “Self-fulfillment, the very core of life, is realized as we give of ourselves,” one author stated in an essay on motherhood that referenced Eve.³⁰ In a lesson published in 1916, church leader Orson Whitney explained: “chief among [Eve’s] characteristics was that of womanliness. She was quite content to see her own life mirrored in that of her husband and her sons.”³¹ Though this statement seems to be referring to Eve’s role as a wife and mother, there is something more to it that hints at the author’s conception of womanhood: Eve’s contentment is found in turning her gaze and focus to another, rather than her own selfhood. In a message entitled, “The Spirit of Helpfulness,” a member of the general Relief Society leadership wrote about Ruth as an example: “For our purpose let us consider the story of Ruth, and learn from it the true spirit of helpfulness. Read it and find lessons of faith, self-sacrifice, and devotion,” she taught.³² A theological lesson on Ruth reinforced this same idea, teaching readers that “there can be no doubt that the central characteristic of Ruth’s nature is devotion.”³³ This devotion caused Ruth to prioritize Naomi’s needs over her own, and likewise, the 20th century women of the Relief Society were encouraged to do the same in their own lives. The selflessness of

Work of Relief Society,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 2021, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/daughters-in-my-kingdom-the-history-and-work-of-relief-society/charity-never-faileth?lang=eng>.

³⁰ Leona Fetzer Wintch, “A Challenge to Mothers,” *Relief Society Magazine* 46 (1959): 386.

³¹ Orson F. Whitney, “Guide Lessons: Theology and Testimony - Lesson 1: Women of the Bible - Eve,” *Relief Society Magazine* 46 (1959): 548.

³² George A. English, “Utah Dixie’s Pioneers,” *Relief Society Magazine* 14 (1927): 497.

³³ Emmeline B. Wells, “Loyalty,” *Relief Society Magazine* 2 (1915): 548-550.

womanhood prepared them for the work they had been spiritually assigned to “yield to the call of the lonely, the helpless.”³⁴

By focusing on selflessness, womanhood became defined not only by the roles women fulfilled, but also by the extent to which they embraced them. In 1939, one author wrote an article describing how “Hannah, the lowly mother, preparing her only son for the service of the Lord,” and “Esther, the patriotic queen, risking life itself for her people,” both exemplified female excellence.³⁵ Hannah as a mother gave her all by giving her child to God’s service; Esther stopped at nothing to protect her people over herself. In an article on female discipleship, the author cited the service of women during the times of Jesus, explaining how those women had “lodged strangers, relieved the afflicted, [and] diligently followed every good work,” with such specific acts as those offered by “beloved Dorcas who...made clothing for the poor” and “Phebe and Priscilla who opened their homes to the meetings of the saints,” all therefore becoming part “of the lineage of devotion which has characterized noble women of all ages.”³⁶ The framing of scriptural heroines often focused on what they were willing to give—as daughters, mothers, leaders, disciples, and ultimately, as women. This theme existed consistently throughout the magazine. An editorial published in 1963, only a few years before the *Relief Society Magazine* came to an end, asked: “What has changed since Eve brought forth Abel, and Cain, and Seth?...Her role as wife and mother has not changed, nor her attributes nor understanding.”³⁷ Despite the ways that society was changing, with women’s roles expanding gradually into the professional world, Latter-day Saint women were being taught about the immutability of

³⁴ “Guide Lessons: Women of the Bible: Ruth.” *Relief Society Magazine* 3 (1916): 287-288.

³⁵ Maude Beeley Jacob, “Woman As An Interpreter of the Faith,” *Relief Society Magazine* 26 (1939): 486.

³⁶ “We Must Cherish One Another,” *Relief Society Magazine* 49 (1962): 188.

³⁷ Marianne C. Sharp, “Editorial: We Thank Thee,” *Relief Society Magazine* 50 (1963): 827.

womanhood. Scriptural women could therefore serve as the perfect examples for modern women, since the ideal characteristics were considered to be unchanging.

Motherhood

Discussions of the inherent nature of womanhood seem to have led naturally into extensive discussions on the importance of motherhood as well. Women were frequently praised by church leaders for diligently fulfilling their role of being mothers. In such a labor, leaders taught, women would find a sense of purpose and meaning, as long as they “work[ed] with skill and knowledge, and dedicate[d] [them]selves to the lofty calling of motherhood.”³⁸ Mentions of women from the scriptures in the *Relief Society Magazine* reflected the changing perceptions of motherhood throughout the magazine’s history. Women who could be used as maternal examples, especially within the context of their immediate family relationships, made up the majority of the mentions, while women who did not fulfill a mothering role were included with less frequency, especially as time went on. As was discussed earlier in this paper, this reflected the organizational shift in the Relief Society: the early days of the *Relief Society Magazine* were a time when civic participation was a core initiative of the organization, but by the later years of the publication, women were being encouraged to focus on the private world of their own homes and local congregations.³⁹

Even amongst scriptural mothers, the figures that featured the most prominently were those with less controversial elements in their stories. In the case of Sarah, Leah, and Rachel, despite their status as wives of the biblical patriarchs, they appeared less frequently throughout the magazine likely due to their involvement in polygamy. Since Latter-day Saints had practiced polygamy throughout the 19th century, yet were attempting to enter the American mainstream

³⁸ Wintch, “A Challenge to Mothers,” 386.

³⁹ McDannell, *Sister Saints*, 66.

throughout the 20th century, there were intentional efforts to avoid the topic of polygamy.⁴⁰ This distancing from the practice quite possibly had the unintentional consequence of increasing reticence surrounding these complicated biblical figures.

As was the case with discussions of womanhood, the role of motherhood was more than a list of tasks or traits; it was presented as a core part of a woman's inherent identity. As one Relief Society leader explained, "Eve first recognized the work of woman upon the earth—that of bearing seed. Through obedience to this law woman receives her deepest satisfaction and greatest reward."⁴¹ Therefore, women who were presented as examples of ideal mothers also were shown to be emotionally invested in their role. One way this manifested was through profound gratitude. An article written in 1939 highlighting faithful women explained that "it was gratitude for the gift of motherhood that gave Hannah courage to fulfill her promise and prepare her son, Samuel, for God's service."⁴² Given that the author was writing as global affairs were becoming increasingly dangerous in the lead up to World War II, it is unsurprising that the imagery of Hannah preparing her son was being used. Sometimes, gratitude was implied as something that good mothers should feel once they recognized the value of their role. Leah Widtsoe, one of the foundational thinkers behind the idea that motherhood was the equivalent to male priesthood in the balance between the sexes, wrote: "Surely no right-thinking woman could crave more responsibility nor greater proof of innate powers than [motherhood]...Our Father even chose a daughter of Eve to be the earth-Mother and guide of His Only begotten Son, and

⁴⁰ "Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 2021, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/plural-marriage-and-families-in-early-utah?lang=eng>.

⁴¹ Marianne C. Sharp, "Relief Society in the Lives of Latter-day Saint Women," *Relief Society Magazine* 39 (1952): 147.

⁴² Jacob, "Woman As An Interpreter of the Faith," 486.

thus honored womanhood for all time and eternity!”⁴³ There appears to have been an implication, in excerpts such as this one, that women who lacked gratitude for the role of motherhood were therefore flawed or morally incorrect, thus reinforcing the idea that the ideal mother would only give joyous thanks for her position. While this idea manifested from early on within the magazine, it is likely that such a theme was carried forth as the women’s liberation movement began to discourage LDS women from harboring discontent as leaders encouraged them to keep to traditional roles in spite of expanding professional opportunities.

In addition to gratitude, another strong emotion that emotionally invested mothers were shown to have was grief. In mourning the loss of her sons, one woman found solace in the example of Elizabeth, declaring: “I am not the first mother to mourn on bended knee at the side of her son. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist – she had her tray.”⁴⁴ Another similar case of finding solace in scriptural women was found in a comparison to Sariah, one of the few named women in The Book of Mormon. “Mother-heart has spoken to mother-heart; I have comprehended Sariah’s anguish in her fear that her four sons had perished in the wilderness.”⁴⁵ The emotional intensity of motherhood was seen as a key aspect that shaped how women experienced it, explaining in part why it was so central to their lives.

In constructing the image of the ideal mother, writers for the *Relief Society Magazine* focused on scriptural examples that showed not only emotional devotion, but also a commitment to teaching the gospel to their children and preparing them to serve in God’s kingdom. For example, from early in the magazine’s history all the way up until its termination in 1970, references to Hannah emphasized her role as an instiller of gospel principles. In a lesson on

⁴³ Leah D. Widtsoe, “Priesthood and Womanhood,” *Relief Society Magazine* 20 (1933): 597-598.

⁴⁴ Mary Ek Knowles, “Life Eternal,” *Relief Society Magazine* 24 (1937): 769.

⁴⁵ Louise S. Cotterell, “Testimony of the Stick of Joseph,” *Relief Society Magazine* 44 (1957): 820, 822.

responsibility to family, the text urged the teacher to “tell of Hannah and other mothers in Ancient Israel” as examples of women who taught “their children to love and cherish every ordinance of the Gospel.”⁴⁶ In an article on women’s religious responsibilities, Hannah was discussed as the mother who willingly and humbly prepared her son to serve God.⁴⁷ When explaining why Hannah had such deep spiritual conviction, the text offered up motherhood as the source of Hannah’s bravery and devotion shown by her willingness to give her son to God’s service.⁴⁸ As 20th century women prepared their sons for the mission field, Hannah’s example as one who “gave her son to the Lord’s service [as] an expression of her gratitude”⁴⁹ seemed to have been one that the authors of the magazine believed would be immensely inspiring and an effective motivator.

While figures like Hannah fit well into Latter-day Saint cultural narratives that emphasized the importance of motherhood, there were two other figures that were even more commonly used who did not fit quite so obviously. These women were Ruth and Naomi. While Ruth and Naomi were both mothers, their biblical story centers on the relationship between the two of them. Even then, Ruth does not become a mother until the end of the last chapter. It is therefore worth considering why these two women—especially Ruth—were so frequently mentioned during the time period when emphasizing motherhood was a top priority of the LDS Church.

Since Ruth’s biblical story centers on the service she provides to Naomi by accompanying her after the death of their husbands, Ruth was used throughout the magazine’s

⁴⁶ “Work and Business - Teacher’s Topic for April - Our Responsibility to Family and Neighbors,” *Relief Society Magazine* 18 (1931): 179.

⁴⁷ Jacob, “Woman As An Interpreter,” 288.

⁴⁸ Jacob, “Woman As An Interpreter,” 436.

⁴⁹ L. W. N., “Editorial - The Mother and the Missionary,” *Relief Society Magazine* 57 (1970): 580.

history as an example of the selfless service good mothers were expected to provide. In the early 1930s, an article that discussed the church's youth program referred to the young women as the "Gleaners," named after Ruth as the role model. Under the theme of "I will Gather Treasures of Truth," the young women had been urged to discover more about their family history and to gather their own stories of faith-promoting experiences so they could serve their families by helping to strengthen relationships and testimonies, especially once they themselves became mothers.⁵⁰ Together with Naomi, Ruth was featured in an article on human relationships, again presented as an ideal exemplar of loyalty and charity.⁵¹ In a poem about women working hard for the good of others, Ruth was mentioned as the one "who gleaned for Naomi's bread."⁵² A message on the importance of service specifically called out Ruth as a model for "the true spirit of helpfulness" from whom "lessons of faith, self-sacrifice and devotion" could be learned.⁵³ One article on welfare service even compared Ruth to the pioneer women who, "with the strength of their faith, gleaned in the fields."⁵⁴ In a piece on motherhood, the author spoke of a time when her mother visited her so that they could "glean as Ruth had done in the fields of Boaz," thus creating an analogy for the service her mother rendered her.⁵⁵ Here we see that although Ruth was not a mother for most of her biblical story, she was seen as modeling the key attribute of service which mothers were taught to embody. Considering how women's roles were shifting in the Church, with women increasingly seen as supporters of the priesthood, this message encouraging women, and particularly mothers, to willingly serve would have likely fit well with the overall trend.

⁵⁰ Clarissa A. Beesley, "A Leisure Time Program," *Relief Society Magazine* 19 (1932): 76.

⁵¹ "Relief Society Conference," *Relief Society Magazine* 19 (1932): 313.

⁵² Katherine F. Larsen, "All Her Ways Are Peace," *Relief Society Magazine* 39 (1952): 178.

⁵³ Jennie B. Knight, "The Spirit of Helpfulness," *Relief Society Magazine* 20 (1933): 284.

⁵⁴ "The Ripening of the Wheat," *Relief Society Magazine* 48 (1961): 440.

⁵⁵ Alice Colton Smith, "These Things Endure," *Relief Society Magazine* 54 (1967): 326-327.

In addition to being a role model of service, Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law was also presented as an example of both the devotion that should be given to mothers and the devotion that should be given to church leaders which mothers were expected to instill in their children. In a Mother's Day tribute, one priesthood leader explained that though "no language ever used or spoken can impress us with the deep obligation we owe to our mothers," the story in the Book of Ruth did demonstrate "true and genuine affection" which showed "a daughter's love intensified [and] a mother's love dignified and glorified."⁵⁶ Another article praised how "never was the lonely heart of woman comforted more than when Ruth spoke to the sorrowing Naomi" and promised to remain with her.⁵⁷ One story in the magazine referred to a man who shook Prophet Joseph Smith's hand and felt "a thrill" which inspired him "to say like Ruth of old, 'Whither thou goest, I will go.'"⁵⁸ A lesson on the Bible as literature referred to Ruth's story as one that showcased "loyalty and obedience."⁵⁹ The focus on loyalty to church leaders and to one's own family were key themes of the magazine from the 1940s up until 1970. As women were encouraged to focus more on mothering in the private sphere and less on the public sphere, a general shift in the magazine towards the activities of the Relief Society itself and the words of Church leaders also occurred. It is therefore understandable that Ruth would be employed in this manner. Additionally, for women who felt dissatisfied with the reduced autonomy of the Relief Society and the increased focus on priesthood hierarchy, the reminder that devotion to church leaders was an essential virtue might have helped to ensure they and their children supported the transition.

⁵⁶ Joseph Quinney, "Mothers' Day," *Relief Society Magazine* 22 (1935): 311.

⁵⁷ Jacob, "Woman as an Interpreter," 512.

⁵⁸ Quinney, "Mothers' Day," 344.

⁵⁹ "Literature: The Bible as Literature Lesson 8," *Relief Society Magazine* 30 (1943): 138.

In addition to the named women from the scriptures whose stories allowed for emphasis on motherhood, the ultimate archetype of womanhood – the virtuous woman in Proverbs 32– was used to drive home this important womanly role. Though the virtuous woman was only mentioned a couple of times prior to 1930, she appeared in the magazine many times from the 1930s until 1970. Quite often, the scripture verses that referred to her domestic achievements and care of her family were listed as references for lessons on the ideal attributes for mothers. In this way, the verses were often allowed to speak for themselves with limited interpretation. When they were discussed at greater length, it was often to highlight attributes that the women of the Relief Society were urged to acquire. One General Conference address explained that this archetypal figure exemplified “all the virtues—personal chastity, loyalty to those nearest and dearest to her,” as well as “industry, thrift, integrity, kindness, humility, imagination, and faith.” The speaker then explained that “her reward is the one thing most desired by all worthy women,” namely, the praise and adoration of her children and husband.⁶⁰ Indeed, it was the virtuous woman’s role as homemaker, which was inherently linked to her motherhood, that was held highest of all. In a talk given in 1950, Joseph B. Wirthlin taught that Proverbs 31 was applicable to all the women of the Church, since “the most important unit in the Church and in the nation is the home, and [the women] are the homemakers.”⁶¹ Thus, the theme of the time was emphasized clearly. Just as the women of the scriptures were portrayed as exemplary mothers, the women of the modern era were expected to follow in their footsteps.

Wifehood

While LDS teachings on chastity prescribed marriage as an absolute necessity before biological motherhood could occur, motherhood was still discussed more frequently than

⁶⁰ Priscilla L. Evans, “The Spirit Giveth Life,” *Relief Society Magazine* 28 (1941): 845.

⁶¹ Joseph B. Wirthlin, “All Her Ways Are Peace,” *Relief Society Magazine* 40 (1953): 801-802.

wifeness throughout the *Relief Society Magazine*. The act of being a wife was not as broadly applicable, since only some LDS women were married, but all could practice mothering by caring for others, as evidenced by the aforementioned examples of Ruth's service to Naomi. Still, wifeness was an important theme in discussions of scriptural women, with leaders and writers within the magazine's pages offering counsel by providing biblical examples.

Of all the scriptural examples of wifeness that appeared in the *Relief Society Magazine*, the most prominent and most frequent was Eve. More than just an exemplar, Eve was treated almost as an essence that is innate to every woman. As one Church leader declared, "[Eve] is, in fact, the pattern for all women."⁶² A social science lesson on family organization reaffirmed this idea with a quote by Brigham Young: "It is the calling of the wife and mother to...[make] herself an Eve in the midst of a little paradise of her own creating."⁶³ The implication of this framing seems to point to the pathway of the homemaking wife: as Eve helped build a home for her family outside of Eden, so too should all wives similarly shape the environment and surroundings for their families. Eve was therefore viewed as an archetypal model for all wives to follow in fulfilling their roles. In an article on literature, it was posited that our "first parents, Adam and Eve" were models of the relationship between "parents one to another."⁶⁴ In this relationship, Eve "gave courage, faith, and hope to her husband, as do her righteous daughters."⁶⁵ Statements such as this one tap into women's role as supporters of the priesthood both in the home and in the institutional Church, lending further support to this 20th century trend. If Eve could be depicted as a supporting figure to priesthood hierarchy and all women were to follow

⁶² McConkie, "Charity Which Never Faleth," 172.

⁶³ "Social Science - The Family in the Gospel Plan - Lesson 2 - The Family Organization," *Relief Society Magazine* 33 (1946): 573-574.

⁶⁴ Maud Beeley Jacob, "Literary Department," *Relief Society Magazine* 19 (1932): 313.

⁶⁵ Whitney, "Guide Lessons: Theology and Testimony - Lesson 1: Women of the Bible - Eve," 549.

her, Eve could be used to help women see the pathway forward as institutional changes continued. Speaking of her in exemplary terms, one author posited that Eve “set for all her daughters the true standard of wifely and motherly love and devotion,” with her actions seen as “the manifestation of the characteristic that has caused woman in all ages of the world to do and dare and hazard and suffer more than man, for the creation and protection of human life.”⁶⁶ With phrases such as these, motherhood was presented in empowering terms, offering the kind of rhetoric that countered the growing societal notion that liberation occurred outside of the home. Since Eve seems to have been viewed as the ultimate woman, her choice to focus on family would have effectively served as a refutation against any alternative messages from outside the Church on a woman’s place in marriage or society. Additionally, Eve’s wifeness was linked directly to her motherhood, again underlining the idea that the one should follow the other. Eve’s role as Adam’s wife led directly to her role as the “mother of all living.”⁶⁷

Esther was another biblical woman who was used to teach about ideal wifeness. Notably, there were two central themes that defined discussions of Esther within the *Relief Society Magazine*. Both her favorability in the eyes of her husband, the king and her identity as a deeply faithful deliverer who called down the power of prayer and fasting to save her people contributed to the core message that ideal wives were expected to have good relationships with both their husbands and with God. These two themes were present together in a pageant script published in the magazine in which Esther declared: “when a great crisis arose in my life, I called for fasting and prayer...I faced my king, made my plea, and because of faith and prayer I was granted the life of my countrymen.”⁶⁸ In this excerpt, Esther’s faithfulness and favorable standing before her

⁶⁶ Willard Done, “Eve, Mother of the Race,” *Relief Society Magazine* 19 (1932): 390-392.

⁶⁷ Genesis 3:20

⁶⁸ “Our Project,” *Relief Society Magazine* 21 (1934): 759.

husband were directly linked, and this linking was repeated throughout the magazine. Another excerpt exemplified this, which read: “by fasting and prayer I found favor in the eyes of the Lord and also my husband the king and saved my people the Jews from destruction.”⁶⁹ The interweaving of these two themes made Esther both acceptable and admirable. She was acceptable for her reliance on male authority, specifically her husband, but she was also deeply admired for her role as a deliverer, born out of her faithfulness. This combination sent a clear message to magazine readers: wives should be both faithful to God and acceptable in the eyes of their husbands, with the two goals supporting one another.

Fascinatingly, the combination of these themes gave rise to a tendency to diminish the sexual component of Esther’s story, which may also indicate why authors in general were less comfortable discussing wifhood. Esther herself was replacing Queen Vashti because of the former queen’s refusal to come before the king and his court in a provocative manner. Esther’s initial success with the king, which allowed her to become queen, was achieved on the basis of his attraction to her. Yet, not only was there no admission of this side of the story in the magazine, but there was even an attempt to speak of Esther in the same terms as Mary, the mother of Jesus, by completely de-sexualizing her. In one particular excerpt, Esther was called “the sweet virgin Jewess” immediately before she was referred to as “the queen so noble and brave.”⁷⁰ Such a juxtaposition shows the discomfort not only around discussions of sex, but even the notion that a woman was sexually active. Though motherhood was also linked to sex in the creation of children, discussions of the role of mother focused on what happened after a child was born—not the process by which the child came to be. It is possible that, to the authors and

⁶⁹ Hazel W. Wheeler, “Our Project: ‘Back to the Scriptures’,” *Relief Society Magazine* 19 (1932): 622.

⁷⁰ Leona W. Fosgren, “Books of the Old Testament,” *Relief Society Magazine* 23 (1936): 453.

readers in the 20th century, contemplating Esther's spirituality led to a rejection of her sexuality.

Women's Roles in Religion

While scriptural women served as good role models for discipleship and devotion, female biblical figures who possessed religious authority alongside their spiritual convictions were selectively portrayed and increasingly absent from the magazine as the Church's efforts for priesthood centralization progressed. This is perhaps most clearly seen through a case study of how Deborah was discussed in the *Relief Society Magazine*. Amongst biblical scholars, there has been considerable agreement that Deborah was the most authoritative woman included in the Bible.⁷¹ She was referred to as a judge and a prophetess, and her life reflected both spiritual and political power. Her ability to command and then accompany her military leader into battle was but one demonstration of the high position she held. Additionally, Deborah's capacity to receive revelation on behalf of her people to deliver them from danger showed her spiritual authority. Within the context of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Deborah's story has presented both opportunities and points of confusion. She was a faithful, valiant woman who worked well with those who served with her, thus exemplifying virtues regarded as important for female disciples. At the same time, her ability to lead her people without deference to a higher male authority was difficult to fit into the Latter-day Saint context, given the transitional period toward greater reliance on priesthood leaders.

The consistent decrease in references to Deborah may have been a result of church leaders who wanted to avoid causing confusion and discontent amongst the women of the Church through comparison between their standing and hers. Deborah was mentioned most frequently in the *Relief Society Magazine* during the 1930s while women still held a considerable

⁷¹ Joy Schroeder, *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

amount of independent control over the Relief Society. While even during this time period references to her were only occasional, there was a fairly consistent theme of portraying Deborah as “a valiant woman” who delivered her people.⁷² Her courage is referred to without hesitation, which is not surprising given that this was the heart of the Great Depression. Deborah was seen as a patriotic leader who “stirred the youth of Israel to continue their fight for their national integrity.”⁷³ Her ability to serve as a “motivating force to aid all the educational forces available to pattern young lives”⁷⁴ fit well with the emphasis of the time period: women were moral influences for good and courageous individuals raising families during difficult economic conditions. This was not only their role in society, but their spiritual purpose as well. However, despite Deborah’s status as an exemplar of female valor, her spiritual authority was de-emphasized: none of the references to her in the 1930s mentioned that she was a prophetess. Even her title of judge was absent from the discussions of her leadership. She was first and foremost a faithful woman, and as such, she was portrayed in a way that allowed the women of the time to relate to her without focusing on the disparities between her position and theirs. They, like her, could serve their communities and spiritually strengthen those around her. Unlike Deborah, they could not independently exercise God’s authority.

References to Deborah continued with some consistency into the early 1940s, especially during World War II when courage was especially prized. However, by 1944, mentions of her had dropped off completely, and Deborah did not reappear in the magazine until the 1950s. When she was occasionally mentioned, it was in the context of listing numerous biblical and modern religious women who served as examples of virtue and sacrifice—key features of how

⁷² “Literature - Life and Literature - The Bible - A record of the life and thought of the Ancient Hebrews,” *Relief Society Magazine* 20 (1933): 688.

⁷³ Jacob, “Woman As An Interpreter,” 288.

⁷⁴ Jacob, “Woman As An Interpreter,” 664-665.

women's spiritual role was perceived. Here again, her title of prophetess was never mentioned. Still, her placement next to other admired biblical women, including the mother of Moses, Mary, and Esther indicated how well respected she was for her traits of valor and strength.

The Interaction of Gender Equality and Patriarchy

While most of the themes considered in this research are best analyzed individually, the themes of gender equality and promotion of patriarchy are most effectively assessed together. This is partially because, in multiple cases, a mention of a particular woman from the scriptures could present ideas relating to both themes at the same time. For example, in one of the rare mentions of Leah and Rachel in a lesson plan published in 1925, participants in the lesson were urged to “discuss Jacob’s respect for his wives in counseling with them and the ideal confidence of Leah and Rachel in their husband.”⁷⁵ In this simple quote, there seems to be implications for both equality and patriarchy. On one hand, Jacob is portrayed as someone who respected his wives and counseled with them, considering their advice and input. Such an act would seem to imply equality. On the other hand, this example points to a polygamous relationship, setting up an inherent imbalance in which it appears Leah and Rachel can offer advice, but ultimately confide in Jacob’s decision. Here, the slight difference between his respect for their counsel and their confidence in him creates room for the interplay of seemingly contradictory themes.

Another reason for the co-existence of equality and patriarchy may be found in the Church’s need to help women reconcile the change in church structure as the Relief Society lost independence. Discussions of the relationship between Adam and Eve were particularly useful in this effort. In a 1958 article written by a Relief Society leader, it was emphasized that “in the beginning, the Father created Eve as an “help meet” for Adam and gave her the right to share the

⁷⁵ “Guide Lessons for October - Lesson 1 - Theology and Testimony - The Abrahamic Dispensation, Continued, Part III - Jacob,” *Relief Society Magazine* 12 (1925): 442.

blessings of his Priesthood.”⁷⁶ Ultimately, it seems he is seen as the leader, the one who has the priesthood and can then share the blessings, with she being the one seen as the helper, assigned to aid him in his labors. Yet, they are still working and sharing together. This mirrored what the women were beginning to see at Church: the Relief Society helped the efforts of the priesthood, but priesthood authority was the governing force. A lesson penned by a male church authority in 1961 further displayed this tension in even sharper terms. “God gave the Priesthood to Adam, thus designating him as his mouthpiece upon the earth. At the same time, Adam’s companion, Eve, was designated as the mother of men...The Priesthood...has for its purpose the caring for the temporal, intellectual, and spiritual welfare of each member of the family. The mother, because of her strategic position, is the moving force in the accomplishment of this purpose.”⁷⁷ Almost as if to remind women of their place in the domestic sphere, quotes such as this one might have been used to further push women away from their previous presence in the public sphere through civic engagement. Even more indicative than the quote itself was the section titles under which it was placed. The section was entitled, “Equal in Opportunities, Rights, and Privileges.” The subheading over this particular quote, directly beneath the section title, read: “Man is the Head of the Family by Priesthood Designation.” Thus, the relationship between patriarchy and equality was present both within the home and the Church. While this contrast might seem dissonant to a modern reader, such a pairing was the reconciliation between patriarchy and equality that women of the 20th century came to expect from their Church leaders.

Some Church leaders and authors whose words were published in the magazine were less interested in reconciling the tension between the two themes and more focused on promoting one

⁷⁶ Louise W. Madsen, “The Key is Turned,” *Relief Society Magazine* 45 (1958): 723.

⁷⁷ Ariel S. Ballif, “Social Science - The Place of Woman in the Gospel Plan- The Eminence of Woman - Lesson 2 - Full Equality in the Gospel Plan,” *Relief Society Magazine* 48 (1961): 561.

over the other. Church leader Bruce R. McConkie used Eve's choice to partake of the forbidden fruit as an explanation for patriarchal leadership. He taught that in the Lord's admonition for Adam to rule over Eve, "the pattern was set for the most perfect and important organization on earth, the family unit. And thus the divine system was inaugurated under which the husband is the head of the house, with the rights of decision and presidency resting in him...the wife is obligated by the gospel law to abide by his counsel in righteousness."⁷⁸ Sometimes, familial leadership was presented in softer terms, though still male-centric: "From the time that...Eve was formed from [Adam's] rib, righteous daughters of our Heavenly Father have sought to be true helpmeets to their husbands."⁷⁹ In a lesson on women's role as worshipers of God, one church leader explained that "[Adam] was not alone, for a woman became his companion."⁸⁰ Though presenting a more companionate view of marriage, these references still present a male-centric vision of marriage, with man's needs being met by his female counterpart.

By contrast, some leaders and writers presented a clearly egalitarian view of Adam and Eve. In speaking of the resurrection, one male church leader explained: "happy [couples] will come together again, standing at the head of their posterity as Adam and Eve will stand at the head of the multitude [of resurrected beings]."⁸¹ In such a statement, there is no implication that Adam is the head, with Eve serving only as a helper. This egalitarian view was made possible by writers and leaders who held a more purely positive view of Eve and her partaking of the fruit. One author created a list of women, with Eve as the first one named, who were praised for "their fidelity, heroism, and devotion," as well as their "superior intellectuality and leadership."⁸² In an

⁷⁸ Bruce R. McConkie, "Father's True Place in the Home," *Relief Society Magazine* 45 (1958): 349.

⁷⁹ Marianne S. Sharp, "Relief Society in the Lives of Latter-day Saint Women," *Relief Society Magazine* 39 (1952): 147.

⁸⁰ Levi Edgar Young, "Women are Worshipers of God," *Relief Society Magazine* 44 (1957): 148.

⁸¹ Christiansen, ElRay L. "Whom and Where Will You Marry." *Relief Society Magazine* 45 (1958): 648.

⁸² Cannon, Annie Wells. "Watchman, What of the Hour?" *Relief Society Magazine* 28 (1941): 155.

article on women from various cultures, author Estelle S. Harris declared: “Ever since the first woman Eve, women have been praised for their charm or blamed for many of the ills of mankind. No matter how much woman is censured, however, no way has been found to get along without her if the race is to be kept going.”⁸³ Another article contained this bold declaration: “To list activities of women which have influenced the spiritual life of the world would be to list pages of items; to touch on women from Eve of ages past to Madame Curie.”⁸⁴

The varied views on Eve presented in the *Relief Society Magazine* were not necessarily traceable by time period; rather, they were more contingent on the perspective of individual authors. Nonetheless, when assessed on the whole, it seems as though an individual reader could have found immense room for personal interpretation as to how marital dynamics were to be established. Some may have found within the magazine’s pages a clear mandate for patriarchal leadership, whereas others may have focused on the calls for greater equality in familial affairs. Given the changes that occurred in the 20th century regarding the roles of women, it seems that the magazine may have amplified, rather than clarified, the confusion regarding a woman’s place and authority in her own marriage.

Gender Neutral Teachings

While the women of the scriptures were often discussed and presented in the *Relief Society Magazine* in a way that established and maintained gender norms, these women were also used in gender neutral contexts, serving as examples of basic gospel principles. To truly understand the language surrounding gender and its corresponding impact on identity, it is also worth understanding the areas where ideas about gender did not come into play, or at least had less of an influence. In an article written in 1963 by church leader Spencer W. Kimball and his

⁸³ Estelle S. Harris, “Women the World Around,” *Relief Society Magazine* 28 (1941): 165.

⁸⁴ Anna Boss Hart, “Women, the Builders of Spirituality,” *Relief Society Magazine* 28 (1941): 173.

wife Camila Eyring Kimball, the importance of learning regardless of gender was emphasized: “Even in the beginning there was the written word, for Adam and Eve were conscious of the need for the development of the mind.”⁸⁵ Progressive-era ideals that influenced the beginning of the magazine’s history did fade over time, but the establishment of education as a key preparation for homemaking meant that despite their different contributions to the family, both men and women had reason to seek learning. A lesson on the importance of work explained that “Heavenly Father does not approve of idleness, and much divine counsel regarding labor has been given to [humankind] since Adam and Eve began their labors beyond the gates of Eden.”⁸⁶ Although men and women had different gender roles, they were both expected to work diligently. Access to spiritual gifts and divine direction was also not conditional on gender. One author pointed out how “the inspiration that led to the union of Isaac and Rebecca was shared by both; the same God that guided Jacob, gave to Rachel the spirit of prophecy.”⁸⁷ In a talk on charity at a conference, one church leader further emphasized equal access in spiritual matters:

“Everything that it is possible for man on earth to have—of a spiritual, ennobling, edifying, sanctifying nature—has been and is available for the women of the Lord’s kingdom. They can become daughters of Jesus Christ. They can take upon them the Lord’s name. They are entitled to personal revelation. They can get all the visions and guidance that men receive. When Rebecca had a problem, she went out and took it up with the Lord...and she received the answer.”⁸⁸

While women were increasingly directed to follow priesthood leaders within Church structure, they did have equal right to directly connect with God and receive direction for their own lives, which remained as a constant teaching throughout the magazine’s decades.

⁸⁵ Spencer W. Kimball and Camilla E. Kimball, “The Power of Books,” *Relief Society Magazine* 50 (1963): 725.

⁸⁶ Alberta H. Christensen, “Work Meeting - Teaching the Gospel in the Home: Lesson 10 - The Dignity and Worth of Work and Play,” *Relief Society Magazine* 52 (1965): 626.

⁸⁷ “Guide Lessons for November - Lesson 1 - Theology and Testimony - The Abrahamic Dispensation, Concluded,” *Relief Society Magazine* 12 (1926): 496.

⁸⁸ Bruce R. McConkie, “Charity Which Never Faileth,” *Relief Society Magazine* 57 (1970): 172.

In addition to receiving an equal exhortation to obey gospel principles, men and women were also viewed as equally capable of having great faith. Indeed, both were encouraged to build their testimonies diligently. In a report on remarks from Church leaders in 1946, the importance of personal conviction for all members was emphasized as one particular leader spoke of the “great testimonies connected with the life of the Savior, such as those of Simeon, Anna, and Peter’s great utterance.”⁸⁹ In this reference, Anna the prophetess is placed alongside the apostle Peter as an exemplar of testimony and faith. To the readers of the *Relief Society Magazine*, the message was clear: gender was not a determinant of the strength of one’s testimony. This was also evident in a narrative description of the woman with an issue of blood. The author explained how the woman’s declaration of faith—that by touching Christ’s clothes, she could be healed—was reflective of “a heart that was pure enough, deep enough, and strong enough to believe that God could instantly heal her body.”⁹⁰ Thus, while women and men were portrayed as having different roles within their religion and their families, the depth of their faith was not considered to be limited by their gender.

Conclusion

One of the primary aims of this paper was to explore how language surrounding women of the scriptures discussed in the *Relief Society Magazine* might have been used to reinforce gender norms. Through my analysis, I found multiple major themes that were used to promote a traditional interpretation of female identity as the ideal. These themes included direct discussion of the meaning of womanhood, emphasis on the roles of mother and wife, the depiction of women as supporters rather than independent leaders within religious structure, and the frequent

⁸⁹ Ramona W. Cannon, “The 116th Annual General Conference,” *Relief Society Magazine* 33 (1946): 394.

⁹⁰ Nephi Jensen, “The Trust Supreme,” *Relief Society Magazine* 20 (1933): 448.

combination of equality and patriarchy. The assessment of gender neutral teachings allowed for a consideration of the limits of the impact of gender on LDS doctrine in the 20th century.

The various themes used to explore women's identities and roles through the usage of scriptural women demonstrated particular trends that developed during the time period of the magazine's publication and were facilitated by its rhetoric. The gradual reduction of the Relief Society's autonomy, combined with the increased focus on priesthood hierarchy, resulted in a focus on women's identity as supporters of the priesthood. The magazine's presentation of scriptural women as also filling this role may have helped women in the modern church accept the realignment of church structure and find purpose in their position despite the lack of independent authority. Another key trend was the intentional effort by church leaders to provide an ideal model of womanhood which could effectively counter developing societal messages that promoted liberation from traditional roles. By pointing 20th century LDS women towards scriptural women, admiration could be cultivated which may have motivated readers to choose to counter social change in their individual lives. Lastly, the general pivot from LDS women's civic participation to a more singular focus on the private sphere seems to have been used to reinforce the other trends, focusing women's attention on a narrower set of responsibilities that were decidedly domestic and local. All of these trends combined over the 57-year period of the magazine's existence indicate a considerable shift in the scope, position, and viewpoint of LDS women that occurred throughout the 20th century.

Though this study thoroughly considered the multiplicity of references to women in the scriptures throughout the 57 years of the *Relief Society Magazine*, a more thorough consideration of the usage of language surrounding gender norms in other contexts within the magazine would be highly beneficial in further exploring the intentions of leaders and authors involved in its

production. Although scriptural women were referenced throughout the magazine, they were still only one element amongst the magazine's many approaches to discussions of gender. Therefore, this study does not encompass the entire breadth of language surrounding gender roles in the *Relief Society Magazine*; rather, the study of scriptural women shows some potential themes which may have also been developed elsewhere. Future research into the gendered themes present in speeches from male and female leaders which were published in the magazine, as well as an analysis of the homemaking articles, current events pages, and ward activity logs could all provide valuable insight into the ways gender was enforced amongst LDS women and by LDS leaders. As has been established, the considerable transformation that occurred for LDS women during this time period demands additional inquiry beyond the limited scholarly work that has already been done and the research that has been presented in this paper.

Another key limitation of this research is the presence of survivorship bias. The *Relief Society Magazine* is a very specific, albeit meaningful, resource from the 20th century. However, it fails to account for the breadth of dialogue and experiences that were occurring outside of its pages. Though many women submitted works to the magazine that were included for publication, there is no presence of dissent or disagreement that made it past the screening of the editors. Thus, the magazine on its own presents a flattened picture without the dimensionality provided by sources that would have been outside of Church control. Furthermore, many of the editors and authors from the earliest days of the magazine have now passed away, requiring a certain degree of supposition as to their motives and experiences. Still, there are options for expanding beyond these limitations in future research efforts: many of the women who subscribed, wrote for, and read the magazine in its mid to later years may still be alive. Interviewing them for the historical record could help fill in the gaps for this time period.

Additionally, journal entries, non-LDS and independent publications, as well as other historical artifacts from 1915-1970 could further inform future research efforts.

Research into the *Relief Society Magazine* is an important step towards acquiring greater understanding not only of LDS women in the 20th century, but also of LDS women today. The language and norms present in the magazine have likely continued in the years since its discontinuance, and thus may continue to shape women's lives and the modern Church. As the LDS Church seeks to move forward in fulfilling the needs of an increasingly global membership, an analysis of the assumptions, patterns, and norms that are intermixed with Church doctrine is essential for organizational success. Moreover, as the scholarly community seeks to understand the growing disinterest in religion as a whole in the present day, carefully analyzing the treatment of women in all religions, including the LDS faith, throughout past decades will likely hold important answers for a variety of disciplines. Greater equity and deeper spiritual fulfillment will be more achievable within the field of religion when increased transparency of the past creates room for significant course corrections.

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