10-1-1993

Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society by Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher; Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism edited by Maxine Hanks; Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History by Anne Firor Scott

Mary Stovall Richards

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol33/iss4/16
In the waning years of the twentieth century, many historians of women are evaluating what the past hundred years—and previous centuries—have meant for women’s lives. Gone from most recent analyses are the simplistic paradigms of the rise and fall of women’s status that characterized much early work in the field (and that judged progress by how well women’s lives approximated those of successful men). Instead, historians increasingly attempt to understand the lives of women on their own terms, rather than either criticizing earlier women for their supposed lack of enlightenment or, even worse, reconstructing their lives to fit contemporary sensibilities, either liberal or conservative. These historians argue that individuals must be understood for the lives they actually lived, not the ones we may wish they had.

While asserting that a person’s life should not be reduced to a political tract, women’s history of the past two decades, just like recent African-American history, nevertheless remains inherently political because both types of history examine, among other things, the way relations of social, political, and economic power have been defined, explicated, and maintained; further, both implicitly or explicitly argue that such power relations of gender or race are socially constructed, not divinely mandated, and are thus subject to alteration. It is little wonder, then, that some people find almost any history of women’s experiences profoundly unsettling since...
such a history may call into question the patterns that have governed the readers' lives and given order to their world.

The three volumes under consideration here, two of which focus on Mormon women, are indeed unsettling, though for very different reasons. One book is a history of American women's voluntary associations; another is the history of one such organization (the Relief Society of the LDS Church); and the third is a collection of Mormon feminist essays. All achieve varying degrees of success in capturing the lives of women on their own terms.

The most balanced and fully realized work, not surprisingly, is the one that does not find itself in the middle of ideological pressures. Anne Firor Scott's *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* examines white and black women's voluntary organizations from the Revolution through the 1920s. Scott, W. K. Boyd Professor of History Emerita at Duke University, argues that women's societies arose in the 1790s as women saw unaddressed needs in their communities, yet, because women were viewed as simply exercising those attributes of charity and compassion with which they were believed to be naturally gifted, their efforts elicited praise, not censure. Few saw the inherent challenge such societies posed for then-current notions of woman’s role. Not only did women use their associations to reform American society (everything from missionary societies to abolition, temperance, education, public health, housing, and politics) but to transform themselves. They defined problems, designed programs to answer them, raised money, balanced budgets, learned administrative skills, and increased in competence and self-confidence. Indeed, Scott contends, societies, especially on the national level, provided many women a public career and an independent identity in the days during which those possibilities were largely closed to them. Further, many women eventually saw that traditional benevolence was not sufficient to solve problems whose roots were societal; only a restructuring of the economy and improvement of working conditions, especially for employed women, could finally alleviate inequities and achieve social justice.

Scott evidences a masterful blend of involvement in and detachment from her subjects' lives. Although she obviously admires many of the women about whom she writes and exults in their
accomplishments as they reformed much of American life, she is not blind to their foibles and even their silliness. She freely admits that clubs often attracted women more interested in social climbing than doing anything of substance and that class pretensions often blinded middle-class women to the real problems faced by those of the working class. Scott’s consummate discernment, good sense, and humanity inform her writing and present the reader with whole people in all their difficult and maddening complexity.

While Scott mentions the LDS Relief Society only briefly (21), her analysis of the growth of women’s associations is helpful in revealing both parallels to and deviations from the national patterns by that organization. Like many church women’s groups, the Relief Society was originally founded for benevolent purposes by women, not by members of the male hierarchy. Like other women’s associations, it provided women numerous opportunities for acquisition of administrative skills and intellectual growth, for a growing sense of themselves as persons. Further, the Relief Society offered women a relatively “safe” public role that did not overtly challenge notions of women’s proper place within society. Even the possession of some autonomy, however, could be threatening. Scott found that almost all women’s societies affiliated with a larger organization run by men experienced men’s discomfort with women’s challenges to their authority. Many Protestant women turned from churches to their own independent associations so that they would get out from under men’s thumbs. While it is not clear to what extent members of the Relief Society may have followed such a course, the Relief Society did experience the progressive loss of autonomy within the church as the organization moved from a “partner to priesthood quorums” to “one of five auxiliaries” by the beginning of the twentieth century (Women of Covenant, 154).

One striking difference between the Relief Society and many other women’s church organizations was the latter’s moving from benevolence to what Scott calls municipal housekeeping and then to social justice. The Relief Society did, indeed, build hospitals, store grain that they sent to disaster victims; work for suffrage, and establish in 1919 under Amy Brown Lyman a Social Service Department, which included an employment bureau, adoption services,
and a program of loans and grants to women. But after 1922 most of these measures were aimed primarily at other Mormons, and to a lesser extent their neighbors (Women of Covenant, 233–35), not the larger community outside Utah. Nor did Relief Society women become politicized to address the structural reasons in society for the secular problems they tried to solve. Rather, as the twentieth century progressed, the Relief Society gradually lost its progressive community functions and espoused an all-consuming domesticity.

This comparison introduces the second and third books under consideration here: Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society by Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher; and Maxine Hanks’s edited volume, Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism. Given the current atmosphere surrounding the place of women in the LDS Church, one does not realistically expect (though one still hopes for) the same nuanced portrayals, as evidenced in Scott’s work, of women’s experience in Mormonism. Indeed, both these volumes on Mormon women advise the reader early on that contemporary sensibilities are considerations in the authors’ approaches. While disclaiming their book as an official history of the Relief Society, the authors of Women of Covenant nevertheless state that their work was vetted prior to publication by the general president of the Relief Society and by members of the Quorums of the Twelve and the Seventy, who provided “wise counsel, [so] that Relief Society and priesthood leaders might all ‘speak the same thing,’” and whose work aided the “final completion of this history . . . in this form” (xii). Similarly, although the point of view of her volume differs dramatically from that of Women of Covenant, Maxine Hanks is up front in proclaiming her book a validation of the place of another type of feminism within Mormon theology and history. The books thus serve as illuminating foils for each other in locating the place of women within Mormonism both historically and currently.

Women of Covenant, the first scholarly history of the Relief Society, was originally commissioned in 1979 by then-president Barbara Smith (xi). Janath Russell Cannon, first counselor to President Smith, and Jill Mulvay Derr, of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University, were the original authors; they were joined near the completion of the book
Review of Three Books on Women

by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, also of the Smith Institute. Both Derr and Beecher are accomplished historians, with numerous path-breaking publications to their credit. Indeed, they, along with a handful of other scholars, have over the past two decades defined the field of Mormon women’s history. Cannon brought the personal experience of working within the female hierarchy of the Church. With such a team, expectations for the completed volume were high. The book contract, however, was with Deseret Book, a semi-official Church publisher, which garnered for their work not only a large Mormon audience but also increased scrutiny for their words. The good news is that the authors provide many important insights into the workings of Relief Society and the spiritual life of Mormon women; the bad news is that many of the authors’ interpretations of currently sensitive historical events are compromised in the process.

The authors sought to recreate “the story of imperfect Saints seeking holiness, changing responsibilities, and eternal covenants” (x). Many readers will find this book to be informative, positive, reassuring, and uplifting;¹ but for this reviewer, Women of Covenant was also, in many ways, depressing. Near the end of the book, the authors discuss Elder Bruce R. McConkie’s 1978 address at the dedication of the Nauvoo Monument to Women, during which he corrected a notion then extant among some Church members that women “could not receive counsel from the Lord except through a priesthood holder” (363); in fact, Elder McConkie assured women, they could pray and receive answers. The reader cries with frustration: how could the Nauvoo society of priestesses have come to such a point? As the tale unfolds, one discovers that after more than a century of numerous small and large losses and equivocations, some women were unsure even of their right to receive counsel directly from God.

The beginnings were very different. The Relief Society, founded in March, 1842, in Nauvoo, Illinois, was a spiritually powerful counterpart to priesthood quorums. The authors describe mighty women, many of whom had been recipients of stirring spiritual manifestations of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and of the divine origins of the Book of Mormon, who had been promised in patriarchal blessings gifts of prophecy and revelation,
and who had administered blessings of healing upon the sick. The Relief Society invited further development of such powers as it prepared women to receive the temple endowment.

That moment in Church history is of profound significance and has been subjected to much scrutiny by LDS historians. Many have wondered about the implications of Joseph Smith’s lectures to the Society that were designed to prepare women to receive the temple endowment in 1843. This volume argues against bestowal of priesthood on women but does allow the conferral of some kind of rather nebulous authority (49). Because common parlance in the Church often conflates the terms priesthood and authority (witness a popular definition of priesthood as the power and authority of God), clarifications of both concepts would have aided the authors’ discussion. Further, since much of Derr’s and Beecher’s previous work is less categorical and more nuanced, the reader is advised to read carefully all the text, not just the portions that address a particular topic, and especially all footnotes, which contain important clarifications of ideas presented in the body. For example, in the text of their history, the authors meticulously explain almost every use of the word ordain in connection with women as meaning “set apart”; only in a footnote do they explain that there was no such verbal distinction made during the midnineteenth century, when the words were apparently used interchangeably and men were “set apart” for priesthood offices (444, 446).

This discussion does not explore the variety of possible interpretations of Joseph’s words regarding women and priesthood or authority. Unfortunately, Joseph’s statement (“I now turn the key to you in the name of God” [47]) does not have a simple or clear historical meaning. The authors acknowledge alternate readings of Joseph’s words in their conclusion (50), but no footnotes steer the reader to fuller discussions of those interpretations. Significantly, in their argument the authors quote only the first portion of one of Joseph’s most important statements regarding women and the priesthood: “The Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood” (43), but in this discussion they omit the promise that “he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch’s day—as in Paul’s day.” (The statement does appear in full
Review of Three Books on Women

on page 53 in a different context.) One wonders why the authors did not include in an appendix the minutes of the Relief Society, from which Joseph’s statements were taken, so that readers could view everything in context.

Although a thoughtful, but abbreviated, discussion of priesthood and the temple follows (50-58), some of the blessings bestowed on women are understood in a limited way. The authors state on three occasions that healing blessings performed by women, by definition, are not performed through the priesthood, but as a gift of the spirit by the power of faith (114, 220, 429). One is left to wonder, then, what is the relationship between conferred priesthood, the blessings of the temple endowment, and the gifts of the spirit.3

As suggested previously, reading just this chapter in isolation perhaps does not give a full appreciation of the authors’ feelings. Quotations later in the text offer a more expansive view: in 1901 newly-called general president Bathsheba Smith and her counselors assured the Church, “We have not taken these responsibilities upon ourselves, but have been called in the order of the holy Priesthood” (151). Also in that same year Lydia D. Alder, evaluating women’s progress during the previous century in an article entitled “Thoughts on Missionary Work”4 in the Woman’s Exponent, concluded that the restoration of the gospel had revolutionized women’s status. Indeed, Joseph Smith had given women “instructions so far in advance of his day that they are not all carried out even now” (178).

After leaving the minefields of the 1840s, the book begins to hit its stride. The authors are conversant with American women’s history and successfully place Mormon women into that larger historical context; further, their knowledge of both the primary and secondary literature is apparent in their extensive footnotes. They are also for the most part unafraid to tackle difficult issues in Church history. For example, the authors forthrightly detail the Relief Society’s inexorable loss of autonomy, which reached its nadir in the massive changes of the 1960s and 1970s under the priesthood correlation program as the Relief Society (along with the Church auxiliaries) lost its financial autonomy, control over its own curriculum, its employment services and social services to
the Church Welfare Department, and its magazine. While the authors betray some unease with this loss of power, they nevertheless conclude that these developments were potentially beneficial since they “released [women] from responsibility for managing the social services of the Church, raising their own funds, and producing their own teaching materials” so they could “achieve an even higher level of personal service to family and church” (346). Also examined are the mistakes made and the divisions engendered among Mormon women by the International Women’s Year meetings in Utah in 1977 (369-74).

The volume suffers from its organizational structure, which, focusing on the administration of each general Relief Society president in turn, lends itself to repetitiveness and a disjointed narrative. With the emphasis on efficiency in the Relief Society in the twentieth century, the narrative loses the wonderfully personal focus that characterized its discussions of the nineteenth century and becomes a rather boring list of accomplishments, with little sense of the personalities involved. Further, the almost exclusive concentration on the Relief Society as an institution obscures many of the real accomplishments of Mormon women, particularly in the twentieth century. For example, the authors commendably include Juanita Brooks’ work as a stake Relief Society president, but only mention her writing when she happens to publish in the Relief Society Magazine.

In sum, Women of Covenant is a significant contribution to our understanding of the development of an important women’s organization that has moved during the last century and a half from its geographically parochial beginnings in a small Illinois town to a nearly worldwide presence. One, however, longs for the book this might have been, had it been written in a quieter age.

The final volume, Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism is a striking contrast in approach and tone to Women of Covenant. Women and Authority approaches Mormon history and theology from explicitly feminist perspectives, which the editor, Maxine Hanks, defines as embracing “a philosophy of equal rights and opportunities for women” (xi). Such a definition blunts some of the almost visceral reactions against that term by many persons (including far too many Mormons) who negatively
stereotype feminists. In her introductory essay, Hanks not only demonstrates feminism's historical presence within Mormonism, but she also shows that feminism, even among members of the Church, is far from a monolithic ideology.5

Hanks has gathered some of the most important essays in Mormon women's studies of the past two decades; others were written specifically for the volume, for a total of nineteen pieces. Practically all previously published works have been updated with new materials and references. Despite differences in approach and emphases, the essays share a common theme: the profound sense that being female has been devalued in Mormonism, that we must rediscover the eternal truth that "all are alike unto God" (2 Ne. 26:33) and its truly transforming implications for how we treat each other. Many of the authors reveal their own pain and that of their sisters as they struggle with marginalization, and they offer suggestions for healing changes, for re-evaluations of our current situation based on their research, whether in history or in the scriptures.

Hanks's book begins by addressing two of the most pressing (and controversial) issues for women in the Church: the theology surrounding Heavenly Mother and the relationship of women with priesthood. In a meticulously researched article, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," Linda P. Wilcox traces the origin and development of the doctrine of a Heavenly Mother. Wilcox points out that, while the existence of Heavenly Mother was affirmed in a 1909 First Presidency statement, specifics about her have not been delineated. Many women (and men) in the Church nevertheless hunger to know more about her as Carol Lynn Pearson's poignant "Healing the Motherless House" and a forty-page collection of women's (and a few men's) thoughts about Mother in Heaven attest.

Hanks similarly marshals historical evidence of the changing position of women vis-à-vis priesthood through the inclusion of Linda King Newell's examination of "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood" from the founding of the Church to the present and D. Michael Quinn's explicitly-titled, "Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood since 1843." Newell documents women's extensive use of the spiritual gift of healing in
the nineteenth century along with its official discouragement and then effective prohibition in the twentieth century under the priesthood correlation movements that centralized all Church authority under the offices of the priesthood (40–41). While she is uncertain about women's ordination to priesthood office, she calls for a "broader, more inclusive understanding of priesthood" (44). Such an understanding is advanced in Quinn's article, in which he argues, interpreting statements from writings of members of the "Holy Order," to whom Joseph first revealed the endowment, that to receive the LDS temple endowment is to receive priesthood; thus, he asserts that endowed Mormon women (all of whom in Nauvoo were married) have held Melchizedek priesthood since the first female endowments in Nauvoo in 1843 (375). To those who argue that women do not hold priesthood because they are not ordained to specific priesthood offices, Quinn cites the eighty-fourth section of the Doctrine and Covenants, given in 1832, to show that such offices are appendages to priesthood, not priesthood itself. Quinn points out, however, that women, like men, may not exercise priesthood authority within the Church without permission of the Church.

Not all will be convinced by Quinn's arguments. Certainly, he is able to marshal only one direct statement by anyone that women have Melchizedek priesthood (emphasis mine), and even that statement is ambiguous to some. Senior president of the First Council of Seventy, ordained patriarch, and member of the Holy Order in Nauvoo, Joseph Young told his niece Zina Young Card in 1878: "‘These blessings are yours, the blessings and power according to the holy Melchisedek [sic] Priesthood you received in your Endowments, and you shall have them’" (371). Further, much of Quinn's evidence is dependent on patriarchal blessings given to women in the 1840s and 1850s by John Smith, uncle of the Prophet, who served first as stake patriarch and then as presiding patriarch to the Church beginning in the late 1840s. Such blessings are given for individual direction and comfort, not necessarily as statements of doctrine.

Nevertheless, there are enough early Church statements about women receiving priesthood or priesthood blessings through temple ordinances to deserve attention, even though the interpretation of
those statements will undoubtedly be an issue. Endless debate will revolve around what for some is rather imprecise nineteenth-century language. For example, one may wonder if Brigham Young’s October 29, 1843, description of women’s receiving their endowments as being “taken into the order of the priesthood” (368) meant the same as receiving the priesthood. While Quinn’s article has far from settled the issue, it has informed and enlivened the discussion.

Much work remains on these and other topics, but many feminist insights offer the hope of new (or, rather, the re-institution of old) paradigms of understanding the covenant and personal relationships of sons and daughters of Heavenly Parents to divine authority. Those insights remove old impasses by reconfiguring the question from “why don’t women have the priesthood?” to “how should women understand the endowment, the priesthood, and the responsibilities they have?” Perhaps our new vision will cause all to focus more on the true purpose of priesthood—not “to gratify our pride . . . or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion” (D&C 121:37), but to serve others in humility, persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, and love (D&C 121:41–42) in order to “preach repentance” to all and to “establish peace” (Alma 13:18). Fittingly, any motivation of unrighteous aspiration or ambition destroys true priesthood.

These latter two volumes are powerful, but very different, contributions not only to women’s studies but also to Mormon studies. Indeed, the reader leaves these volumes believing that no work of history or theology that ignores women can hope to capture the essence of Mormonism.

Editorial Note: This review was written prior to the general conferences of 1993 and 1994 and the 1993 disciplinary councils. Several of the historical claims and documents used in these books will be discussed further in upcoming issues of BYU Studies.
NOTES

1 For a laudatory assessment, see Claudia L. Bushman’s review of this book in *Journal of Mormon History* 19 (Spring 1993): 156–59.


3 Conferred priesthood is given only by the laying on of hands for that purpose (A of F 5).
