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The Scriptures and Mormon Women

Melodie Moench Charles

Scriptures disclose attitudes, practices, and doctrines concerning women, to which God's people in earlier ages subscribed. This essay will examine statements from scripture which detail the prescribed position of women in society. It will explore what is inadvertently said about women through the overwhelming focus on men. It will study individual women of the scriptures to see how their lives comment on their societies. Finally this essay will try to ascertain what patterns have been provided by scripture for the Latter-day Saint view of women, past and present.<sup>1</sup>

In the Doctrine and Covenants, the most contemporary of LDS scriptures, men are mentioned by name over 415 times, while women are mentioned by name only 5 times. These figures might suggest that this book of scripture assumes that women are insignificant. However, there are a few important passages which reveal a range of attitudes toward women.

Three sections of the Doctrine and Covenants address specific women. Section 91:28-31 gives instructions on moving to one Vienna Jacques. More noteworthy are the two sections that deal with Emma Smith. Section 25 is a lovely revelation which praises her, forgives her of sin, gives her the unique assignment to compile a hymnbook, and assigns her a task which only a few of the most trusted males had--to be Joseph Smith's scribe. She is promised to "be ordained. . .to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church," a rare privilege for a woman. In a tone that is positive, uplifting, and accepting, the revelation promises blessings in return for righteousness and faithfulness.

<sup>1</sup> Because Eve is dealt with in Jolene Rockwood's essay, her influence will not be treated here. For this reason, the Pearl of Great Price, in which Eve is the only female who is significantly different from her biblical counterpart, will not be examined with the other LDS scriptures.

The tone of the second revelation to Emma in 132:52-56 is radically different from that of the earlier revelation. Here she is threatened to support Joseph in what he does, "for I am the Lord thy God, and will destroy her if she will not obey my law." If she does not accept polygamy she will have to endure his receiving the blessing of "an hundred-fold in this world, of. . . wives." This threat gives Emma no options; she can accept more wives willingly or she can have them forced upon her. This would have been a bitter message for Emma to receive in any case, but it looms larger when one remembers that this revelation from God was mediated through Emma's husband rather than through some less involved person. Her husband, speaking for God, demands that she accept a situation morally intolerable to her and that she forgive him, Joseph, for his sins.

Aside from these three revelations, the Doctrine and Covenants is usually addressed to men, either specifically or generally. While it can be argued that "men" is meant to be a generic reference to mankind rather than a designation for males (intentionally or inadvertently), many revelations assume an all-male audience. Section 123, for example, instructs "the saints" to publish the true account of their persecutions, yet verse 7 talks of the duty "we owe to God, to angels. . .to ourselves, to our wives and children." Verses 16-17 apparently equate "saints" and "brethren." A canonized letter from Joseph Smith to the church which begins with "My dearly beloved brethren and sisters," closes with only "Brethren" (128:15, 25).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, section 76 which describes "the men" who will be saved, and the realms of glory in which they will dwell (76:69-75).

<sup>3</sup> While "brethren" can be a generic term in Christian religious usage, nothing in the context suggests that a generic sense was consciously intended here.

Section 42, verses 18-26, presents a series of "thou shalt not's" addressed to "the church." Because they include "thou shalt love thy wife," "he that looketh upon a woman to lust after her," and "he that committeth adultery," it is safe to assume that here "the church" is equivalent to "the adult males in the church." But this is not a consistent bias. The address in verses 74-77 has strangely switched to "persons," exploring the penalties for "persons" committing adultery. Commandments are given that "if a man or a woman does X, then he or she shall Y," and "if thy brother or sister does X, Y shall be done to him or her." It seems that somewhere in the middle of Section 42 someone became conscious that these commandments could be understood as applying only to males unless the address were broadened. This more inclusive attitude was only fleeting though; subsequent sections are again male-directed without exclusively male content.<sup>4</sup>

Judging by the eight verses in this section alone that are devoted to the issue of adultery, we could assume that it was a burning concern for some. Section 42 outlines that adulterers are to be forgiven if they repent, or be severed from the church if they do not. It also gives direction for holding a church court for an offender, but provides only the vague penalty of being "dealt with according to the law of God." These penalties apply equally to offenders of both sexes, but the new penalties for adultery introduced in section 132 do not. If a woman who is married in "the new and everlasting covenant" commits adultery she should be destroyed (verse 41). Yet the penalty for a man married in "the new and everlasting covenant" who is guilty of adultery is much softer--Joseph Smith could deprive him of the wife to whom he had just been unfaithful and give her to another man (verse 44).

<sup>4</sup>See sections 43 and 81.

The inequity goes further. The penalty for the adulterous man seems to apply only if his wife has remained faithful while he has not. The adulterer's incurring a penalty is as dependent upon his wife's actions as upon his own. Yet the adulteress's penalty apparently comes automatically on the heels of her sin. Moreover, the innocent wife, whose husband has been unfaithful to her, does not have her wishes consulted. She is simply transferred from an unworthy man to a worthy one--"for he shall be made a ruler over many" (verse 44).<sup>5</sup> The revelation makes no provision for her desires.

This implication that women may be regarded as vehicles for men's fulfilling their religious obligations, rather than as people with inherent importance, recurs throughout Section 132. Abraham's concubines "were given unto him" so that he could fulfill God's law (verse 37). Women have been given to Joseph Smith, presumably so that he can be a ruler over "many things" (verse 53).<sup>6</sup> A man is given the right to be husband to many wives, and is justified in doing so. He cannot commit adultery for they belong to him, and they are given unto him" (verse 62). These women are given to him so that he can obey the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth.<sup>7</sup> They are given to him "for their /the women's/ /exaltation in the eternal worlds" so that "they /the women/ may bear the souls of men" (verse 63). The comparison to

<sup>5</sup>The direct object is not specified, but it seems that a man could rule over "many wives," or "many families" or "many kingdoms" which the wife will help provide.

<sup>6</sup>An entire family is theoretically reduced to the status of objects when Joseph Smith is blessed that he will be given "an hundred-fold in this world of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, wives and children." This treatment of people as rewards for someone else is reminiscent of the story of Job where he receives a new family of children to replace the family who had died.

<sup>7</sup>Brigham Young in Journal of Discourses (Hereafter JD) 4:56 (September 21, 1856) said "If my wife had borne me all the children that she ever would bare /sic/, the celestial law would teach me to take young women that would have children."