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- Abstract** This essay argues that religions are made up of numerous streams of traditions that are, in turn, created by multiple conversations between various individuals and constituencies within religious groups. This case study examines how women’s literary work in the late nineteenth century helped to make the Book of Mormon relevant for their community. By exploring how women writers interpreted Eve and the mothers of the stripling warriors, we can see how women incorporated individual revelation, Mormon gender norms, and the wider adulation of motherhood into novel readings of their scriptural tradition, readings that influence how even today the Book of Mormon is understood.
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Women and the Book of Mormon: The Creation and Negotiation of a Latter-day Saint Tradition

Susanna Morrill

AT THE TURN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, when Mormon school-teacher Martha Cragun Cox took a trip through Arizona to New Mexico, she visited an ancient Native American dwelling. In her autobiography, she describes this dwelling as a “Nephite mansion.” To her mind, this archaeological treasure was the construction of one of the Israelite tribes that the Book of Mormon records as living in the ancient Americas.¹ The Book of Mormon shaped such simple, everyday perceptions, even as it drove the most profoundly religious actions of Latter-day Saint members. Martha Cragun Cox also tells the story of an eccentric

The following article by Susanna Morrill first appeared in *Historicizing “Tradition” in the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Engler and Gregory Price Grieve (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 127–44. We believe that it has, unfortunately, not received the attention it deserves for the light it sheds on the ways the Book of Mormon has been received by its readers. Morrill writes from the perspective that the Book of Mormon is a product of the nineteenth-century, but we feel that all stand to learn much from her analysis. We would like to express our gratitude to Professor Morrill, as well as to De Gruyter, for allowing us to reprint the essay. Similarly, she ruefully recounted her visit to Phoenix, a city originally settled and then given up by Mormon pioneers.

1. She was disturbed that a city fed by—in her words—an ancient Nephite canal had been abandoned to non-Mormons by these latter-day successors of the Nephites (Cox 1928–1930, 222).

missionary to Native Americans who was directed on his missionary work by the Three Nephites, three American followers of Jesus who, according to the Book of Mormon, had been left behind to roam the earth and provide spiritual help to the faithful until the Second Coming (Cox 1928–1930, 222).

Looking at these very personal stories, we can see that, as the founding scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS Church), the Book of Mormon and related texts have had a pervasive influence on the history and worldview of the Mormon community. Yet Mormon women such as Cox did not simply exist unconsciously within the Book of Mormon worldview, they also actively helped create this worldview. They had a vital hand in building the traditions within which they lived and understood the world. Cox's straightforward, Book of Mormon-oriented descriptions reveal only a small, passive part of how women interacted with this scripture.

When LDS women and men accepted the Book of Mormon, they rejected both the Catholic reliance on a line of temporally continuous apostolic power, and the Protestant faith focused on localized leadership and individual interpretation of the Bible. The Book of Mormon introduced a new, American scriptural narrative, and just as importantly, it described a lay apostolic and revelatory power that originated from nineteenth-century visitations by various biblical and extrabiblical characters. This presumably unadulterated divine power cut through what Mormon viewed as centuries of corrupted Christian belief and practice. Well into the twentieth century, viewed as dissenting radicals by the mainstream American religious establishment, LDS faithful lived in a religious culture that scripturally recentered Judeo-Christian religious history within the American context.

Marcel Sarot has argued that the Book of Mormon is an example of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of an "invented tradition"—but a specifically religious case of this phenomenon (Sarot 2001). Sarot uses Karl Popper's discussion of tradition as an expansive wedge to make Hobsbawm's concept more flexible and more relevant to the historical study of religion. Perhaps most usefully, Sarot widens Hobsbawm's concept to include

not just rituals and symbols, but most aspects of religious life, including narrative and scriptural elements. Sarot explains this concept of tradition:

A tradition is a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules, which presuppose a factual context. Traditions may help us 1. To discern order in a *prima facie* chaotic world, 2. to know how to act within this world, 3. to participate in groups and communities, 4. to claim an identity for ourselves, 5. to let other people know what we expect of them, and 6. to change the contexts within which we live. These rules seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. Traditions need not be invariable, but they do need to exhibit a certain degree of continuity over time. (Sarot 2001, 27)

For Sarot, traditions are the structuring, but flexible guidelines, assumptions, practices, and expectations that members of a religious community live within and, when necessary, modify.

Sarot is not entirely clear on whether he considers Mormonism as a whole a new tradition and the Book of Mormon simply one aspect of that tradition, or whether he considers the Book of Mormon itself a tradition along with other traditions that make up Mormonism as a religious community—temple rituals, weekly worship, tithing, patriarchal blessings. His interpretation seems to assume that latter, and, as I hope the following discussion demonstrates, the idea that a religious community is made up of numerous, sometimes externally and internally contradictory and changing traditions represents most accurately and usefully how this and other religious groups actually exist and operate. Refining this Hobsbawm-Sarot model, in this case study, women writers were agents of tradition making—one group among many similar agents within their religious community. They looked to the Book of Mormon tradition for guidance, but also provided conflicting, woman-centered guidance on how this tradition was shaped in concert with the other traditions, elements, and membership segments of the Mormon community. Traditions within religious groups are many, and

many even seemingly incompatible individuals, influences, and points of view combine to create them.

As a key tradition within the LDS repositioning of Judeo-Christian culture—from the Mormon point of view, a reawakening—the Book of Mormon created a religious narrative that emphasized the importance of fatherhood and patriarchal authority. Thus, the Book of Mormon tells of a series of prophet-patriarchs who either led their families and communities along the true, godly path, or towards religious destruction. Lawrence Foster has noted this recurring theme of family disorder and structuring in the Book of Mormon: “Indeed, the restoration of family ties was implicit in the commission Joseph Smith said had been given in his vision of September 21, 1823—when, according to his account, the angel Moroni told him that he would bring forth the Book of Mormon” (Foster 1984, 132). The Book of Mormon was to be a definitive model for ideal patriarchal family, gender, and divine interactions.

Founder Joseph Smith sought to redress what he felt was the corrupting imbalance of authority between the genders. For him, the original church had declined because the role of the father within the family and the church had corroded. Smith reacted against a nineteenth-century mainstream American culture that promoted or simply assumed mothers to be the central moral anchor of the family. The nineteenth century was the heyday of what has been termed the “cult of domesticity” and, particularly, the cult of motherhood. By way of describing this ethos, Ann Douglas notes:

The cult of motherhood was nearly as sacred in mid-nineteenth-century America as the belief in some version of democracy. Books on mothers of famous men, especially Mary Washington, mother of George Washington, poured from the presses in the 1840s–1850s; their message was that men achieved greatness because of the instruction and inspiration they received from their mothers. (Douglas 1988, 74)

In the popular and religious press, motherhood was adulated and described in glowing and idealized terms as the foundation of families

and societies. Religion and the family were “feminized,” to use Douglas’ term. Women became domestic and spiritual centers who, through their sacrifice and selflessness, controlled the behavior and characters of their husbands and children.

Smith, and then his successor, Brigham Young, sought to reorder this perceived disorganization by instituting a church based on ascending levels of lay patriarchal, priesthood power, and also establishing the practice of polygamy. Their scriptural, patriarchal focus was reflected transparently in the familial and institutional structures of the LDS Church. They made the father-patriarch the pivot point around which the family and the church rotated. Elizabeth Kane, a sympathetic non-Mormon who visited the LDS community in the 1870s was forcibly struck with the patriarchal focus of the society, likening it to the biblical model in which Smith and Young self-consciously found inspiration: “During my whole stay in Utah, I have found the poetry of the Bible running in my mind. I have felt myself to be living in that old Syrian work amid a people whose ways are like those of the ancient pastoral folk to whom Isaiah spoke” (Kane 1995, 129).

In the Hobsbawm-Sarot model, the Book of Mormon was a tradition that claimed to leapfrog back and activate and reinterpret part of the biblical, Christian narrative in order to provide explanation and continuity for a community undergoing a radical shift in familial and social structure. The Book of Mormon authoritatively explained how and why the patriarch was the driving social, religious, and familial force within the Mormon community. This was how God ordained society in the beginning, and it was how God’s chosen people had to live in order to take part in a reactivated and authentic relationship with God. According to the Book of Mormon, the patriarch was the prophetic figure through whom the community authoritatively received God’s will and God’s words. These patriarch/prophets were the religious light towards which the ancient (and modern) Mormon communities turned for direction. Within the scripture, these patriarchs provided a cohesive narrative that ordered the LDS world, showed members how to act and participate within this world, gave religious models for behavioral

expectations, and, thus, actively changed the religious world in which members lived (Sarot 2001, 27).

This male-centered scriptural, institutional, and social focus did not deter women from joining the LDS Church and embracing the Book of Mormon as a meaningful religious document. However, LDS women did not simply accept the patriarchal focus of the Book of Mormon; they actively interpreted this new scriptural tradition for their own circumstances. At around the time Martha Cragun Cox was making her way across Arizona, as a group, women of the church were undergoing their own time of transition as they moved from limited access to prophetic, revelatory authority and actions, and toward the modern LDS Church where female institutional and prophetic presence is, generally speaking, more circumscribed and controlled.² At this crucial time of religious standardization and rationalization (1880–1920), LDS women writers played an important role in how the Book of Mormon was integrated into the modern church. These writers helped to negotiate what parts of the Book of Mormon were interpreted and participated in creating and validating the process of tradition making. They sought to make the scripture effective and meaningful for their own lives and priorities.

To do this, Mormon women writers selectively focused on two Book of Mormon episodes: the story of the stripling warriors and the LDS reinterpretation of the fall and Eve. Publishing in the *Woman's Exponent*, the semiofficial publication of the Mormon women's auxiliary, the Relief Society, LDS women explored and discussed these stories and, thereby, adapted them to voice female concerns and to support a definable women's culture and authority within the Mormon community. Balancing the Book of Mormon focus on prophet-patriarchs, these women writers emphasized the importance of motherhood within the plan of salvation. By interpreting these stories in conjunction with the Old and New Testaments, as well as through a filter of long-standing

2. For a full discussion of this pivotal time period and its institutional changes, see Alexander 1986.

Victorian gender norms, women writers shared in and shaped the theological discourses of their community.

Further, by presenting these stories within the context of religious, but popular literature, women writers participated in an extended, continuing, and often subtextual discussion about what tradition was and how it should be comprehended and enacted. They played a part in negotiating the theological contents of their religion, but they also helped to structure how their religious community internally understood scriptural tradition, history, and interpretation. At this transitional time, for women writers, the Book of Mormon tradition became a combination of scriptural and authoritative institutional revelation combined with more communal public and literary discussions that were fueled by individual prophetic encounters with the divine. Though ostensibly based in obedience to LDS scripture and institutional, patriarchal prophecy, in this case study, in practice, this Mormon tradition became a kind of contained, textual conversation generated by women.

Sarot has developed the term, “counterfactuals,” in order to better grasp the dynamic of how traditions are generated within religious communities. For Sarot, counterfactuals are events or facts that, from the point of view of scholars or outsiders, are open to question, but, from the point of view of members of a religious community, are major generators of meaning and symbolism. They are events, facts, or concepts that serve as a focus of a new tradition—and that must be believed as fact in order to serve as this focus of the community. He writes, “Thus, though the truth of the counterfactual cannot be ascertained, its untruth should not be established either” (Sarot 2001, 33). Sarot argues that the Book of Mormon is an exception to the rule because members continue to believe in the scripture, though it has been proven that Smith was the author of the scripture and borrowed many points from Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* (33). Putting aside the controversy about the origin of the Book of Mormon, about which there are countless scholarly views both within and without the LDS community, perhaps we should not single out the Book of Mormon and Mormonism as an exception to the rule. Most religious groups contain elements

of tradition that outsiders and scholars believe are not factually true, but members accept on some level as truth. Humans are able to hold simultaneously starkly contradictory beliefs—oftentimes without much difficulty, and even with a perceptive self-consciousness. More important to understanding any religious group or tradition within a group is to more fully understand how and why traditions develop and become meaningful and authoritative within a community.

As this case study will show, traditions are not simply generated from above and accepted *in toto* from the members below. The Book of Mormon as, from Sarot's point of view, a crucial "counterfactual," was accepted as divinely generated scripture by most members of the early Mormon community. Yet it had to be adapted and interpreted in order to function effectively within the community; it had to be integrated into existing and emerging social, cultural, and religious structures and traditions. In this instance, LDS women writers who also lived within a larger American culture that espoused rather different gender values from their chosen faith community, selected certain, relevant episodes within the narrative. Then, utilizing other traditions within the Mormon community, including direct, individual access to God, they spun out further interpretive possibilities for a seemingly inflexible and unchangeable scriptural tradition. As they negotiated and tested the elements of their religious community, LDS women writers and readers created their own scriptural, interpretive subtradition that inevitably influenced the more general Mormon scriptural tradition. Here, a tradition was so effective because it claimed to hark back to older days, but also because it was made relevant to the present day by those who had to deal with these present-day realities.

Necessary preconditions to negotiation: Literary and revelatory opportunities

Women were able to participate in the shaping of their community and their scriptural tradition because they had access to authoritative literary means—and they had issues on which they could speak

authoritatively. These developments are essential to understand as a prelude to setting up how and why LDS women writers participated in scriptural discussions.

The years 1880–1920 saw a renaissance in Mormon women’s literature. The *Woman’s Exponent* was the most important forum in which women of the LDS Church stretched their literary wings—it was a key part of this female literary efflorescence. The *Exponent* was founded in 1872 with the permission and encouragement of then church prophet, Brigham Young. However, its status within the Mormon community was ambiguous because of its somewhat fuzzy relationship with the Relief Society.

The Relief Society was the women’s auxiliary of the LDS Church that was begun in 1842 on impetus of women of the church, but with the blessing of then prophet, Joseph Smith. The organization was disbanded shortly after this when women members, including Smith’s wife, Emma Smith, openly opposed the practice of polygamy that Smith was advocating at this time. The organization was gradually and locally, and, finally, formally reorganized in Utah under the leadership of Eliza R. Snow, a plural wife of Smith and then Young, and a woman who was considered to be a prophetess because of her poetic talents and her ties to the first church prophets.

In its early Utah incarnation, the Relief Society was somewhere between a woman’s parallel to the priesthood and a church auxiliary for women. Like the priesthood, it was organized from the ward (parish) to general level and had similar, repeating levels of triadic and committee leadership. However, key leaders at all levels were selected and installed by male leaders of the church. Though members of the Relief Society did perform semiformal blessings on women before childbirth confinement, or on women who had reproductive or health problems, for the most part, members of the Relief Society looked after the less fortunate women and children of their communities, and also assisted families at times of childbirth, sickness, and death. The Relief Society had a distinctly practical, charitable mission. Nonetheless, the organization had a fairly wide range of autonomy within the church. Relief Society

members collected and maintained their own funds with which they supported the needy, built their own Relief Society meeting places, and ran the basic programs of the auxiliary.³

The *Woman's Exponent* had a similar, parallel existence. The tabloid-formatted periodical was financed with subscriptions and edited by women. Emmeline B. Wells was the editor for the lion's share of the periodical's existence, beginning her term in 1877 and stepping down only when the *Exponent* ended its run in 1914. The periodical was often described as the "organ" of the Relief Society.⁴ Though the Relief Society did not directly fund the *Exponent*, at least one president of the Relief Society urged that local Relief Societies appoint women to collect subscriptions among local members ("The Jubilee Celebration" 1892, 132). The *Exponent* reported and vigorously supported the Relief Society, extensively describing the work and meetings of the organization from the local to the general level. In turn, members of the Relief Society actively drummed up support for the *Exponent*. However, legally and officially, the two organizations remained separate. In many ways, this is a representative snapshot of how the LDS Church as a whole operated at this time; a certain decentralization and informality linked together members and their various church-related projects.

Throughout her tenure, Wells vigorously solicited subscriptions to keep the periodical on its feet, and she also strongly encouraged Mormon women to contribute their work for publication.⁵ The *Exponent* carried a wide range of genres including poetry, essays, reports, stories,

3. For details on the history and work of the Relief Society, see Derr et al. 1992.

4. "Brigham Young and Eliza R. Snow started the Woman's Exponent, over forty years ago . . . made it the organ of the Relief Society of the Church" ("Second Literary Child" 1915, 38).

5. Wells frequently inserted notices within the *Exponent* that encouraged women to support the paper with subscriptions ("Notice to Agents" 1891, 4). However, just as frequently she encouraged her readers to send in submissions for publication. In one instance, she exhorted her readers: "Sisters, if you have ideas that will benefit others put them upon paper and send them to the press, they will reach a larger number of people in that way, and by that means you may be sowing some good seed that will eventually bear fruit" ("Editorial Notes" 1891, 69).

sermons, obituaries, and epigrams—women could contribute just about any kind of literary work on just about any subject. This was a women's periodical dedicated to issues of interest to women, but it was also a religiously focused publication dedicated to spreading information and news about the LDS Church to members and nonmembers alike.

Though Wells continually and often unsuccessfully attempted to increase the flow of submissions, she was especially effective in inspiring those she knew personally to write for the *Exponent*. In addition to her editorship, Wells was a highly placed woman within the Relief Society central leadership, and a plural wife to Daniel Wells, a counselor in the church presidency of Brigham Young. Wells' close friends were often women who were similarly highly placed in the Relief Society leadership, or with close ties to the central male leadership circle of the church. The women who wrote for the *Exponent*, therefore, often were well respected by both men and women members of the LDS community.

As mentioned above, one of these women, Relief Society President Eliza R. Snow was believed to communicate prophetic thoughts by means of her poetry. She converted her poem, "Oh, My Father," into a hymn that became widely popular within the church throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. In many ways, Snow was the model for women to follow in combining literary and spiritual work in order to speak convincingly, theologically, and nonconfrontationally. She started a Mormon tradition of (often elite) women using poetic and literary means to speak with authoritative voices—voices that communicated by means of the *Exponent*, and had strong and deep resonance in the institutional church.

One of the reasons that Snow and her literary successors were able to speak theologically and authoritatively was that Mormonism held within it another, more general, formal tradition of individual revelation and access to the divine by every individual. Joseph Smith established this crucial LDS tradition when he described receiving visitations from God, Jesus, and angels while still a teenager. Even more relevant according to Mormon history, Smith translated the Book of Mormon while still in his early twenties. Members of the LDS Church felt that the communication and connection with the divine had been reopened in the latter days,

and while they looked to prophetic leaders such as Smith and Young for guidance, they also felt compelled by these weighty examples to find their own truths and answers from the ultimate divine source.

We see this understanding practice throughout the women's sources of this time period. In the July 15, 1884, edition of the *Exponent*, an author identified only as M. wrote approvingly about the increasing number of women writers in Utah, arguing forcefully that they were simply and by divine necessity expressing their connection and inspiration from God.

But why should not the women of Utah be able to write, and to write glorious sentiments, too? Are they not living under the voice and influence of inspiration? Have they not the Spirit of God within them to guide their thoughts and expression? And why should they not be permitted to write? The time has come when the Lord is not only willing that their voices shall be heard in the land, but His Spirit calls upon them to speak, and they feel that they must do it. The testimony of the truth which they have often borne to each other is burning within them and they feel they must give it to the world. (M. 1884, 31–21)

The author goes on to argue that though rough and difficult missionary work was not open to women, writing was the appropriate form for women to contribute to the community's internal and external missionary work. The *Exponent* communicated the personal religious testimonies and revelations of Mormon women to each other, and to the wider reading audience.

As the twentieth century progressed, public expression of personal revelation declined as the leadership of the LDS Church sought to standardize institutional structures and practices.⁶ The Relief Society also lost much of its limited autonomy and existence as this standardization process moved through all parts of the church. But, for the years we are

6. Thomas G. Alexander has written extensively on this process of centralization and standardization that began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated as the twentieth century progressed (Alexander 1986).

examining, women writers, especially women of the elite inner circle of leadership, had access to a literary vehicle of expression designed purposefully to showcase and encourage their theological, revelatory expressions. Their literary voices were extensions of the wider, Mormon tradition of individual revelation, and, following the example of Eliza Snow, also deepened a Mormon subtradition of women speaking authoritatively through textual and literary means. It was from within this LDS female literary tradition that women contributed to the wider, scriptural Book of Mormon tradition.

Women in the Book of Mormon: A tradition of negotiation

The Book of Mormon introduced very few new women characters into Mormon theological discussions.⁷ Only three Book of Mormon women characters are mentioned by name—Sariah, Abish, and Isabel—and even these three are only minor players in the overarching narrative of the scriptures.⁸ For the most part, in the Book of Mormon, women are mentioned in the collective and usually in reference to family connections as mothers, wives, and daughters.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that a collective female character is one of the most mentioned and most meaningful Book of Mormon figure within LDS women's literature. The mothers of the stripling warriors appear in the book of Alma in a description of one of the continuing conflicts between factions of the Nephites and Lamanites. The Nephites were the descendants of the first Book of Mormon patriarch Lehi's godly son, Nephi, and the Lamanites were the descendants

7. An article in the *Woman's Exponent* noted: "It is somewhat noticeable how little prominence is given to womankind in the historical narrative of the Book of Mormon, and unfortunately when mention is made of her it too frequently grows out of man's sins and her misfortunes" (G. 1880, 7–8).

8. Sariah has the greatest part to play. As the wife of Lehi, the first prophet of the Book of Mormon who leads his family from Jerusalem to the Americas, she even appears in dialogue with her husband and family. She appears in the dialogue of 1 Nephi 5:1–8 at first berating her husband for his prophesying and then praising God for leading and inspiring her family.

of Lehi's rebellious son, Laman. In this particular episode, a group of Lamanites had gone over to the side of the Nephites and had pledged not to shed any more blood so that, in the ensuing armed conflicts, they were not able to help their Nephite allies. Their culturally Nephite sons had not taken this pledge and, so, two thousand of them gathered under the command of the Nephite leader Helaman.⁹ They were very young and had never fought in a war. Nevertheless, before their first conflict with the Lamanites, they were not afraid because "they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" (Alma 56:47). And, indeed, they not only successfully routed the Lamanites, all two thousand survived the battle because "they had fought as if with the strength of God; yea, never were men known to have fought with such miraculous strength" (Alma 56:56). After this first conflict, sixty more young boys joined the group and they once again proved themselves and their mothers' faith as they defended a Nephite city from the Lamanites without a single death, even as their allies in the Nephite army fell by the hundreds (Alma 57:18–27).

These unnamed, yet aggressively influential mothers spoke most meaningfully to Mormon women living in the late nineteenth century. As noted, when Joseph Smith instituted polygamous families modeled on his interpretation of the Old Testament patriarchal families, he attempted to reverse the Victorian trend that put women at the spiritual center of the home. Yet Victorian gender norms lingered and even prospered harmoniously in the LDS community. An 1880 editorial in the *Woman's Exponent* stated: "It is conceded that woman's nature is more susceptible to spiritual impressions and the growth and culture of these finer faculties than that of man, that women possess a greater degree of the elements of character that tend heavenward that lead to the worship of a Supreme Being" (Lack of Spirituality" 1880, 92). Following this common understanding, LDS women writers selected and focused on the silently influential mothers of the stripling warriors as among the most relevant female role models in the Book of Mormon. For an era

9. The stripling warriors and their fathers are first mentioned in Alma 53:10–22.

that elevated to truism the saying “the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world,” these unnamed, but powerfully influential mothers stood out. These mothers took precedence in women’s literary discussions about the Book of Mormon.

The June 1880 issue of the *Exponent* offered on its first page an article entitled “The influence of the Home” that extols the far-reaching influence of the mother and home.¹⁰ This same issue carried an article titled “Woman amongst the Nephites.” The article mentions very briefly the three named women of the Book of Mormon and then goes on to speak in generalities about the relatively elevated position of Israelite and Nephite women (G. 1880). Unintentionally picking up themes from the first article on the influence of the home, the author, however, devotes a long paragraph to the story of the mothers of the stripling warriors, noting:

Their mothers’ teachings and their mothers’ prayers were weapons of destruction to their foes and shields of defence to themselves. They went forth conquering and to conquer, and the All-seeing One only knows how much the teachings of those saintly women effected towards the preservation of the Nephite commonwealth from imminent destruction. (G. 1880, 7–8)

The anonymity of the mothers of the stripling warriors confirmed their prophetic authenticity. Balancing the Book of Mormon focus on patriarchal prophets, this author combined contemporary gender norms with authoritative scriptural narrative to reemphasize the spiritual importance, even precedence of the mother. Unnamed and unknown, these mothers saved their community with their faith physically and militarily embodied in their soldier sons.

Throughout Mormon women’s literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, LDS women writers were very engaged with another scriptural mother—the mother of all humanity—Eve. Eve is

10. “All our great men and women who have obtained notoriety for their works, say that to home, and most of all to their mothers, is due credit for fame they have gained” (World 1880, 1).

one of the few women characters who crosses over from the Bible and appears in the Mormon scriptures. In their work, LDS women writers pulled together different strands of the Mormon and biblical scriptural narratives in order to fully renovate and elevate the figure of Eve and, more generally, mothers. In these textual conversations, we see even more clearly how women writers argued for the theological vitality of women in LDS history, past and present.

The most important part of this renovation lies in the Mormon reinterpretation of the fall. The fall became a necessary step within the overarching movement towards progressive salvation. In a deathbed sermon, the first Book of Mormon patriarch, Lehi, reveals to his sons this new view of the fall. Lehi initially appears to be rehearsing a fairly standard version of the traditional biblical story of the fall: the devil as a serpent tempts Eve with the forbidden fruit, and Adam and Eve eat and are cast out of garden with the various curses laid upon them. However, the story here takes a different turn as Lehi explains that this seeming transgression actually is an absolutely integral part of God's plan for humanity's spiritual progress. He says:

And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed, he would not have fallen; but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created, must have remained in the same state which they were, after they were created; and they must have remained for ever, and had no end.

And they would have had no children; wherefore, they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. (2 Nephi 2:22–23)

At this time, the Mormon plan of salvation promised that humans could become divinized and participate in the process of the creation and divinization of other worlds.¹¹ However, a key part of this divinization was that humans required the knowledge of good and evil and

11. The most famous explication of this concept is "The King Follett Discourse," a funeral sermon delivered by Joseph Smith upon the death of a man named King Follett. For a full text of the sermon, see Larson 1976.

the will to freely choose the right path over the wrong way.¹² Human beings were literal spirit children of God and his female divine partner. Originally born into a preexistent state, they had to be born into human bodies in order to be tested in the mortal existence. Utilizing their knowledge and their free will, ideally, they proved themselves as they suffered and found their way past the stumbling blocks of mortality to the final destination of ultimate divinization.

The LDS scriptures revise the story of the fall, but, significantly, they do not positively refashion the image of Eve. In the above story and in a different retelling of the fall in another part of the Mormon scriptures, the Pearl of Great Price, Eve is described as unwittingly falling for blandishments of the serpent devil, even though the ultimate outcome of the scenario is necessary and good (Moses 4–5). God the Father controls the situation and steers it to his own liking. When Lehi described the fall as necessary, it is Adam who does the falling, not Eve, even though just a few paragraphs before it is clearly Eve who gives in to the serpent. In the Mormon scriptural stories, therefore, though the fall is reinterpreted, there is little that directly acquits Eve for her role as the one who initiates the necessary series of events—or that valorizes her for her world-changing choice.¹³

When we examine Mormon women’s literature of this period, we see an extended and lively conversation about Eve. Negative interpretations of Eve persist in some good form throughout the literature. This is not surprising given that, at this period, a large number of church members were first generation converts still carrying with them beliefs from the religions of their upbringings. In one case, assuming that Eve’s act was rebelliousness against God and needed punishment, the unnamed writer of an article on polygamy claims that the marriage practice serves

12. A few lines down, Lehi states: “And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil, for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27).

13. As one example of a more positive evaluation of Eve, in another part of the scriptures, the Doctrines and Covenants, Joseph Smith has a vision of heaven that includes “our glorious Mother Eve” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:39).

as compensatory and intensive suffering that will eventually lead to the lifting of Eve's curse.¹⁴ Similarly, the pseudonymous Hehmita uses the serpent in the garden as an example of how women needed to be especially careful to guard against spiritual fraud and deception: "This very monster appeared before Mother Eve in the Garden of Eden; 'imitating' all the affability he recollected having seen in the Mansions of Glory; for if possible, to elude aversion, and fascinate Eve, so she should not be able to discern the fraud" (Hehmita 1881, 121). In these two examples, the writers fit the negative interpretation of Eve into characteristically LDS discussions about polygamy and the best way to lead a virtuous life. An unwitting Eve is deceived, though presumably according to God's plan. The mission for modern women was to avoid or make up for their ancestor's mistakes.

More commonly, however, within Mormon women's literature of the time, Eve is a wise and knowing woman who—somehow already in the possession of free will—safely guides the course of human salvation on the right path. God gives her the choice and she makes the right decision. Eve becomes a savior figure: she introduces necessary mortality and suffering that Jesus will end upon his Second Coming.

Sometimes women writers simply assume a renovated Eve in their descriptions. Hannah T. King wrote a series of articles for the *Exponent* about women of the scriptures. She begins the series with Eve: "Eve, the sovereign mother of all living. She stands in close proximity to God the Father, for she is the life giving spirit of the innumerable hosts that have figured upon this earth, the one grand, stupendous act of her life is all that is told of her in the Bible and it is enough" (King 1903, 41–42). In another instance, an article describes how Brigham Young walked into a woman's meeting and, in awe at the powerful female spiritual presence

14. "The effect of their [plural wives'] examples upon the rising generation will be of immense value, and as the generations roll by nobler types of womanhood will be developed, until the penalty laid upon woman in the beginning, that 'thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee,' will be repealed, and she will stand side by side with man, full of that queenly dignity and self-control which will make her his suitable companion rather than his inferior' (Topics of the Times' 1884, 157).

he felt, he exclaimed: “What do I see before me? A congregation of Eves” (“Utah County Silk Association” 1880, 56).

Sometimes women writers are much more self-conscious that they are arguing against the grain. An unnamed author, using Lehi’s speech about the fall, wrote into the *Cincinnati Enquirer* arguing forcefully that the blame must be lifted from Eve. The article was reprinted in the *Exponent*. Noting that blame for the fall was usually assigned fully to Eve, the article suggests that, from the point of view of the Mormon understanding of salvation, Adam appears as the potential threat: “We could with as much propriety accuse him of being less ambitious and enterprising than the woman; ‘if he could do only as he was told,’ as the writer says, ‘he would be no higher in the scale of moral being than the beasts, who indeed know neither virtue nor vice’” (“Answer to Woman and Sin” 1884, 145). For this author, it is Eve who took the risk of divine wrath to bequeath to humanity potential divinity. She is the unsung and unfairly maligned hero of the story.

Perhaps the most eloquent advocate for the reinterpreted Eve was S. W. Richards, a male church leader who often contributed to the *Exponent*. In an 1894 essay, he very clearly spells out the eternal consequences of Eve’s actions. “When in the garden, woman was master of the situation; for a time she held the destiny of the world in her hands, and not until man yielded to her persuasive power did she commit that destiny to the keeping of her lord” (S. W. Richards 1894, 81). According to Richards, Eve pleaded with Adam to join her: “to share with her the conditions by which, and by which alone, they could become as Gods, knowing both good and evil, and thereby inherit those attributes without which there is no God” (81). In these views, a fully cognizant Eve must argue with her mate—not to deceive him, but to persuade him to join in the unpleasant task of initiating the slog through mortality so that humans have the opportunity to reach a final salvation, a final divinization. A Victorian-styled Eve stands at the spiritual center of the first family and quietly uses her influence for the good, then fades into the background, only reappearing to sacrificially take unfair blame.

Somewhere in between the negative and positive interpretations of this female scriptural figure, Eve becomes a polemical, even humorous

vehicle for discussion about the respective roles of men and women. In a lecture before a local Utah W.S.A. (Women's Suffrage Association), Amelia B. Sidwell dismisses the blame attached to Eve, noting that she was forced to wander alone for ages in a garden, deprived of her female companions that she knew in the preexistence. Her only company was Adam, who, Sidwell argues: "If I am allowed to judge Adam by most men of my acquaintance, he was probably very indifferent company, as men's conversational brilliance is seldom exerted to any considerable extent for the benefit or entertainment of a wife" (Sidwell 1890, 136). Taking a slightly different tack, L. L. Greene Richards poetically and enviously imagines Eve's idyllic existence in the garden where she had nothing to do but enjoy the beautiful nature:

No dishes to wash after breakfast,
 No planning of what to have next,
 For luncheons or dinner or supper,
 No man disappointed and vexed. (L. L. G. Richards 1899, 28)

LDS women writers utilized a now unfairly maligned Eve as a kind of literary catharsis to release frustration about their own seemingly mundane troubles and injustices. The woman who set humans on the path to divinization through humanization offered a model of how to think about the complicated religious question of free will and the purpose of mortal life. She also served as a literary safety valve for women to express their frustrations about the daily grind of dishes, meals, and family obligations. She gave women writers an opportunity to directly, though nonconfrontationally, critique the patriarchal family structure so emphasized in the Book of Mormon. For these writers, she was a creative, female model in an otherwise overwhelmingly male scriptural lineup.

Interestingly and tellingly, today, within official talks and pronouncements, the dominant interpretation of Eve is overwhelmingly positive.¹⁵ Eve (often in conjunction with Adam) is shown to have

15. One of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Dallin Oaks, noted in a general conference talk: "It was Eve who first transgressed the limits of Eden in order to initiate the

consciously made the right choice for her descendants and, thus, to have been a crucial player in the Mormon plan of salvation. Women's early literary work helped to create this scriptural interpretation, and the tradition of noncentralized Mormon scriptural, prophetic discussions that continue within both formal and informal church talks, testimonies, periodicals, and books—despite the more controlled and standardized twenty-first century church. Even today lively intra- and extrachurch interchanges continue about how to interpret the Book of Mormon. In the March 2004 *Sunstone*, a Mormon magazine not affiliated with the church, four LDS members of varying professions and backgrounds wrestle with how to reconcile the Book of Mormon claims of an Israelite descent for Native American with the DNA evidence that Native Americans are genetically related to Asian populations (*Sunstone* 2004). As a vital religious tradition, the Book of Mormon continues to be interpreted and adapted in order to fit the changing social, cultural, and in this case, scientific context within which Mormon members live.

Conclusion

Added to the existing biblical tradition, the Book of Mormon shaped the beliefs and practices of the Mormon community. As with many millennialist groups of the early to mid-nineteenth century United States, within the early LDS community, religious traditions—especially as these were manifested in established clergy or institutional authority—were examined with deep skepticism and suspicion. For LDS members, this new scripture upended American Christianity, and the understanding of tradition as an abstract concept. With the opening of direct communication with God, members looked to fresh prophecy and scripture for guidance. When Joseph Smith described his first, teenaged vision,

conditions of mortality. Her act, whatever its nature, was formally a transgression but eternally a glorious necessity to open the doorway toward eternal life. Adam showed his wisdom by doing the same. And thus Eve and 'Adam fell that men might be' (2 Ne. 2:25)" (Oaks 1993).

he offered a new and different alternative to the established religious institutions of the day.

However, LDS members inevitably adapted these “new” scriptural and prophetic traditions to fit times and circumstances. In the religious, popular women’s literature of the *Exponent*, we see part of the process of how women writers communally sculpted the scriptural tradition. We see the give-and-take about the role of women within the Mormon theological and scriptural tradition. We see also how, in practice, the women writers of the community negotiated their LDS revelatory understanding of authority; how they moved between newly established scripture, current social norms, and the personal revelatory aspect of Mormonism that was to them so important a part of latter-day communication between God and the church. Christian history was stood on its head with a new set of scriptures, at the same time that the concept of scriptural tradition was redefined. Mormon women writers helped to create another conception of this tradition in which individual, in this case mostly female, voices participated in a negotiating, theological discussion in order to adapt the Book of Mormon to their nineteenth-century women’s lives. For a time, women writers created theological discourse and, thereby, helped to establish the parameters of theological, scriptural tradition for their religious community.

With this case study, we see that religious groups are made up of multiple traditions as described in the Hobsbawm-Sarot model. Further, these traditions provide meaning, structure, and stability to members of religious groups. But, we also see that traditions are not simply imposed from above. The successful tradition is one that passes through many different interpretive hands. Finally, when we look very closely, we witness that even within religious traditions, there are multiple and contradictory interpretations and voices. Traditions are continually negotiated, and shifting. They can never be fully grasped, because individuals and groups are always adapting them to fit personal, historical, and cultural circumstances. They are the ever-shifting foundations upon which religious communities stand.

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