

**Emmeline B. Wells:
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Carol Cornwall Madsen

Two thousand suffragists packed DeGuiver’s opera house in Atlanta, Georgia, for the annual convention of the National-American Woman’s Suffrage Association on 2 February 1895. Emmeline B. Wells, delegate from Utah, had just concluded her report on the status of woman’s suffrage in Utah Territory. With Utah’s constitutional convention only a month away, she expressed confidence the convention delegates would see fit to include woman’s suffrage in the organic law of the new state. She reviewed the work of the Utah Woman’s Suffrage Association, which she headed, in achieving a favorable disposition of the convention delegates toward this issue and expressed hope that Utah would join Wyoming and Colorado as the only three states in the Union granting suffrage to women.

It was a satisfying and long-awaited occasion for the Mormon suffragist. But the moment was marked indelibly as a milestone when Susan B. Anthony, the grande dame of the suffrage movement, came forward and put her arm around the Utah delegate. The stately suffrage leader towered above the tiny Emmeline, but their dedication to the cause of women knew no such disparity. Enthusiastically endorsing the work of her Utah colleague, the elder Anthony spoke with such fervor that the audience was visibly moved by this spontaneous display of deep affection.¹

For Emmeline Wells it was the capstone to twenty-five years of public work in behalf of women matched only, fifteen years later, by another expression of confidence in her leadership. In 1910, at eighty-two, she was appointed general president of the Relief Society, the highest ecclesiastical position available to Mormon women.

How did it happen that this tiny Mormon woman could rise to such prominence in two seemingly diverse spheres of activities? The answer lies in the fact that to Emmeline B. Wells they were not so dissimilar. They were tributaries of the same stream, following their own course toward the advancement of women. Appraising the broadened opportunities for women that had occurred during her lifetime, she linked those achievements with the purposes God had for his children. “The inspiring influences that have been causing this uplifting,” she wrote in a 1902 Relief Society handbook,

are all in the program marked out for the children of our Father in Heaven; let those who *dare*, deny it! but as sure as the Scriptures are true, and they *are true*, so sure woman must be instrumental in bringing about the restoration of that equality which existed when the world was created. . . . Perfect

equality then and so it must be when all things are restored as they were in the beginning.²

Emmeline Wells's entrance into these two public spheres came almost by chance. The circumstances of her life, her interest in writing, and her deep concern for the condition of women all merged propitiously with the vehicle that would provide her passage into these spheres, the *Woman's Exponent*. Established in 1872 as a Mormon woman's journal to provide a forum of public expression on women's issues, the *Woman's Exponent* spread a network of communication to women throughout Utah Territory and even beyond and became a broker of information for the three women's organizations of the Church: the Relief Society, the Young Woman's Mutual Improvement Association, and the Primary.

First a contributor, later associate editor, and within five years editor, Emmeline Wells used the thirty-seven years of her editorship to speak clearly and boldly on issues of greatest concern to her as a Mormon woman. It is through these editorials and her forty-seven diaries, now located in the Brigham Young University archives, that she is best studied and most completely understood. She became a leading exponent of the Mormon cause and served for more than thirty years as a connection between the women of the Church and the national women's councils.

Near the end of her life she wrote in an editorial: "I believe in women, especially thinking women."³ Her faith was well placed, for she had learned early in life the necessity for women to think and act for themselves. Deserted by her husband and deprived of her newborn son by the time she was sixteen, Emmeline stepped into a whirlwind of events which would carry her a long way from the pleasant, stable, and secure New England setting of her childhood.

Born on 29 February 1838 in Petersham, Massachusetts, Emmeline Belos Woodward joined the Church as a girl of fourteen. The next year she married James Harris and moved with him and his parents the following spring to Nauvoo, Illinois. Six months later the Prophet Joseph Smith was dead, her parents-in-law had apostatized, and Emmeline had lost both child and husband. The following year, at seventeen, she became a plural wife of fifty-year-old Newel K. Whitney, and in 1846 she joined the exodus of Saints to the West.

Emmeline bore Newel two daughters after arriving in Utah but was then thrown again on her own resources upon his death in 1850. Marrying a third time, in 1852, as the seventh wife of Daniel H. Wells, she seemed to have finally found a measure of security. The prosperous Wells was at various times a counselor to Brigham Young, mayor of Salt Lake City, superintendent of Public Works, chancellor of the University of Deseret, and lieutenant general of the Nauvoo Legion. His other wives shared a large home on South Temple Street known as the "big house," while Emmeline

and her five daughters—three more were born to her after her marriage to Daniel H. Wells—lived in a smaller home several blocks away.

When Wells's financial circumstances faltered, Emmeline was obliged to make adjustments. Like many other women, she found it difficult to meet the exigencies that often accompanied plural marriage. Learning to become both economically and emotionally self-reliant was a painful process for her and caused her frequently and apologetically to explain, "No wonder I'm forced to be strong minded."⁴ A resolution evolved from this self-appraisal which eventually became her own course of action:

I am determined to train my girls to habits of independence so that they never need to trust blindly but understand for themselves and have sufficient energy of purpose to carry out plans for their own welfare and happiness.⁵

The process toward independence was expedited by her association with the *Woman's Exponent*, and though nearly a decade of diaries is filled with feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and constant need for "the shelter and protection of a strong arm," such entries became fewer after 1879 and disappeared altogether within a few years.

Her focus began to move outward; her attention transferred from the dissatisfactions she felt in her own life to those experienced by women generally. At this time she expressed what would become her primary motivation for half a century: "I desire to do all in my power to help elevate the condition of my own people, especially women," adding later, and to "better her condition mentally, morally, spiritually, temporally."⁶ Igniting and fueling this commitment was the continual flow of calumny from the eastern press and pulpit against LDS women, giving Emmeline the determination to counter the attacks along with a similar determination to expose the social inequities undermining the position of women generally.

An unusual set of circumstances arose which enabled Emmeline Wells to serve both purposes simultaneously, circumstances which inadvertently united the cause of national suffragists with that of Mormon women, an unlikely alliance at the outset. In 1870 Utah women were given the right to vote by the territorial legislature. For the previous three years various members of Congress had proposed bills granting women suffrage in the territories primarily as an experiment but also as a ploy to enable Mormon women in Utah Territory to unshackle themselves from the chains of polygamy, hopefully stamping out the practice altogether. While Congress vacillated, the Utah Territorial Legislature acted upon the proposed measure and passed it unanimously. Woman suffrage became law in Utah on 12 February 1870. The motives for adopting such progressive legislation may have been varied, but it was obvious that taking the initiative for such a gesture measurably countered the "enslaved" image of Mormon women. A hidden bonus for this action came in the form of unforeseen support for the Mormon cause by national suffragists when suffrage became the scapegoat of

polygamy. For, unlike the prognosis of anti-polygamists, Mormon women did not rise up en masse and vote down the practice. Congressional strategy thus made an about-face. The new posture was to strengthen existing antipolygamy legislation by adding stiffer penalties, including disfranchisement of Mormon women. Declaring they were ready "to render all the aid in their power to fight this proposition,"⁷ national suffragists increased their efforts each time Congress considered disfranchising Utah women.

While the United States Supreme Court was deliberating the constitutionality of antipolygamy legislation in the Reynolds case of 1878, the time seemed propitious for Mormons to reinforce the battle on the national scene with supplementary support for their congressional delegate. Though other Utah women had made the initial contact with national suffragists as early as 1869, their independent efforts had not been recognized by Mormon officials or by suffragists as representative of the territory.⁸ Thus it was that Emmeline Wells and Zina Y. Williams were selected by Church leaders to perform a two-fold mission to Washington in 1879. The first was to memorialize Congress against proposed antipolygamy legislation that would invalidate existing plural marriages and illegitimize the children of such unions. Secondly, the two women were to attend the annual suffrage convention in order to cement relations with national suffragists in their common suffrage cause.

It was not easy for these two representatives of the much maligned women of Utah to brave the ridicule and derogation of easterners. They were, however, cordially met by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and given opportunity to speak at the convention. Not everyone was pleased to have the controversial Mormons join the suffrage cause. An article in the *Boston Woman's Journal*, organ of the American Woman's Suffrage Association, criticized these two women's presence at the convention, an attitude which noticeably disturbed the liberal Elizabeth Stanton. She answered, "If George Q. Cannon [Utah's delegate to Congress] can sit in the Congress of the United States without compromising that body on the question of Polygamy, I should think Mormon women might sit on our platform without making us responsible for their religious faith."⁹ Suffragists always made clear that their sympathies were not with the Mormon cause, per se, only against any move to use woman's suffrage as a weapon to strike at polygamy.¹⁰ Despite efforts of both Mormon women and national suffragists, the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, along with outlawing polygamy, carried among its stringent enforcement measures the repeal of woman's suffrage.

Emmeline Wells used the *Women's Exponent* as a vehicle through which to express her views on suffrage and on woman's position in the social order. Her first efforts for the *Woman's Exponent* were strong feminist arguments submitted under the name Blanche Beechwood. When she became editor, she used the editorial column to express these views and

soon dropped her pseudonym. But, interestingly, she added a new one, "Aunt Em." In tracing these writings, one finds an interesting literary dichotomy—a dichotomy which characterized Emmeline herself. While articles by Blanche Beechwood and editorials by Emmeline B. Wells voiced primarily feminist ideas, "Aunt Em" provided a balancing counterpoint. Reflecting the ideals of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular woman's magazine of the day, she wrote the typical sentimental pieces of that genre, eulogizing friends, romanticizing the past, and extolling nature as the source of cosmic truths.

Emmeline the woman was both of these voices. As feminist, suffragist, and organizer, she was a rebel with a cause. But she was also a romantic, embodying more the traces of the romantic literary legacy inherited by the Victorians than the ideals of womanhood developed by them. Measured by Barbara Welter's definition of the "true Victorian woman," Emmeline was only halfway in the fold. Both pious and pure, she was never domestic and only selectively submissive.¹¹

Her dyadic nature is beautifully demonstrated by two pieces of her writing, one, a diary entry, and the other, an *Exponent* article, written within days of each other. On 30 September 1874 an article by Blanche Beechwood appeared, posing the question:

Is there then nothing worth living for, but to be petted, humored and caressed, by a man? That is all very well as far as it goes, but that man is the only thing in existence worth living for I fail to see. All honor and reverence to good men; but they and their attentions are not the only source of happiness on the earth, and need not fill up every thought of woman. And when men see that women can exist without their being constantly at hand, that they can learn to be self-reliant or depend upon each other for more or less happiness, it will perhaps take a little of the conceit out of some of them.¹²

On the day this article appeared Emmeline wrote an extensive entry in her diary. Part of it reads:

Oh if my husband could only love me even a little and not seem so perfectly indifferent to any sensation of that kind, he cannot know the craving of my nature, he is surrounded with love on every side, and I am cast out. O my poor aching heart Where shall it rest its burden, only on the Lord, only to Him can I look every other avenue seems closed against me. . . . I have no one to go to for comfort or shelter no strong arm to lean upon no bosom bared for me, no protection or comfort in my husband.¹³

Her feminism served as a catharsis for these feelings as she struggled to come to terms with the conditions of her life which she could not control. Consciously or unconsciously, she addressed this and similar articles to her own husband, whose attention was a desired but absent element in her life. Thus the *Exponent* became in effect a game board for her, the opposing elements of both her nature and her situation the pawns she moved about at will.

As a feminist theorist and activist, Emmeline used both pen and petition, combining the “conservative and moralistic” stance of her contemporaries with the “libertarian and rationalist” style of the early feminist theorists.¹⁴ Her feminism reflected the major themes of the “woman question” that historian Nancy Cott identified and labeled as “sexual equality” and “sexual propriety.”¹⁵ Emmeline believed wholly in the principle of “sexual equality” espoused by Mary Wollstonecraft and other early theorists. As explained by Wollstonecraft, this idea was predicated on the assumption that both women and men partake of a common humanity, both are endowed by the creator with the capacity for rational thought, and both are responsible for their own “perfectability.” Restraints on individual growth and progress for either sex could not be justified. Almost a century later Emmeline explained this idea to her *Exponent* readers. “[Woman’s] highest motive is,” she wrote, “that she may be recognized as a responsible being, capable of judging for and maintaining herself, and standing upon just as broad, grand and elevated a platform as man.”¹⁶ Only by overcoming centuries of custom would women be able to “comprehend the advantage arising from the progress of independence of thought and action, and a knowledge for themselves.”¹⁷ She was convinced that if women had “the same opportunities for an education, observation and experience in public and private for a succession of years” it would be obvious that they are “equally endowed with man and prepared to bear [their] part on all general questions socially, politically, industrially, and educationally, as well as spiritually.”¹⁸ Her mission was to raise the consciousness of women to the point where they would no longer let lie dormant “the highest faculty of [their] nature—thought.” Women must be responsible for their own progress. “May it not be said of any of us . . .,” she counseled, “that we neglected to improve the talent committed to our care.”¹⁹

Woman’s distinctiveness rather than her similarity to man was the basis for the second major feminist theme, “sexual propriety.” This view assumed a unique woman’s sphere in which women performed specifically designated female duties, different from male responsibilities but equally valued. As long as women could justify their activities as essentially “female” in nature, they could expand the perimeters of that sphere. The emphasis on differences thus circumvented, at least at the outset, the issue of inferiority and superiority. The concept of an extended woman’s sphere not only gave it a socially acceptable instrumentality but did so while reinforcing its distinctive qualities.²⁰ Elements of both theories, equality and propriety, constituted feminism in the last century. Recognizing the inherent variances in the two views, Emmeline Wells borrowed discretely from both. That logical lapses occasionally occurred in her position only placed her more squarely in the mainstream of nineteenth century feminism whose parameters underwent repeated reexamination and definition throughout the century.

Emmeline saw that to function with excellence in either the home or in society, women needed to be educated and experienced. Many of the important issues of the day—reform, temperance, the woman question—all pointed significantly to the home, she told her readers, and she argued that

in the name of justice, reason and common sense, let woman be fortified and strengthened by every possible advantage, that she may be adequately and thoroughly fitted not only to grace the drawing room, and manage every department of her household, but to perform with skill and wisdom the arduous and elaborate work of molding and fashioning the fabrics of which society is to be woven.²¹

Thus women, whose mental capabilities were equal to those of men, should not be fettered in their efforts to obtain the skills and knowledge necessary for them to take an equal part in “the work of the world.” But she envisaged this partnership as beginning at home. Critical of the submissive or subservient role imposed on women by prevailing Victorian standards, she urged her *Exponent* readers to be something more than just a “toy”, a “painted doll”, a “household deity” or “a subject” rather than “a joint-partner in the domestic firm.”²² When women have learned to be “self-reliant and self-sustaining, and comprehend that in marriage there is a higher purpose than being a man’s pet or even housekeeper,” she averred, “they will . . . choose to become the wives of men who are living for lofty purposes.”²³ Almost plaintively, she queried: “Why is it not possible for man and woman to love each other truly, and dwell together in harmony, each according to the other all the freedom of thought, feeling, and expression they would grant to one who was not bound to them by indissoluble ties?”²⁴ She firmly believed that if men would recognize the advantages to themselves they would help develop woman’s powers rather than placing “almost insurmountable barriers to hinder their progress.”²⁵ Educating both men and women in the new definition of woman’s place was basic to the feminists, task.

A third dimension of Emmeline’s feminist philosophy found its roots in her Mormon beliefs, which not only encompassed elements of the first two ideologies but also broadened the base from which Emmeline viewed woman’s place and purpose in life. The concept of individual progression and accountability, a foundation stone of Mormonism’s plan of salvation, had no gender-based restrictions or limitations. It derived from the eternal principle of individual agency, explained by Apostle Erastus Snow in 1883:

We have come to the understanding that every soul of man, both male and female, high and low, is the offspring of God, that their spirits are immortal, eternal, intelligent beings, and that their entity depends upon their agency and independent action, which is neither trammelled by God himself nor allowed to be restrained by any of His creatures with His action and approval.²⁶

It was not the partiality of God, she affirmed, that created inequality of the sexes but the denial of opportunity to women to develop and utilize the rational powers with which they had been endowed. Any artificial barriers to individual growth and development were deplorable. No limits are set for what men can do, she observed. Women should enjoy similar freedom. "It is this longing for freedom," she explained, "that is inspiring . . . women . . . to make war against the bondage with which they have been enslaved, and seek, by every available means, to inspire a universal feeling among men and women for equal rights and privileges in the sphere God has assigned them."²⁷ And for Mormon women, woman's sphere was not the tightly defined domestic circle of the middle-class Victorians. Building a commonwealth in the West, they were constantly advised, was a mutual effort of women and men requiring business, mathematical, merchandising, medical, legal, educational, administrative, and organizational skills, especially from women, releasing men to use their strength in the harsh demands of building the physical structure of that commonwealth.²⁸

Emmeline and other Mormon feminists thus found institutional support for their views, and at a Relief Society conference in 1895, Joseph F. Smith further clarified his opinion regarding the woman question: "Why shall one [sex] be admitted to all the avenues of mental and physical progress and prosperity and the other be prohibited, and prescribed within certain narrow limits?" Affirming the right of a woman to be whatever she had capacity to be, he had a word for those who would restrain her:

Women may be found who seem to glory in their enthralled condition, and who caress and fondle the very chains and manacles which fetter and enslave them! Let those who love this helpless dependent condition and prefer to remain in it and enjoy it; but for conscience and for mercy's sake let them not stand in the way of those of their sisters who would be, and of right ought to be *free*.²⁹

While the Relief Society offered a means whereby women participated in the nontraditional vocations demanded by empire-building, its organization in Nauvoo was an event of singular importance to Mormon feminists. Although ostensibly formed for benevolent purposes, as its name indicates, the organization in time became an educational, economic, and spiritual resource for its members as well as for the general Church membership. Benevolent and reform societies had been formed as early as the late eighteenth century and proliferated in the area in which Mormonism was born.³⁰ Thus, many Mormon women were well acquainted with the structure and purposes of such an organization. But the women of Nauvoo were informed that the Relief Society was not to be another charitable or moral reform association. Formed "after the pattern of the priesthood," which the women understood as the saving power of God, it had been "organized according to the law of heaven," explained John Taylor, present

at its inception. Joseph Smith himself had told the women that the Church was not fully organized until the women were; and Elder Reynolds Cahoon, addressing the society, stated: "There are many Benevolent Societies abroad designed to do good, but not as this. Ours is according to the order of God, connected with the priesthood, according to the same good principles. Knowledge will grow out of it."³¹ Thus, while many of its functions and procedures resembled those of other women's groups of the period and while some members may well have belonged to such groups, this organization was perceived as distinct in origin and design.

Although Emmeline Wells did not participate in the Relief Society in Nauvoo, she learned of its beginnings from her life-long association with her plural sister-wife Elizabeth Ann Whitney, counselor to Emma Smith in the first Relief Society presidency. She heard the oft-repeated words of Joseph Smith to the women of the Society on 28 April 1842: "I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time—this is the beginning of better days to this Society."³² For Emmeline and numerous other Mormon women those words had prophetic meaning. Imposing a literal and universal interpretation on that symbolic gesture, they attached a direct relationship between that event in Nauvoo in 1842 and the Seneca Falls convention six years later, which marked the beginning of an organized woman's movement and gave to the world a "Declaration of Sentiments" enumerating woman's legal and social disabilities. The Declaration, patterned after the Declaration of Independence, cited man as having usurped woman's autonomy by denying "her inalienable right to the elective franchise"; by declaring her "civilly dead" upon marriage, thus denying her any claim to her own or her husband's property, wages, or children; by limiting her access to education and employment; by allowing her "a subordinate position" and participation in the churches; and by assigning her to "a sphere of action" independent of her own choice, thereby coming "to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life."³³ The organization of the Relief Society, Emmeline noted years later, opened

one of the most important eras in the history of woman. It presented the great woman-question to the Latter-day Saints, previous to the woman's rights organizations. The question did not present itself in any aggressive form as woman opposed to man, but as a co-worker and helpmeet in all that relates to the well-being and advancement of both, and mutual promoting of the best interests of the community at large.³⁴

For Emmeline and other LDS feminists, the nascent woman's movement was but a secular manifestation of the organization of Mormon women, both heralding a new age for women. Looking back at the two events, she was persuaded that "the key of knowledge was turned for her [woman], and men no longer had the same absolute sway."³⁵

Others perceived the same relationship. Louisa Lula Greene Richards, first editor of the *Woman's Exponent*, wrote in 1901:

[Joseph] declared when he organized the Sisterhood of the Church into the Relief Society, that he "turned the key in favor of woman." Since that time what a noble work has been accomplished in woman's favor by hundreds of heroic women in this and other nations, including many of the Society which the Prophet organized.³⁶

Susa Young Gates, daughter of Brigham Young, remarked, "From the hour the key was given, great and restless activity has marked every phase of womanly life."³⁷ Sarah M. Kimball, one-time president of the Utah Woman's Suffrage Association and long-time president of the Fifteenth Ward Relief Society, declared in 1870, when Utah women were enfranchised, that she had always been a "woman's rights woman"; and she later stated, "The sure foundations of the suffrage cause were deeply and permanently laid on the 17th of March, 1842."³⁸

Some of the brethren concurred. Apostle Orson F. Whitney, long-time advocate for women, opined that the

lifting of the women of Zion . . . was the beginning of a work for the elevation of womankind throughout the world. "I have turned the key," said the Prophet on that historic occasion, and from what has since taken place we are justified in believing that the words were big with fate.³⁹

As late as 1945 President George Albert Smith in a Relief Society general conference told the sisters:

You were the first women to have the franchise; the first women to have a voice in the work of a church. It was God that gave it to you and it came as a result of revelation to a Prophet of the Lord. Since that time, think what benefits the women of this world have enjoyed. Not only you belonging to this Church have enjoyed the blessing of equality, but when the Prophet Joseph Smith turned the key for the emancipation of womankind, it was turned for all the world. And from generation to generation the number of women who can enjoy the blessings of religious liberty and civil liberty has been increasing.⁴⁰

It is little wonder that Emmeline Wells could conclude that the women of the world were "acted upon by an influence many comprehend[ed] not which [was] working for their redemption from under the curse."⁴¹

The curse to which she referred was the nemesis of Bible believing feminists. The biblical edict pronouncing Eve's subjugation to Adam because of her disobedience in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:16) had long been the basis for defining male-female relationships in Jewish and Christian cultures. So thoroughly embedded in traditional attitudes was the concept of woman's secondary status not only in the church but in marriage and in society that only when the traditional relationship of men and women was challenged by nineteenth century feminists did it become necessary to invoke Genesis from the pulpit to reinforce the status quo.

From her Mormonism Emmeline found assurance on the dilemma posed by Eve. Eve's punishment for disobedience in the garden presupposed a different status before the Fall. As Emmeline explained in a talk to a woman's group in New York, Eve's curse was not perpetual, and when the conditions of redemption were met, men and women would again be equal.⁴² The punishment, a requisite of law, was temporal, a part of mortality, not an eternal condition and in no way represented the essential nature of woman. Moreover, while Eve was blamed for the subordination of women, she was also honored as the mother of the human race. Brigham Young in 1869 explained her important role to the Saints:

We understand . . . why God permitted Mother Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit. We should not have been here to-day if she had not; we could never have possessed wisdom and intelligence if she had not done it. It was all in the economy of heaven; and we need not talk about it; it is all right. We should never blame Mother Eve, not [in] the least.⁴³

Emmeline Wells preached the same principle to her audience in New York, explaining that Eve was a "willing instrument in effecting a grand purpose for the ultimate good of the human family."⁴⁴ A Relief Society lesson in 1916, written during Emmeline's presidency, also praised Eve as a woman who "dared to disobey," a "compound of curiosity and unselfish willingness to suffer that her loved ones might enjoy."⁴⁵ Eve thus presented a mixed message of subordination through disobedience and honor through self-sacrifice. While her subordination was temporal, her honor was eternal.⁴⁶

Overcoming the "curse" of Eve inexplicably found a corollary in the principle of plural marriage. Mormon women continually affirmed the possibility of redeeming themselves from the effects of Eve's transgression and returning to a station of equality with man. Joseph had been given the keys of this last dispensation which would bring forth the restitution of all things. In giving the key of knowledge and intelligence to women, he gave them the power to regain that original equality. Eliza R. Snow explained how this could be done:

The Lord has placed the means into our hands, in the Gospel, whereby we can regain our lost position. But how? . . . It was through disobedience that woman came into her present position, and and it is only by obedience, honoring God in all the institutions he has revealed to us, that we can come out from under that curse, regain the position originally occupied by Eve, and attain to a fullness of exaltation in the presence of God.⁴⁷

Plural marriage was one of those institutions to which Eliza referred, and it became the pivotal measure of obedience for Mormon women. Polygamy, Emmeline wrote, required "the most pure-minded and high souled women," who could sufficiently "comprehend the designs of these covenants to endure the trials and temptations which are incident to a higher spiritual development."⁴⁸ Plural wife of Joseph Horne, Mary Isabella Horne acknowledged

those trials: "No one can ever feel the full weight of the curse," she wrote, "till she enters into polygamy."⁴⁹ But the promise of redemption from the curse, Emmeline affirmed, was "worth all the sacrifices it is possible to make."⁵⁰

In a sermon on celestial marriage given in 1869, George Q. Cannon confirmed the principle as the route to redemption. Plural marriage, he said, "will exalt woman until she is redeemed from the effects of the Fall, and from that curse pronounced upon her in the beginning."⁵¹ On another occasion he prophesied that "as the generations roll by nobler types of womanhood will be developed, until the penalty that was 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."⁵²

Although the evolutionary ramifications of Cannon's statement raise more questions than the statement answers, his willingness to acknowledge that equality of the sexes was indeed a potential reality even in this life, however developed, was beyond the prophetic scope of most of the clergy of his time. Subscribing to at least part of his argument, Emmeline Wells urged women to educate themselves for that day. "The very genius and spirit of the age is in keeping with the cry of woman, for recognition of her position by the side of man," she wrote. "It is the consciousness in woman everywhere, if even a latent spark of her inherent divinity lingers, that the hour is hastening when the curse will be removed."⁵³

The Adam and Eve model, however, continued to set the pattern for male-female relationships in the nineteenth century, and Mormonism reinforced this pattern with its priesthood-based patriarchal system. Always advocating a mutually supportive marriage relationship, Emmeline seldom addressed the uses of patriarchal or priesthood authority in a Mormon marriage. Her own experience could only have underscored the desirability of strong, decision-making women, adequately fortified to bear the responsibilities for their own families. Polygamous marriages virtually demanded such self-reliance.

The Mormon theological concept of the eternity of the marriage relationship gave further impetus to Emmeline's views. The promises of exaltation bound men and women inextricably together in their pursuit of godhood in which both would have "all power . . . and be above all, because all things are subject unto them" (D&C 132:20). The possibilities of such an awesome celestial union undoubtedly defined Emmeline's perspective of its temporal beginnings. Marriage, for her, was but a microcosm of the relationship of the sexes in all aspects of life in this world and in the next. Thus it should provide for both men and women unrestricted opportunity for continuing development, full and equal participation, and the free exercise of rational and spiritual powers. In one of her more poetic passages, she expressed her hope of this ideal:

Do you not see the morning star of woman's destiny in the ascendant? Why the whole civilized world is becoming enlightened with its beams. . . . There are some wise men who recognize the star, and who even say "peace and good will" to woman, and take her by the hand and welcome her to their circle, and would fain assign to her all that nature gave her intelligence and capacity to do, would lift her up to their level . . . and say there is room for us both, let us walk side by side.⁵⁴

Emmeline's attempt to resolve the tension between spiritual equality and social inequality sometimes resulted in compromise or inconsistency. But her struggles to reconcile those inconsistencies put her among a host of other religious feminists whose loyalties to both traditions posed continual dilemmas. As one historian of patristic writings explained, "The logic of Christian doctrine required a commitment to sexual equality." The difficulty lay in reconciling that doctrine "with the practical conditions of life" burdened as they were with the effects "of the curses of Adam and Eve."⁵⁵

Under no illusions that her religious feminism was logically unassailable, Emmeline seemed to find sufficient reinforcement within Mormon theology to transcend the obvious difficulty of coalescing an egalitarian philosophy with an authoritarian theocracy—but perhaps their disparity was no greater than those disparate elements which characterized Mormonism itself. From the outset, as historian Gordon Wood's analysis of Mormonism observes, it was a religion "in tension, poised like a steel spring by the contradictory forces pulling within it." Creating this tension, he explained, were elements both "mystical and secular, restorationist and progressive, communitarian and individualistic; hierarchical and congregational; authoritarian and democratic; antinomian and arminian; anti-clerical and priestly; revelatory and empirical; utopian and practical ecumenical and nationalist."⁵⁶

Somewhere within the antitheses of this intricately balanced religious structure Emmeline found a niche for her own belief system. In her efforts to accommodate the dialectic between religion and feminism, she was not unique in her time, but her time was unique in Mormon history.

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1. "Convention in Atlanta," *Woman's Exponent* 23 (1 and 15 February 1895): 237. See also Emmeline B. Wells Diary, 2 February 1895, photocopy, Library-Archives, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter referred to as Church Archives). Originals are located in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

2. *The General Relief Society, Officers, Objects and Status* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1902), pp. 74–75.

3. "Why, Ah! Why," *Woman's Exponent* 3 (30 September [1 October] 1874): 67.

4. Wells Diary, 6 January 1878.
5. *Ibid.*, 7 January 1878.
6. *Ibid.*, 4 January 1878, "Why a Woman Should Desire to be a Mormon," *Woman's Exponent* 36 (January 1908): 48.
7. George Q. Cannon to John Taylor, 14 January 1882, Cannon Papers, Church Archives, as quoted in Beverly Beeton, "Woman Suffrage in the American West, 1869–1896" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1976), p.101.
8. Annie Thompson Godbe, Mary Hampton Godbe, and Charlotte Ives Cobb Godbe, plural wives of William S. Godbe, were all active in the suffrage movement and associated with the splinter group, the Godbeites. Charlotte remained the most active and visible of the three in the woman's rights movement. For additional information, see Beeton, "Woman Suffrage," pp. 43–46.
9. "Mrs. Stanton and the Mormon Women," *Woman's Exponent* 7 (15 May 1879): 240.
10. "Mormon Ladies Calling at the White House," *Philadelphia Times*, 19 January 1897, reprinted in *Woman's Exponent* 7 (15 March 1879): 212
11. For a full description of "true womanhood" in the Victorian era, see Barnara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," in *Divinity Convictions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), pp. 21–41.
12. "Why, Ah! Why," *Woman's Exponent* 3 (30 September [1 October] 1874): 67.
13. Wells Diary, 30 September 1874.
14. Alice S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers* (New York: Columbia University Press, Bantam Press, 1974), p.6.
15. For further elaboration of this analysis, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood, Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 202–205.
16. "Woman's Expectations," *Woman's Exponent* 6 (1 July 1877): 20.
17. "Woman's Expectations," *Woman's Exponent* 6 (15 February 1878): 140.
18. "Woman's Expectations," *Woman's Exponent* 5 (1 September 1876): 54.
19. "Why, Ah! Why," *Woman's Exponent* 3 (30 September [1 October] 1874): 67.
20. Feminists of the last century did not see the advancement of women in contradiction to woman's domestic role. This was always considered woman's first duty, the one in which society most highly esteemed her and from with she herself attained most legitimacy.
21. "Impromptu Ideas of Home," *Woman's Exponent* 4 (15 May 1876): 191
22. "Woman, A Subject," *Woman's Exponent* 3 (1 November 1874): 82; and "Real Women," *Woman's Exponent* 2 (1 January 1874): 118.
23. "A Mormon Woman's View of Marriage," *Woman's Exponent* 6 (1 September 1877): 54.
24. "Woman's Progression," *Woman's Exponent* 6 (15 February 1878): 140.
25. "Woman, A Subject," *Woman's Exponent* 3 (1 November 1874): 82.
26. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–1886; reprint ed., 1967), 24:69.
27. "Special Life Missions," *Woman's Exponent* 6 (1 March 1878): 148.
28. See, for example, Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 8 April 1867, 12:32; 8 December 1867, 12:116; 18 July 1869, 13:61; 7 April 1873, 16:16.
29. "Relief Society Conference," *Woman's Exponent* 24 (15 August 1895): 45.
30. Studies in early women's organizations include Keith E. Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood, The American Woman's Rights Movement, 1800–1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, "The Power of Women's Networks: A Case Study of

Female Moral Reform in Antebellum America,” *Feminist Studies* 5 (Spring 1979): 66–85; Mary P. Ryan, “A Woman’s Awakening: Evangelical Religion and the Families of Utica, New York, 1800–1840,” *American Quarterly* 30 (Winter 1978): 602–23; Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, pp. 126–59.

31. Minutes, Nauvoo Female Relief Society, 17 March 1842, p. 8, and 13 August 1843, p. 91, Church Archives.

32. *Ibid.*, 28 April 1842, p.32.

33. Susan B. Anthony et al. *History of Woman Suffrage*, 6 vols. (Rochester, N.Y.: Susan B. Anthony, 1881), 1:70–71.

34. “Women’s Organizations,” *Women’s Exponent* 8 (15 January 1880): 122. See also “Stray Notes,” *Women’s Exponent* 8 (15 July 1879): 28, for her ideas on how the Relief Society qualified women for the responsibility of suffrage and other rights. See also John A. Wodtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), p. 245, for a further interpretation of the broad purposes of the Relief Society.

35. “A Wonderful Age,” *Women’s Exponent* 27 (1 February 1899): 100.

36. *Women’s Exponent* 29 (1 January 1900 [1901]): 69.

37. “What Hath the Century Wrought,” *Woman’s Exponent* 29 (1 January 1900 [1901]): 71.

38. Woman Suffrage Leaflet (Salt Lake City, January 1892), p. 3

39. *Young Woman’s Journal* 17 (July 1906): 295.

40. *Relief Society Magazine* 32 (December 1945): 717.

41. “Self-Made Women,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (1 March 1881): 148.

42. In answer to a request from the Women’s Clubs of New York, Emmeline Wells “Why a Woman Should Desire to Be a Mormon,” in which she discussed in length her viewpoints on the redemption of women from the curse, emphasizing her belief that women would be instrumental in their own behalf and that the curse was only temporary (see *Woman’s Exponent* 36 [December 1907]: 39–40, and 37 [January 1908]: 46–48.

43. *Journal of Discourses*, 11 July 1869, 13:145.

44. “Why a Woman Should Desire to Be a Mormon,” *Woman’s Exponent* 36 (December 1907): 40.

45. *Relief Society Magazine* 2 (December 1915): 548.

46. There is a similarity in the Mormon and Puritan attitudes toward Eve. Cotton Mather wrote of her in 1713:

And that brave woman, being styled, The Mother of all living, it has induced Learned Man to conceive, That EVE was, by being the First of them all, in a peculiar manner, the Mother of all that live unto God; and that she was on this account, (Oh! Most Happy Woman!) a Mother to her own Husband, and the Instrument of bringing him to Believe on the great Redeemer. (Tabitha Rediviva, *An Essay to Describe and Commend the Good Works of a Virtuous Woman* [Boston: n.p., 1713], p. 23.)

This point is elaborated in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), pp. 146–63.

47. *LDS Millennial Star* 33 (12 September 1871): 578.

48. “Patriarchal Marriage,” *Woman’s Exponent* 6 (15 August 1877): 44.

49. From an autobiographical sketch located in the Bancroft Collection, Huntington Library, typescript copy, Church Archives. One of the earliest recorded statements of a Mormon woman concerning the curse was made by Emma Smith in a blessing Joseph asked her to write for herself which he would sign. In it she expressed the hope

that “through humility she would be enabled to overcome the curse which was pronounced upon the daughters of Eve.” (Emma Smith Blessing in Vesta P. Crawford Papers, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.)

50. “A Few Thoughts,” *Woman’s Exponent* 13 (1 June 1884): 4. Another view was expressed by Prescindia Kimball in 1870. She exclaimed: “The day is approaching when woman shall be redeemed from the curse placed upon Eve, and I have often thought that our daughters who are in polygamy will be the first redeemed.” (Minutes of a General Meeting of the Female Relief Society, 19 February 1870, as recorded in Edward W. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* [New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877], pp. 503–504.)

51. *Journal of Discourses*, 9 October 1869, 13:207.

52. *Juvenile Instructor* 19 (1 February 1884): 38–39. Another example of the employment of this essentially Darwinian notion in connection with woman’s nature and consequent place in society appeared in a publication *Men and Women*, edited in Salt Lake City by Apostle Orson F. Whitney and Calvin Reasoner. The article states that the woman’s movement “is a stage in the order of the divine evolution of humanity, that it is as truly a part of progress as the revelation of Christianity or the vast unfoldment of the wonders and treasures of the material world which has signalized the advancement of the last two centuries. The granting to women the privilege to vote under our institutions is a necessary part, but is a very small part of the enlargement that is to be given to her sphere and mission in the world.” (*Men and Women* 1 [14 May 1895]: 8.)

53. “Patriarchal Marriage,” *Woman’s Exponent* 6 (15 August 1877): 44.

54. “Peace and Good Will,” *Woman’s Exponent* 7 (15 September 1878): 60.

55. JoAnn McNamara, “Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Early Christian Thought,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (Spring–Summer 1976): 145.

56. Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61 (October 1980): 380.