

Inherent and Inherited Issues for Women in Mormonism

By: Allison Card Jensen

Having two older sisters, two younger brothers, and being a low-income family meant that I had a lot of hand-me-downs. Most of my belongings had either gone through other siblings or other families before making their way into my possession. My grandma often made outfits for us girls when we were little. Laura, the oldest, would get the outfit in the red and pink colour scheme; Carmen, the second oldest, would get the same pattern in blue and purple and I would get an outfit made out of whatever colour had enough fabric left over. This also meant that I inherited both sets of patterned outfits once I had grown enough to fit into them which meant I had twice as many things to wear to church. There was always plenty of things to wear to church; there was no shortage of skirts, laced pantyhose, or frilly white socks. There was also plenty of hair barrettes, curling irons, and a ton of hairspray. Part of giving the Lord your best entailed looking your best when you worship Him in His house on His day. We may have been one of the poorest families in the pews but my mother made sure we didn't look it.

I didn't really mind hand-me-downs for the most part but there was one aspect that I always hated: winter clothes. The main problem was that winter clothing is expensive and having to sufficiently bundle five children for Canadian winters can require a small fortune which we did not have. This meant that we were often the charity case of our congregation and one of the most needed items for any family is winter clothes. I absolutely hated every single winter coat I ever owned up until I was 15 years old, when I was finally able to have my own brand new winter jacket that I chose for myself and it's still in perfectly fine condition to this day.

There were times when I was younger where I would throw a fit because I didn't want to wear whatever god-awful atrocity my mother was trying to get me to wear to school. I would stomp my feet, flail my arms, and flat out refuse to wear it. To my complaints, my mother would

respond: “Well, you could always go naked”, to which I would reply “I’d rather go naked than wear THAT ugly thing”. She’d warn me that I was about to be late for school and I would find myself putting on that very jacket, trudging to school, mumbling under my breath at this hideous full length, puffy, fake-fur trimmed hood, light pink marshmallow of a coat. I hated having to share the toques, mittens, and scarves with all my siblings. I had my favourite items and I always tried to be first to the hat box so that I could wear the things I wanted but the pickings were slim and none of them matched any of the horrid snowsuits.

Some people are born religious, some become religious, and some have religion thrust upon them. I was all three. I was born into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and I loved it dearly. I loved being different; Mormons love being a peculiar people. I inherited a religion that was passed down through generations. My ancestors walked across the plains and were sent to Canada by Brigham Young himself where they founded Cardston, Alberta. I felt connected to that familial past, it was my cultural identity from both sides of my family. I was dyed-in-the-wool, true blue, through and through. I felt lucky to have been born into a family with long-lasting religious traditions; our faith had gone through many family members before reaching me. It was a hand-me-down coat I wore with pride. I was told this was the only true church on the face of the earth and it was the only way to gain our fullest salvation. How wonderful to grow up feeling like you knew you had the answers and you knew what was right and what was wrong. As I grew older, life became more complicated. I still stuck to my inherited principles despite increasing insufficiencies. I rationalized my views by reminding myself of the words found in Isaiah 55:8-9 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” So it’s okay that I don’t understand everything because God does and He talks to the prophet and the prophet would tell us if it was that important so I shouldn’t worry about it.

It wasn’t until I took a critical theory course that I finally acquired the vocabulary and the framework through which I could accurately describe and assess the world around me. Terms

like: hegemonic control, hierarchy, patriarchy, deconstruction, ideology, oppression, power dynamics, and others that made my head spin. All of these things were brand new to me and I started seeing examples of these concepts everywhere: in school, social relations, movies, conversations, TV shows, books, and, to my horror, even in church. At first, I didn't allow myself to really deconstruct things too deeply in the church because I was afraid of what might happen. If I started picking at the threads, the entire thing might unravel and I was worried I wouldn't have anything left to wear; how could I weather life storms without my winter coat?

The online Mormon community of forums, blogs, and podcasts called the bloggernacle uses a common metaphor of a shelf where we put issues or concerns that we can't necessarily comprehend or deal with at present but can be put on the shelf to be dealt with at a later date or perhaps never at all. Often, people will refer to what made their shelf break, what was it that made them decide to deal with these hard things head on, and what conclusions they made from having to confront these hard issues. When a shelf breaks, it usually means the person decided to either step away for a time or leave the church entirely. I don't think I have any one specific piece of information or one specific question that broke my shelf. It wasn't one single question, it was years of wear and tear.

I am an atheist; although I don't miss any of the theological aspects of the church, I do miss having an immediate community connection no matter where I went. I discovered CFI in July of this year and found what I had been looking for, I found a group of like-minded individuals which was something I wasn't sure I would ever find, coming from Alberta which is not known for being progressive politically, socially, or religiously. In my first meet up with CFI, I immediately fell into the position of resident ex-Mormon and soon after at a pub night, where I outed myself as an ardent feminist, the idea was floated that I should give a talk about Mormonism from a feminist perspective. Immediately, the wheels started turning in my brain and the list of possible approaches and topics to cover became overwhelming. I could write an entire book called *The Gospel According to Allison* discussing what I think about Mormonism theologically, socially, culturally, and morally, incorporating analyses of race, class, culture,

colonialism, sexual orientation, gender identity, and a host of other aspects but I think those discussions will have to wait. So for the purposes of today, I have chosen to do a feminist analysis of gender within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, specifically the church's cultural, historical, and theological treatment of women.

Firstly, I will address the place of the woman in Mormon theology by looking at doctrines surrounding the divine feminine. The first Article of Faith, written by Joseph Smith, states: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." According to Mormon doctrine, a 14 year old Joseph Smith saw God the Father, most commonly referred to as Heavenly Father, and Jesus Christ in what is now called the Sacred Grove in Palmyra, New York, a short distance from Smith's childhood home. Heavenly Father pointed to Jesus and said "This is my Beloved son. Hear Him." This leads one to ask: if Jesus is the Son, and God is the Father, then who is the Mother? A Mormon hymn titled O My Father asks the question: "In the heav'ns are parents single?/ No, the thought makes reason stare!/ Truth is reason; truth eternal/ Tells me I've a mother there." It is interesting to note that this hymn was, in fact, written by a woman; it is a woman who inquires of the divine feminine, perhaps wondering of her own place in the eternities, wondering how she can see herself in the face of God. For Mormons, it is only logical to believe that if there is a Father in Heaven, there is also inevitably a Mother in Heaven.

In my research, I came across a blog post on rationalfaiths.com that lauded the Mormon church for their acknowledgement of a Heavenly Mother. In an attempt, which I would call quite feeble, to make the argument that a Heavenly Mother has scriptural precedence, the author used the scripture Deuteronomy 6:4 which says "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord". The author of the blog post claims that this shows that because God created male and female and that through marriage, the two become one and subsequently become co-creators with God, that this means that there must be a counterpart to God the Father, that being God the Mother. For me, this is quite a reach and speaks more to the author's projections of what they wish to see in the scriptures and doctrines as opposed to what is actually there. Also, their analysis completely

disregards marriage between people who are not of binary opposite genders but that is typical of Mormonism and is a topic for another day. This author further describes Proverbs chapter 8 as an example of Chokmah - the Hebrew word for Lady Wisdom - and the author goes on to say that this is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit of God, which is always referred to as male, and that this Lady Wisdom is the spirit of Heavenly Mother. Now this is all well and good as speculation but let me be perfectly clear: there is in no way, shape, or form, any place in canonized LDS doctrine or theology, any talk of Heavenly Mother having a Holy Spirit of Her own. All of these points the author of the blog post is making are completely unique to their own opinion and have absolutely no basis in published and preached LDS doctrine. In fact, I would go so far as to say that these remarks would be quickly dismissed by any man in a leadership position in the church because of the fact that there is no established doctrine on the topic of Heavenly Mother and therefore it is all speculation.

The Encyclopedia of Mormonism says of Heavenly Mother that “she is like [Heavenly Father] in glory, perfection, compassion, wisdom, and holiness.” It further states “Though the scriptures contain only hints, statements from presidents of the church over the years indicate that human beings have a Heavenly Mother as well as a Heavenly Father”. So it is well established in Mormon theology that there is in fact a Heavenly Mother but that is about as far as any revelation goes; She exists but there is virtually nothing known about Her. It is of utmost significance to note that Mormons do not and prescriptively should not pray to Heavenly Mother; the entry for Mother in Heaven on [lds.org](https://www.lds.org) uses a statement by a former prophet Gordon B. Hinckley that says “The fact that we do not pray to our Mother in Heaven in no way belittles or denigrates her” which could be true as a statement but forgets to acknowledge that by not praying to Her, it in no way elevates Her, establishes Her as a worthy deity, or praises Her either. The entry also states “our present knowledge about a Mother in Heaven is limited. Nevertheless, we have been given sufficient knowledge to appreciate the sacredness of this doctrine and to comprehend the divine pattern established for us as children of heavenly parents”. How are we expected to know God and become like God when at least half of the population has no concept of what they look like as a deity?

Though that is all that is officially established about Heavenly Mother, basically just the fact that she exists which is not exactly something worth praising, there is plenty of Mormon folk doctrine surrounding the limited knowledge we have of God as Mother. If you were to ask a run-of-the-mill Mormon why they don't really talk about Heavenly Mother, they will tell you that it's because God the Father loves Her so much and that She is so sacred that He doesn't want to have Her name taken in vain the way that we mortals take the name of God the Father in vain; He is protecting her from abuse or disrespect. At a romantic glance, this can seem to be a kind and even imitable relationship to have but upon further investigation, this quickly falls apart. First and foremost, She is a goddess; she is not some damsel in distress in need of protection by her husband. She does not need to be kept in a gilded cage. If she is, as I said earlier, "like [Heavenly Father] in glory, perfection, compassion, wisdom, and holiness", then why on earth does she need to be protected? Surely, as a God, she can handle herself. How can the church justify the almost complete removal of a divine Mother and child relationship, especially when the church so ardently and vehemently champions the social unit of the family? On earth, Mormons believe we are supposed to be families and that in the eternities they will be in familial units, and that they will be in the presence of God the Father and assumingly God the Mother. So what we can gather from all of this is 3 things: 1) She exists (within the context of Mormon theology) 2) Mormons do not and should not pray to her and 3) That's it. That's all they know.

I could go on about the disparity between men and women embedded in the theology of Mormonism but we can't be here all day so I will move on to discussing the early history of the church and how it relates to women. It's virtually impossible to discuss the early history of the church without mentioning the elephant in the room: polygamy. This is the practice of one man marrying two or more women which was practiced from 1843 to 1890. The official church website states: "Latter-Day Saints do not understand all of God's purposes for instituting, through His prophets, the practice of plural marriage during the 19th century" which is a convenient caveat. It goes on to further justify the practice of polygamy by saying: "The Book of Mormon identifies one reason for God to command it: to increase the number of children born in

the gospel covenant in order to “raise up seed unto [the Lord]”. Continuing on, the church website states: “Plural marriage did result in the birth of large numbers of children within faithful Latter-day Saint homes. It also shaped 19th-century Mormon society in other ways: marriage became available to virtually all who desired it; per-capita inequality of wealth was diminished as economically disadvantaged women married into more financially stable households and ethnic intermarriages were increased, which helped to unite a diverse immigrant population. Plural marriage also helped create and strengthen a sense of cohesion and group identification among Latter-day Saints. Church members came to see themselves as a “peculiar people,” covenant-bound to carry out the commands of God despite outside opposition, willing to endure ostracism for their principles” which is a nice way to say they don’t mind breaking the law because God told them they could. The entry on the church website about plural marriage in the early church discusses some of the difficulties that arose from the practice of polygamy but says that the reason why the Saints continued to practice it is because “they believed it was a commandment of God at that time and that obedience would bring great blessings to them and their posterity, both on earth and in the life to come.” The official essay by the church concedes that “the practice was generally based more on religious belief than on romantic love.” How can people be willing participants when they are told their entire salvation depends on their participation in a specific practice?

1843 was the year the principle of plural marriage was instituted but there is evidence to suggest that Joseph Smith was practicing polygamy as early as 1831. A different article on the church website says that “Joseph Smith married multiple wives and introduced the practice to close associates” which is an interesting way to say he and his mates got to have sex with lots of different women because God said they could. The article further states “participants were asked to keep their actions confidential”; it doesn’t take much speculation to see why that might be, whether it’s because their first wives would not approve or because it was illegal or because it was morally reprehensible to coerce women into marrying you by saying God commanded it, I guess we will never know. The church says that plural marriage was one of the ancient principles that was to be restored in the latter-days. Joseph Smith told some close associates that an angel

with a sword of fire came to him and commanded him to instate the practice of plural marriage, threatening Joseph with destruction were he to disobey. This makes Joseph out to be a reluctant participant but I would argue that someone who was reluctant to practice would not have gone on to marry 40 women, some of whom were married to other men and one of whom was a 14 year old girl named Helen Mar Kimball. The official church statement says that Helen was married to Joseph Smith “several months before her 15th birthday” which is an interesting way to say 14. The article on the church website says that girls would marry at the age of 16 or 17 which was typical of the time but actual historians say that women married around the age of 21.

According to an article written by Mette Harrison in the Huffington Post, the church ended the practice of polygamy in 1890 because the state of Utah was making things difficult for members of the church. The Edmonds-Tucker Act in Utah allowed for confiscation of church property so miraculously, the president of the church at the time, Wilford Woodruff, which is a name I couldn't make up if I tried, he received a convenient revelation called “The Manifesto” that dictated that the church should stop practicing plural marriage. Many members of the church who were currently in polygamous relationships continued to practice the principle, many fleeing the state of Utah to go to Mexico or Canada. Others divorced or separated from their plural wives but continued to financially support the ex-spouses. Harrison goes on to say that some members of the church said that the practice of polygamy would be reinstated were it to become legal. This was always an underlying fear of mine when I was a believer. What would I do if polygamy was reinstated? I didn't even want to think about it. Now, as a feminist, I do not have any problem with polygamy were it to be between consenting adults; it's none of my business what people choose to do in their own bedrooms as long as it's consensual. I do however have a major problem with the unequal balance of power that was implicit in the polygamous relationships in the early church. The coercion and the deception that often came along with the practice is undeniable.

Though the actual practice of polygamy is deemed grounds for excommunication in the mainstream LDS church, there are other offshoots of mainstream Mormonism that continue to

practice plural marriage. So while the mainstream church has categorically disavowed the practice, they do continue to practice what is often called spiritual polygamy, where men are able to be sealed to more than one woman but women are not able to be sealed to more than one man. If their wife dies or if they get a divorce, the man can be sealed to another woman without having the dissolution of the previous sealing ordinance. Men are allowed to be married more than once for time and all eternity but women are allowed to marry again for time only. Currently, the prophet of the church is sealed to more than one woman and one of his counsellors in the presidency of the church is also sealed to more than one woman.

In preparation for this talk, I had to subject myself to reading primary texts of the church which is something I never thought I would have to do again but lo, and behold, it came to pass that I so did. In 1995, the first presidency and the council of the twelve apostles, which governs the church and have perhaps the most pretentious name ever devised, came out with *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*. This document was meant to be a declaration to the world about the appropriate nature of families and gender roles within these social units. The context of the proclamation is interesting to note; the thought process behind the proclamation started in 1994. In 1993, Elder Boyd K. Packer said that the three biggest threats to the church were “the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of which are relatively new) and the ever-present challenge from so-called scholars or intellectuals”. With a critical eye, this statement can be read as “we’d have to accept people who are different, treat women as people, and be honest about historical facts”, none of which are things the church wants to do.

A blog post on wheatandtares.org outlines the social context in which the proclamation was produced. It notes: “Typically when we talk about the early 1990s, we point to the September Six as representing the biggest headaches for church leaders. That was when six feminists and/or academics were formally disciplined in September 1993 (five excommunicated, one disfellowshipped). The crackdown had a chilling effect on Mormon academic and feminist communities for years afterwards.” Though the feminist and academic community certainly shaped the specific phrasing of the proclamation, the main driving force behind it was the

“threat” of what they call same-sex marriage rather than the term equal marriage because they don’t actually view the two as equal. The LDS church’s objection to same-sex marriage began in the 70s and 80s with the rise of the Equal Rights Amendment; of the ERA, the church said: “Passage of the ERA would carry with it the risk of extending constitutional protection to immoral same-sex—lesbian and homosexual—marriages.” There were legal battles being fought in Hawaii between the state and gay couples who were denied marriage licenses which prompted the church to issue many statements reaffirming their views on marriage, as if those views weren’t already well-established.

The blog post further explains the legal framework that made up the basis for the proclamation. It states: “In February 1995, local LDS church leaders (with the support of the Catholic church) filed a motion to intervene in the court case. While publicly they justified their involvement as a moral issue to deal with the “threat to families, to our children, and to our way of life in Hawaii,” that was not the legal argument they used. Church leaders argued they had an interest in the case because if same-sex marriage was legalized, a refusal to perform such a marriage would result in their state-issued marriage licenses getting revoked. The church also expressed concern that refusal to perform a same-sex marriage would result in a sex discrimination lawsuit.” The petition was rejected as was their appeal to the Supreme Court. The proclamation was constructed as a way to entrench their anti-LGBTQ beliefs within the doctrines of the church.

The first line of the proclamation says “we [...] solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children”. The proclamation also states: “We declare that God’s commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.” This is one of the reasons why many members of the church have big families: because they believe it is commanded of them by God (this being God the Father but who knows how Heavenly Mother would feel about that).

As typical in the LDS church, I was married at the age of 21; one year later, I was being interviewed by my stake president, the leader of a group of congregations in a geographical area, where he asked me what my plans were with my education. I told him I wanted to get a PhD and become a professor. He told me that God had not yet repealed the commandment to multiply and replenish the earth and that it is our duty to follow it. To which I said oh of course, but really I was so taken aback I didn't even know what to say.

The stark division of the genders of men and women are rigidly maintained. The proclamation states: "By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurturing of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners" which seems to be a contradiction. How is it that fathers get to preside over the family as well as provide and protect them while mothers get to nurture the kids? That seems to me like women get the shorter and arguably more difficult end of the stick. The very fact that fathers get to preside over the family while mothers do not negates the aspect of it ever being an equal partnership because the distribution of power is distinctly lopsided in favour of the father. Cheiko Okazaki served in the 90s as first counselor in the presidency of the women's organization of the church called the Relief Society. She is viewed somewhat as the patron saint of Mormon feminism. She was the first non-white individual to serve on any LDS general auxiliary board. Of the Family Proclamation, she said: "as I read it I thought that we could have made a few changes in it. Sometimes I think they get so busy that they forget that we are there", to which I would argue that they didn't forget, they just simply don't care about women or their input.

It is interesting to note that trans and non-binary people are not recognized at all in the proclamation. Whenever the question of trans people's place in the church is brought up, the default answer is a quote from the proclamation that says "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose". The ambiguity is usually interpreted to mean that our biological sex is inextricably linked to our gender expression and

that those roles are prescribed by God. However, the vagueness of the wording and the lack of concrete doctrinal teachings on the issue also leave it up to interpretation. Some choose to interpret it as gender being eternal, like their spirit, but that it is not always tied to their biological makeup. Therefore, they see themselves or their loved ones as expressing their eternal gender regardless of if it is the gender they were assigned at birth based on their biology. So while there is unintentionally a tiny bit of wiggle room, the vast majority of members believe that their gender and sex are inextricable and that there are divinely appointed gender roles that they are commanded to follow.

The gender role prescriptions outlined by the church extends not only to the personal sphere of family dynamics but also to the theological sphere of doctrine and policy. It is important to note the kind of language employed when talking about women's positions in the church. Firstly, we can look at the treatment of women in the scriptures. Again, I don't have all day to go through each book of scripture and tell you all the ways in which they are sexist, misogynistic, or otherwise oppressive to women but we can look at specific examples of the wording that surround women in positions of perceived authority. For example, there are a handful of women in the Old Testament that are referred to as prophetesses. The organization called Christians for Biblical Equality states "Female prophets in the Old Testament are simply prophets who happened to be female. In ancient Israel and throughout the ancient Near East, female prophets possessed the same spectrum of gifts as their male counterparts. Women could be prophets because, unlike priests and kings who inherited their positions, prophets were appointed by God." This is a fair enough observation; however, the LDS church does not hold the same view. Though they do use the term "prophetess" to describe these same women in the Old Testament, their power is constantly diminished in capacity; they are not seen as equal to their male counterparts. The entry for prophetess in the guide to the scriptures defines it as "a woman who has received a testimony of Jesus and enjoys the spirit of revelation. A prophetess does not hold the priesthood or its keys." This is no different than any other woman in the church because the church believes that everyone is entitled to personal revelation, that being the ability to receive an answer to their prayers straight from God. The church changes the meaning of the word

prophet as related to women because women are not viewed as having the same authority to speak on behalf of God in the way that men do.

The Book of Mormon does not prove to be any more supportive of women considering the fact that there are only 6 named women in the entire book: three from the bible, Eve, Sarah, and Mary, and three unique to the Book of Mormon, named Sariah, Abish, and Isabel. I want to focus specifically on the women unique to the Book of Mormon. All three of the named women in the book of Mormon are defined by their relationship to men: the mother, the servant, and the harlot. Sariah is the mother of Nephi, the first prophet in the Book of Mormon; she is seen as a dutiful wife and mother up to a point. Sariah loses faith for a time and blames her husband for the fact that her sons might be dead because they went back to Jerusalem to get the golden plates. They had initially left Jerusalem because of their father Lehi's vision and revelation that they needed to leave in the first place. Sariah wavered but Lehi never did; she was of lesser faith, she was the weaker parent. As readers, we can't exactly blame Sariah for doubting her husband seeing as she believed her 4 sons to be dead and it is not a stretch to blame her husband for sending them back to Jerusalem on a mission that could get them killed. However, when there is so little representation of women in their sacred texts, the instances in which women appear are exponential in significance.

The next woman to be named, Abish, is a servant in King Lamoni's household. King Lamoni was a Lamanite, who are essentially the bad guys for much of the Book of Mormon and Ammon is a Nephite missionary, the good guys, who went to convert the Lamanites to the Lord. Of Abish, the Book of Mormon reads: "And it came to pass that they did call on the name of the Lord, in their might, even until they had all fallen to the earth, save it were one of the Lamanitish women, whose name was Abish, she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of her father. Thus, having been converted to the Lord, and never having made it known, therefore, when she saw that all the servants of Lamoni had fallen to the earth, and also her mistress, the queen, and the king, and Ammon lay prostrate upon the earth, she knew that it was the power of God; and supposing that this opportunity, by making known

unto the people what had happened among them, that by beholding this scene it would cause them to believe in the power of God, therefore she ran forth from house to house, making it known unto the people.” She is viewed as someone who was forced to hide her testimony until the time came that she was able to tell other people about what she knew to be true and subsequently converted them to the right belief. Though she is viewed positively as a figure in the Book of Mormon, she is later referred to as “the woman servant” rather than by her name which is disheartening and somewhat undermines her importance.

The last named woman in the Book of Mormon is a woman named Isabel who is called a harlot. The prophet Alma is talking to his son Corianton about the bad things Corianton has done of which he needs to repent. Alma says “And this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel. Yea, she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted. Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?” Isabel, though she is only given two verses, is seen as someone who led a previously righteous man astray and caused him to commit a sin only slightly less egregious than that of murder. Let’s not even get me started on how awful of an equivocation that is and the horrendous implications of that statement. She is the opposite of the madonna, she is the whore. The women worthy of names in the Book of Mormon are a mother whose faith wavers, a servant who shares her testimony, and a sex worker who leads men astray.

In analyzing these women, I was led to the question: how would I be portrayed as a woman in the Book of Mormon? I would not be viewed in any sort of sympathetic light. My few passages would read: Behold, Allison was a stalwart daughter who knew the truth, who walked in righteousness, and loved the Lord with all her “heart, might, mind, and strength”. But wo unto her, for she did choose darkness over light, yea she was beguiled by that same serpent that beguiled Eve, and she did become the bitter apostate, with darkness in her eyes, who turned her

back and sinned against God.” That would be my story: I was once righteous but I was led astray by the adversary; Satan was able to lure me away and I chose to turn from the truth and to live a life of sin. I am now the unbeliever, the unrepentant sinner, the one sheep that left the fold of her own accord and has journeyed beyond the reach of God. The Book of Mormon warns about people like me. It says “O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.”

The church’s treatment of women in their sacred texts is reflected in their treatment of women in the present day. Perhaps the most stark distinction between men and women in the church is the fact that women are excluded from holding the priesthood and serving in positions of authority. Every leadership position that is held by a woman is considered to be an auxiliary position. They are not even necessary to make a congregation, which members call a ward; in order for there to be enough people to be considered a branch, which is a small version of a ward, there only needs to be one woman and that would be the bishop’s wife because bishops need to be married in order to lead a congregation. This is an example of structural sexism, where the institution itself is built on ignoring women. A blog post on bycommonconsent.com says “Mormon children learn early and without being explicitly taught that men have more authority and can do more things at Church than women”. The author further argues that women in the LDS church could not be seen in the same light as prophetesses in the Old Testament because those callings of leadership are not available to LDS women. The only positions of authority for women are those that are over other women or over children. They are not allowed to preside over men.

When talking about the priesthood in the Mormon church, it is impossible to ignore the racist history it entails. In 1839, under president Brigham Young, Black people were excluded from participating in the temple, which would mean they could not take out their endowments and they could not have a celestial marriage which means they would not receive the fullest level of

salvation. They were also prevented from receiving the priesthood. There were many reasons given to justify this ban, some revolving around the curse of Cain, and others saying that Black people were not as righteous in the pre-mortal life. All of which are incredibly and inexcusably racist. The priesthood and temple ban was lifted in 1978 due to increasing internal and external pressures; the church was expanding around the world and was finding it difficult to maintain their policy. With the rise of the equal rights movement in the 60s coupled with black collegiate athletes refusing to play BYU, the church leaders came to a unanimous decision, as is required, and they decided to lift the ban. Black people were now allowed to attend the temple to receive their saving ordinances and Black men were allowed to hold and exercise the priesthood. Black women and women in general are still excluded from holding and exercising the priesthood.

Women are allowed to officiate in the temple but it is only under direction and permission from male leaders. Like the prophetesses of the Old Testament, the capacity of women to have any kind of authority is constantly diminished and undermined in order to seem less important. Women are allowed to exercise priesthood authority, that being the power to act in God's name and bring about His work, as seen in the temple, but they are not allowed access to priesthood keys, those being the power to direct the exercise of priesthood authority; in other words, they can do what men tell them to do but they can't tell other people what to do. I take this direct quote from a talk by Dallin H. Oaks, currently a member of the presidency of the church, where he said: "We should always remember that men who hold the priesthood are not "the priesthood." It is not appropriate to refer to "the priesthood and the women." We should refer to "the holders of the priesthood and the women." While I appreciate the effort made to distinguish the power of the priesthood from those who hold it, thus separating the person from the ability, it is of utmost importance to note that women are always distinctly separate from holders of the priesthood; they are deliberately not included. Not to mention they are referred to as "the women" which is in itself a quite dismissive and patronizing way to refer to people that you supposedly respect and view as what is often put in terms of "equal but not the same", whatever that means.

Perhaps the strongest argument employed by the church to exclude women from the priesthood is the reasoning that men are called to have the priesthood and women are called to motherhood. Motherhood is seen as part of women's divine nature and is a special calling given by God to women specifically to raise up children. In her famous presentation, Valerie Hudson talked about two trees in the garden of Eden; one being the tree that gives knowledge of good and evil and the other being one that holds the ordinances necessary for salvation. Hudson consistently repeats the line of "two people, two trees" in order to emphasize that both men and women have equally important roles. Women are givers of the fruit of the first tree, where they are able to bring children into the world and men are givers of the fruit of the second tree, where they are able to administer the ordinances of salvation. She argues that it is women's spiritual obligation to hearken unto their husbands when it comes to spiritual matters. This piece by Valerie Hudson was an absolute slog to get through and I still don't really understand where the second tree comes from and I am increasingly persuaded that it is of Hudson's own making. Her argument fails to acknowledge that motherhood is available to women outside the church and that motherhood has nothing to do with personal worthiness and furthermore has nothing to do with access to leadership in the church. The equivalent of motherhood is fatherhood, NOT priesthood.

Another argument used against women getting the priesthood is "well, women already have so much to do, they don't need more responsibility". To which I would argue that that is a problem in itself; the domestic distribution of work and the expectations of who does that work is unequally distributed, especially in the LDS church. To solve this problem, the answer would be to have men take more responsibility in the home. Presiding over spiritual matters in the home is not the same as cooking, cleaning, raising children, and a myriad of other things that mothers do in the home. Considering that many women are asking for more responsibility in the church, it is clear that they do in fact have the time for more responsibility. If men are able to make the time to serve in positions in the church, then so can women, provided their domestic needs are met by their so-called equal partners. Women in the church are conditioned to not want the responsibility of the priesthood; it is internalized sexism. Were it to be made a genuine option for women, taken

away from the rhetoric that discourages female ambition, I argue that there would be many more women who would find themselves wanting to take up the mantle of the priesthood.

I remember when I first heard of the organization Ordain Women, a group of women in the LDS church who were faithfully agitating for women to be ordained in the church. I was initially immediately put off, finding myself repeating many of the arguments I had heard against the ordination of women in the church. Upon further investigation and listening to the words of women who felt that they should be included in the power and leadership processes in the church, my mind changed. I remember when I first decided I would wear pants to church, which is not impermissible but certainly defies convention and tradition in the church. I was so nervous as to what people might say or think but I did it anyway. I felt empowered, I felt like I was being true to myself and true to what I believed, that being the full equality of men and women. I had bought new pants and a new jacket to wear that were mine only. After that, I consistently wore pants to church, partly as a personal protest and partly to show other women that it is okay to be different, it is okay to want more than what you have.

The last Sunday I ever went to church was Easter Sunday in 2014. I was the ward chorister and had not really been attending regularly, if at all, but I went that day because Easter hymns were my favourite. We only sang them once a year and I wasn't going to miss it. I was showing up at church in my Sunday best, though it wasn't the same Sunday best I grew up performing; I was not in hand-me-downs, I was here in my own clothes, on my own terms, ready to make a deal with God. I told God that I would stay in the church if I could find even one small thing to hold on to from the meeting that day. This was my leap of faith. I was dressed in blue and white floral trousers (which made my mother gasp in shock when she found out I wore those to church), a blue peplum top with white filigree, and a brand new magenta blazer. I was Easter personified and was so ready to lead the hymns and to feel something. I put everything into leading and singing that opening hymn, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today", and I don't think I have ever lead a song more effectively than that. Then it was time for the talks to be given and my heart broke. These talks that should have been about the Saviour and about the atonement

and resurrection of Christ, the foundation of our entire religion, but they weren't. I came to church that day looking for Christ and I couldn't find him; I came asking God "with sincere heart, having real intent" and God was silent. I felt crushed, I felt abandoned, I felt nothing. I knew at that moment that I wasn't coming back because this place had nothing to offer me anymore.

So here I am, four years later, and I couldn't be a more different person. I always wondered what life would be like outside the church and for a long time, I was too scared to even think about it let alone act in any way. Once I allowed myself to think "is there more than what I have?", it was a revelation and a revolution. Once I allowed myself to question what I knew, to even ask questions at all, my shelf began to crack and eventually, everything came crashing down. I was picking at the threads of my coat and it all unraveled, at first to my horror and then to my pleasant surprise. There was a whole world out there for me and all I had to do was walk into it with an open mind. For better or for worse, Mormonism made me who I am. It served its purpose for me and I had no use for it anymore; intellectually and emotionally, I grew out of it. I found out I didn't need a coat, the weather is fine.