

LETTERS

An Evolving God

I found Janice Allred's essay in the summer 1994 issue, "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother," to be insightful, intriguing, bravely honest, and obviously very heartfelt in its sentiments. It is with mixed feelings of empathy and sadness that I understand she has since found herself in trouble with the church for publicly expressing her views. Having also wrestled with the quagmire of scriptures and statements of church leaders regarding Mormon concepts of deity, I can easily see how she has arrived at her present situation, although I don't share her conclusions.

In searching the scriptures diligently for evidence of a feminine aspect and role of deity, she has recognized that the Book of Mormon and early revelations of Joseph Smith do indeed vividly portray a picture of the Father and Son as the same God. The evidence likewise forced me to this conclusion several years ago when I attempted to sort out many conflicting statements about the church's doctrine identifying Jesus as Jehovah and Brigham Young's Adam-God teachings (see my articles in *Sunstone* 9/2:36-44; *Dialogue* 19/1:77-93; and *Sunstone* 10/12:6-12; reprinted in *Line Upon Line* [Signature Books, 1989], 35-52, 171-81). Others have also noted and elaborated on the Book of Mormon's unorthodox doctrine of God (for an excellent discussion of this issue, see Melodie Charles, "Book of Mormon Christology," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* [Signature Books, 1993], 81-114; and Dan Vogel, "The Earliest Mormon Concept of God," *Line Upon Line*, 17-33). Incidentally, Allred's speculation that

our Mother in heaven "sacrificed her immortal body to be with us" (31) by becoming the Holy Ghost is reminiscent of Brigham Young's belief that our Father in heaven voluntarily sacrificed his immortal, celestial state to descend into mortality as Adam to provide mortal tabernacles for his spiritual offspring. He likewise taught that Eve, whom he considered to be our Mother in heaven, made the same sacrifice (see my letter in *Sunstone* 6/2:4-5).

Grappling with such extreme doctrinal diversity in the scriptures and authoritative statements of church leaders has led commentators to a variety of responses, usually very conditioned by their assumptions and agendas. Allred's search seemingly began with a desire to find a significant place and role for a heavenly mother in history and in her own life. She therefore excluded from her discussion the scriptures and Joseph Smith's later teachings which contradict her thesis. Many church leaders and apologists (as I have noted elsewhere) have likewise glossed over problems and inconsistencies regarding statements about deity. Rather than acknowledge the contradictions, they have redefined, ignored, excised, and harmonized in sometimes incredibly inventive ways to defend or promote "the orthodox religion." All of this juggling seems to stem from the perceived need to defend the inspiration and reliability of embraced authoritative sources.

Why is it that the Book of Mormon not only doesn't clear up questions about the godhead which have raged in Christianity for centuries, but on the contrary just adds to the confusion? This seems particularly ironic, since a major avowed purpose of the

book was to restore lost truths and end doctrinal controversies caused by the "great and abominable church's" corruption of the Bible. Why couldn't the Nephite prophets (or Joseph Smith, depending upon your point of view) have said just as plainly and clearly what James E. Talmage said in the 1916 "Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve On the Father and the Son"? If they (or Joseph) had, perhaps Allred wouldn't have been led to views which are considered heretical by today's standards.

For me, it simply makes more sense to recognize that there has clearly been an evolution of thought in regards to these things that fits better within the context of finite human cultures and development than as "eternal truths" that have appeared like bolts out of the blue. This is particularly apparent when the sources are viewed in chronological order according to the time of their production and interpreted in context with the environments from which they sprang. This has long been recognized in biblical scholarship (see my discussion and notes cited above in *Dialogue*, 78-79) and is becoming increasingly recognized by Mormon historians and scholars as well. In the Book of Mormon, we see a conscious attempt to reconcile trinitarian and unitarian controversies raging in Joseph's environment but which seem anachronistic as ancient musings when compared to biblical and early Judeo-Christian thought. Joseph was attempting, I submit, just as Janice, to sort things out. In later years he reversed his earlier efforts to completely "monotheise" the godhead and instead "tritheised" it. Although some may find this conclusion disconcerting, I find it instructive to realize that

even the prophets have had to struggle and falter like the rest of us in their attempts to discover truth. Although this view isn't as comfortable as a belief in infallible standard works and prophets, at least it doesn't require me to go through the questionable intellectual gymnastics I've seen coming from those defending more conservative views.

Thus, on a scholarly level I think that Allred is off the mark in her use and understanding of her sources. But I applaud her efforts and find that her portrayal of a nurturing, self-sacrificing Mother in heaven strikes an emotional chord. It's always nice to feel that Mom will always be there when you need her.

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Eve's Tongue

I was very pleased to read Helynne H. Hansen's essay on Virginia Sorensen's novel, *A Little Lower than the Angels*, in the summer 1994 issue. I tend to agree that women writers have a unique means of expression, and when I visited Virginia Sorensen in September 1990 I pointedly asked her to explain her previous statement that writing was "like working in the kitchen from an old recipe, very certainly a female thing." I hoped to use her explanation to clarify my own studies of *écriture féminine* in Mormon women's literature. But Sorensen, as Hansen suggests, quite frankly was ignorant of feminist theories of writing and admitted that her connection of cooking with writing came from her experience as a cook/writer while married.

Perhaps, however, if Sorensen had followed the women from *A Little Lower than the Angels* on to Winter Quarters she would have found there a source for women's discourse that vividly captures what Hansen calls "the tumultuous and often violent history . . . being made around them and the emotional upheaval that invade[d] the core of their personal lives." I am referring specifically to the women's practice of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) that many of the Winter Quarters sisters enjoyed for an extended period.

A number of the women at Winter Quarters had participated secretly in plural marriage in Nauvoo as Sorensen describes in *Angels*, and the dialogue between these women was indeed necessarily minimal. But after the prophet's death, when the women were miles away from Emma, who never accepted polygamy, and away from an accusing world, these women for the very first time broke the silence. They could openly discuss polygamy, their feelings about it, and their shared experiences. Zina Huntington said that at Sugar Creek the women first saw who were "the brave, the good, the self-sacrificing. Here we had now openly the first examples of noble-minded, virtuous women, bravely commencing to live the newly-revealed order of celestial marriage. Women; this is my husband's wife! Here at length, we could give this introduction, without fear of reproach or violation of man-made laws . . ." It would be an understatement to say that the women's discussions were intense. Eliza R. Snow claimed that to describe their meetings was beyond her power, even as a poet. And so the women relied upon, what I suggest is a worthy example of

écriture féminine, glossolalia.

Although the gift of tongues had been practiced previously in the church by men and women, Snow and the other "sister-wives" began to use this "hysterical" feminine discourse (Snow called it Eve's tongue) as a vehicle (1) to legitimate their assumption of leadership positions that they would retain throughout their lives, (2) to validate their spiritual worthiness and to articulate spiritual and divine truths in a manner that was recognized and sanctioned at that time by the church patriarchy, and (3) to vent suppressed desires and anxieties in a language that is both privileged and private and that transcends symbolic discourse. Or to explain and/or justify what Hansen suggests Mercy, Eliza, and the other women friends were unable to articulate in Nauvoo.

Music and glossolalia are frequently categorized by some feminist scholars as female tropes of expression, examples of "feminine" discourse that disrupt the symbolic order while liberating in a cathartic way anxieties from perceived oppression or constant stress. Julia Kristeva includes glossolalia as a form of the "poetic language" that serves to support the speaking subject when she is threatened by the collapse of the signifying function. Unfortunately for those who believe in this spiritual gift, Kristeva labels it a "psychotic" discourse that echoes the rhythms and intonations of infants.

On 26 January 1847, several weeks after Snow's "five-day visit with the girls" that renewed the practice of glossolalia among the Mormon women, Snow wrote "In Sacred Union," ostensibly a poem about the role of sacred music in the church. But

there are a number of indications that the poem can also be read as the women's reclamation of their promised spiritual gift, speaking and singing in tongues.

Snow occasionally sang in tongues to her sister-wives, with Patty Sessions offering interpretations. In this poem Snow's "songs of the righteous" could very well include the same spiritual gifts these righteous women had exercised when the Relief Society was first organized. In the first stanza Snow calls upon her sister-wives to unite in music's sweetest strains, and her image of the "fountain of delight" hints at the literal eruption of ecstatic love and spirituality (*jouissance*) the women shared at times throughout the year in Winter Quarters. The emphasis was upon using this spiritual gift to unify the sisters, which indeed was one of the effects of the glossolalia. It is the union of the women that is sacred and the sacredness is symbolized in the women's musical discourse whose origins lie not only with the holy fathers but also with "the ancient mothers." Snow's penultimate stanza distinguishes between "the minstrelsy of earth" and the "Bright patterns" of music that prove things of noble worth. This division of two types of music, one earthly and one celestial, intimates a division of discourse as well: one symbolic, authoritative, objective, linear, "masculine," what the apostle Paul calls singing with understanding; and one semiotic, ecstatic, mystical, healing, harmonic, "feminine," what Saint Paul labels singing with the spirit (1 Cor. 14:15).

I suppose a sad conclusion to this fascinating experiment with glossolalia is the evolution of the spiritual gift in the Mormon church. Sarah M.

Cleveland, a counselor to Emma Smith in the Relief Society, said that she "many times felt in her heart what she could not express in our own language." But because Joseph Smith had given women "the liberty to improve the gifts of the gospel," Cleveland took advantage of the opportunity extended to her and spoke "in a powerful manner" in the gift of tongues. (Patty Sessions interpreted.) Glossolalia was the early women's claim to direct experiential knowledge of the divine, and it provided them with an accepted channel of communication with God. However, Joseph Smith also warned the women of misusing the gift, and in 1900 Joseph F. Smith said the gift of tongues was easily imitated by the devil. Bruce R. McConkie further demoted Eve's tongue when he claimed that there was a host of gifts far more important. Today the gift is almost exclusively considered the ability of missionaries to learn a foreign language quickly! Hence, this most "feminine" of all *écriture féminine* has seemingly been appropriated by masculine discourse and effectively silenced.

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