



4-1-1976

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### Recommended Citation

Mulvay, Jill C. (1976) "Eliza R. Snow and The Woman Question," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol16/iss2/4>

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# Eliza R. Snow and The Woman Question

Jill C. Mulvay

And what is Woman's calling? Where her place?  
Is she destined to honor, or disgrace?

—Eliza R. Snow, "Woman"

In the 1830s, contemporary with the beginning of Mormonism, a new woman's movement was stirring in America. A small but vocal group of American women involved in the abolitionist cause had come to a frightening awareness of their own lack of legal and property rights. Increasingly women recognized their ability to organize and speak out for their own cause, and in 1848, with the early woman's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York, an organized woman's movement was underway. With that movement came the questions that Americans would actively ask until 1920 when the suffrage amendment was finally ratified: What is woman's position? What are her rights? What is her sphere? Feminists concluded that woman's rights had been usurped and her sphere confined. They were eager to break down the established order that had so long kept woman under what Elizabeth Cady Stanton termed the "absolute tyranny" of man.

Women converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the years following its 1830 organization, however, were not concerned with breaking down an existing order, but rather with establishing a new order—the Kingdom of God. As that kingdom grew, the sphere of Mormon women was enlarged. Sisters were early encouraged to exercise spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues; later, they participated in baptisms for the dead and temple ordinances; and they administered to the sick by the laying on of hands. Early in the 1830s Latter-day Saint women began vot-

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ing in general Church assemblies.<sup>1</sup> In 1842 the Prophet Joseph Smith responded to the women's desire to be organized, and established the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo "to look to the wants of the poor," "to teach the female part of the community," and "to save souls."<sup>2</sup>

All of this was part of the growing Kingdom, a kingdom directed by the priesthood-bearing hierarchy of the Church. The rights, sphere, and position of Mormon women were determined by the pronouncements of its male prophets, seers, and revelators. But Mormon women themselves distinguished subjugation to man's "absolute tyranny" from submission to the priesthood. They insisted upon defending their role, not defining it. Beginning in the early 1870s, in response to anti-polygamy legislation and a nationwide characterization of Mormon women as "poor and degraded," Latter-day Saint sisters became increasingly vocal about their position as women within the Church.

"Do you know of any place on the face of the earth, where woman has more liberty, and where she enjoys such high and glorious privileges as she does here, as a Latter-day Saint?"<sup>3</sup> Eliza R. Snow asked some five or six thousand women gathered in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in January 1870 to protest against anti-polygamy legislation. Zion's poetess and Female Relief Society president would never complain of usurped rights or a confined sphere of activity, and she promised her sisters that no woman in Zion would need to mourn because her sphere was too narrow. Eliza Snow's assertions were not mere rhetoric. During the 1870s the sphere of the nineteenth century Mormon woman was expanding. By the 1880s Mormon women had significant duties and responsibilities inside and outside their homes. At the first meeting of the International Council of Women at Washington, D. C. in 1888, Utah's delegate reported that 400 Relief Societies in Utah held property valued at \$95,000, many societies owning the halls in which they met.<sup>4</sup> Mormon women published their own biweekly

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed discussion of woman's position in the pre-Utah Church, see Ileen Ann Waspe, "The Status of Woman in the Philosophy of Mormonism from 1830 to 1845" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1942), especially pp. 81-136.

<sup>2</sup>Relief Society General Board Minutes 1842-1914, 17 March 1842, microfilm of holograph, Library-Archives, Church Historical Department. Hereafter cited as Church Library-Archives. In these unpublished minutes and those cited hereafter, spelling and punctuation have been standardized.

<sup>3</sup>Eliza R. Snow address, "Great Indignation Meeting," *Deseret News Weekly*, 19 January 1870.

<sup>4</sup>"The Women of Utah Represented at the International Council of Woman, Washington, D. C.," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 April 1888.

newspaper titled the *Woman's Exponent*. The Relief Society managed a hospital with a woman as resident surgeon. And the women of Zion had contributed significantly to the territory's economy through their participation in silk production and their mercantile cooperatives promoting home manufacture.<sup>5</sup> By the turn of the century Mormon women had made political, economic and social gains within their own culture comparable to gains made by their more vocal national colleagues in the larger American culture.

This host of Utah women was for more than twenty years captained by Eliza Roxcy Snow, "presidentess" of all Latter-day Saint organizations for women. Designated by her sisters an "elect lady," she was said to have precedence "in almost everything pertaining to woman's advancement among her people."<sup>6</sup> Not only was she an able administrator, she was an eloquent enunciator who proclaimed Church doctrine to her sisters in poetry, prose, and oratory that would fill volumes. Add to these distinctions the eminence of being a wife, consecutively, of both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and the aura of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and healing, and it is not difficult to understand why this poetess-presidentess-priestess-prophetess was probably the most widely heard and widely heeded woman in nineteenth century Mormondom.<sup>7</sup> What is woman's position? What are her rights? What is her sphere? Eliza R. Snow certainly influenced (if not sometimes dictated) both practical and theoretical responses of Mormon women to the woman question.

The focal point of late nineteenth century women's issues was suffrage. In that matter Mormon women were for some years ahead of women involved in the national suffrage movement, women in Utah receiving in 1870 the franchise for which their Eastern sisters would battle for the next five decades. They had staged no demonstrations and apparently circulated no petitions. The signature of Eliza R. Snow headed fourteen signatures on a memorandum to acting territorial governor Stephen Mann praising his "liberality and gentlemanly kindness" in signing the bill granting suffrage. But Eliza never would have led her sisters in an effort to take the right of suffrage by storm. She distrusted "that class

<sup>5</sup>See Leonard J. Arrington, "The Economic Role of Pioneer Mormon Women," *Western Humanities Review* 9 (Spring 1955):145-64.

<sup>6</sup>Annie W. Cannon, "Women of Utah," *Woman's Exponent*, 15 July 1888.

<sup>7</sup>See Maureen Ursenbach, "The Eliza Enigma: The Life and Legend of Eliza R. Snow," lecture delivered for the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 24 October 1974, manuscript on file in the office of the Church Historian, Church Historical Department.

known as 'strong minded,' who are strenuously and unflinchingly advocating 'woman's rights,' and some of them at least, claiming 'woman's sovereignty' vainly flattering themselves with the idea that with ingress to the ballot box and access to financial offices, they shall accomplish the elevation of woman-kind." She explained, "Not that we are opposed to woman suffrage. . . . But to think of a war of sexes which the woman's rights movement would inevitably inaugurate, . . . creates an involuntary shudder!"<sup>8</sup>

In 1872, while Susan B. Anthony was being arrested in Rochester, New York for her attempt to register and vote, Eliza R. Snow encouraged Mormon women to cast their more easily secured ballots. She possessed enough political acumen to see the advantages of female suffrage, especially in Utah. "Your vote counts as much, weighs as heavily, as President Young's, Brother G. A. Smith's or Brother D. H. Wells's, hence you should consider yourselves important on election day," she counseled her sisters. She told Ogden Relief Societies, "[God] has given us the right of franchise," and it is "as necessary to vote as to pray." With Illinois and Missouri persecutions vivid enough in her memory, she advised, "Unless we maintain our rights we will be driven from place to place."<sup>9</sup>

As a political force the women of Utah were destined to create controversy. When their votes strengthened the Church-dominated People's Party, the anti-Mormon Liberal Party complained that "the female dupes of the priesthood" were "arrayed at the polls against them."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, liberal forces lined up against female suffrage, while generally conservative Church authorities and women rose in its defense. In the struggle Eliza R. Snow, who had earlier polemicized against "female conventionists," called Mormon women together in suffrage meetings to garner support for the proposed "Anthony Amendment" which guaranteed that the right to vote in federal or state elections would not be denied on the basis of sex.

The alliance with the national suffrage movement was tenuous at best, and under the leadership of Sister Snow Mormon women did not become closely involved with national suffrage leaders.

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<sup>8</sup>Eliza R. Snow address, "Celebration of the Twenty-fourth at Ogden," *Deseret News Weekly*, 26 July 1871.

<sup>9</sup>Salt Lake Stake, [General or Cooperative] Retrenchment Association Minutes 1871-1875, 19 July 1873, Church Library-Archives; Weber Stake, Ogden City Wards Joint Session [Relief Society] Minutes 1879-1888, 6 February 1879, Church Library-Archives.

<sup>10</sup>"The Woman Suffrage Law," *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, 23 December 1877.

By 1882 Mormon women had attended only two of the annual woman's suffrage conventions, indicating as one sister put it, that they had been "so busily engaged in cleaning up the House of Zion . . . that seemingly the fact has not been considered that there might be safety in having a few sentinels stationed on the towers afar off."<sup>11</sup> In Utah the major battle for suffrage took place after the disfranchisement resulting from passage of the anti-Mormon Edmunds-Tucker Bill in 1887, and Eliza died before that year was out.

Perhaps Eliza R. Snow unintentionally prepared the field for the suffrage struggle in other ways, especially in organizing the Relief Societies which became the focal point for the activities of Mormon women. She had served as secretary of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, and with prophetic hindsight she later recalled: "When Joseph organized the sisters in Nauvoo I saw different positions for women to occupy besides tending to their household duties as wives and mothers."<sup>12</sup> Having dutifully kept minutes for the Nauvoo meetings—minutes Joseph Smith said would be the constitution and law of the society—Eliza brought them across the Plains to Salt Lake City. Such a constitution became useful when Brigham Young commissioned Eliza to assist bishops in organizing ward Relief Societies, and eventually called her to preside over all Relief Societies.

In 1868 the Relief Society was erecting its first hall in the Fifteenth Ward and at the same time Brigham Young was suggesting classes through the University of Deseret "giving ladies a thorough business education, qualifying them for bookkeepers, accountants, clerks, cashiers, tellers, payers, telegraphic operators, reporters, and other branches of employment suitable to their sex."<sup>13</sup> Eliza backed him up with the words of her first and best-loved Prophet: "Joseph Smith counseled the sisters to do business."<sup>14</sup>

More than once Eliza Snow helped Brigham Young in his requests for women to meet specific community needs. In 1873 when the President asked women to help with printing, Eliza made up her mind "to go from house to house if required to procure

<sup>11</sup>Romania B. Pratt, "Woman Suffrage Convention," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 March 1882.

<sup>12</sup>Park Stake, First Ward Relief Society Minutes 1870-1893, 26 November 1874, Church Library-Archives.

<sup>13</sup>General Epistle, January-February 1868, p. 25, Brigham Young Circular Letters, Church Library-Archives.

<sup>14</sup>Box Elder Stake Relief Society Minutes 1878-1890, 10 September 1878, Church Library-Archives.

young ladies to learn.”<sup>15</sup> President Young suggested that young ladies volunteer to study obstetrics and nursing, and to become physicians. “We want sister physicians that can officiate in any capacity that gentlemen are called upon to officiate. . . . Women can occupy precisely the same footing that men occupy as physicians and surgeons,” declared Eliza.<sup>16</sup> Small groups of women began their own classes in physiology and anatomy, and several women went East to study medicine, some with financial aid from their sisters. By 1879, plans for a hospital were underway, and in 1882, under the direction of Eliza R. Snow, president of its founding association, the Deseret Hospital opened its doors and an LDS woman was installed as resident surgeon.

The first issue of the *Woman's Exponent*, a paper, “owned by, controlled by and edited by Utah ladies,” appeared in 1872. In several early issues the editor described the purpose and terms of the paper, including this note: “Miss Eliza R. Snow, President of the entire Female Relief Societies, cordially approves of the journal, and will be a contributor to it as she has leisure from her numerous duties.”<sup>17</sup> Eliza’s official sanction was crucial to any Mormon woman’s enterprise. In the hundreds of issues of the *Exponent* printed before her death, Eliza R. Snow’s name was connected with every major movement among Mormon women from retrenchment to publication of Edward Tullidge’s *Women of Mormondom*.<sup>18</sup> Few, if any, of the movements originated with her, but many benefited from her phenomenal executive skill, and all—home industry, silk production, ladies’ commission stores, physiology classes, grain storage, MIAs and Primaries—received her personal endorsement as she traveled by train and wagon to every settlement in the territory.

With the coming of the railroad which brought foreign goods within easy reach, and Retrenchment Associations whose purpose was to curb the appetite for Eastern finery, came Brigham Young’s push for home industry. Support home industries, Eliza emphasized, “in accordance with the requirements of the Priesthood.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Salt Lake Stake, [General or Cooperative] Retrenchment Association Minutes 1871-1875, 19 July 1873.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 13 September 1873.

<sup>17</sup>“Woman’s Exponent, A Utah Ladies’ Journal,” *Woman’s Exponent*, 1 June 1872.

<sup>18</sup>Edward W. Tullidge’s *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.p., 1877) was financed through shares purchased by ward Relief Societies. Eliza R. Snow collected sketches of Mormon women for the volume and read and revised the manuscript. See Emmeline B. Wells, “Pen Sketch of an Illustrious Woman,” *Woman’s Exponent*, 15 August 1881.

<sup>19</sup>“Notice to the Officers and Members of each Branch of the Relief Society . . .,” *Woman’s Exponent*, 1 April 1875.

Sustain home straw manufacture and "if we can get sufficient encouragement, we shall make hats for men and boys, women and girls."<sup>20</sup> Eliza considered "each successful Branch of Home Manufactures, an additional stone in laying the foundation for the upbuilding of Zion," and she considered a woman who stepped forward and assisted efficiently in home industries (including silk culture, straw weaving, tailoring, and home canning) to be "doing just as much as an Elder who went forth to preach the Gospel."<sup>21</sup> Sister Snow did not preach idly. She and her sisters in the Fourteenth Ward commenced a Cooperative Tailoring Establishment to "fill orders for men and boys' clothing, on short notice and at low prices."<sup>22</sup>

In 1876, President Young asked the women to "form an association to start business in the capacity of disposing homemade articles, such as are manufactured among ourselves."<sup>23</sup> Eliza Snow was elected president of the Relief Society Woman's Mercantile Association and the women opened their store in the Old Constitution Building on Main Street in Salt Lake City. Because they had no capital to commence their enterprise, they sold on commission and the project came to be known as the Woman's Commission Store. The first year of operation Eliza superintended the store from eight in the morning until six at night, carefully looking after the minute details—evidently quite capably. Once, refusing to let one of Brigham Young's clerks dictate the terms of commission on Young's goods, Eliza haughtily wrote the President: "Although we are novices in the mercantile business, we are not green enough for that kind of management."<sup>24</sup>

"Presidentess" Snow told the Brigham City Relief Society, "Sometimes I think we can do more than the brethren."<sup>25</sup> For years the men had tried unsuccessfully to store grain, but Brigham Young finally assigned grain storage to the Relief Society. Individual

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>E. R. Snow to Mrs. L. G. Richards, *Woman's Exponent*, 15 April 1875; First Ward Relief Society Minutes, 7 June 1877, in *Woman's Exponent*, 15 November 1877. Daniel H. Wells, second counselor to Brigham Young, told the Relief Society: "Any man or woman engaged in any of these callings [building, manufacturing, agriculture] with pure motives, is just as much on a mission as if teaching the gospel." "Dedication of the Kaysville Relief Society," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 March 1877.

<sup>22</sup>"Tailoring Establishment," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 May 1875.

<sup>23</sup>President Young to the President and Members of the Relief Societies, 4 October 1876, in *Woman's Exponent*, 15 October 1876.

<sup>24</sup>Eliza R. Snow to Brigham Young, 10 February 1877, Brigham Young Collection, Church Library-Archives.

<sup>25</sup>Box Elder Stake [old] Relief Society Minutes 1875-1884, 6 November 1877, Church Library-Archives.

ward Relief Societies built their own granaries and by 1880 their holdings were strong enough that John Taylor was advising the women that their sisters had voted at general conference to lend their respective bishops "so much wheat as they may consider requisite to meet the necessities of the deserving poor," and at the same time admonishing the bishops to pay back their loans in full.<sup>26</sup>

As Retrenchment Associations grew up among the young ladies, many recognized the need for similar associations for the young men. Eliza told her sisters, "I have suggested that the boys be organized but of course we ladies cannot dictate."<sup>27</sup> Dictate she did not, but campaign she did. In 1875 she traveled to Lehi and held a meeting for the young ladies and instructed them to bring their beaux. She later reported:

I asked the young men to vote and told them I wanted them to sustain the young ladies in their positions; and also if they did not leave off their drinking and tobacco where were the young girls to get husbands? The young men did not wish the young girls to be in advance of them. I heard the next morning that the young men had been after the Bishop to organize them before night.<sup>28</sup>

The same year, President Young called Junius Wells to head the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association. "We ladies cannot dictate," Eliza admitted, but the Prophet Joseph Smith had told the women at that first meeting of the Relief Society in Nauvoo that they might "provoke the brethren to good works."<sup>29</sup>

By the mid-1880s Mormon women had achieved with distinction. Relief Societies, Mutual Improvement Associations, and Primary Associations had been established throughout the territory, largely through the efforts of women under the direction of Eliza R. Snow.<sup>30</sup> Women's efforts in these organizations, in home industry and grain storage, and their willingness to be trained in skills

<sup>26</sup>John Taylor, "Circular," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 May 1880.

<sup>27</sup>Park Stake, First Ward Relief Society Minutes 1870-1893, 5 September 1872, Church Library-Archives.

<sup>28</sup>Salt Lake Stake, [General or Cooperative] Retrenchment Association Minutes 1871-1875, 1 May 1875.

<sup>29</sup>Relief Society General Board Minutes 1842-1914, 17 March 1842.

<sup>30</sup>The concept of a Primary Association, an organization to train young children in the teachings of the Church, originated with Aurelia S. Rogers, who with the support of Eliza R. Snow and under the direction of her bishop, organized the first Primary Association in Farmington, Utah, in 1878. Sister Snow and other women immediately took up the task of organizing Primaries throughout the territory. See Aurelia Spencer Rogers, *Life Sketches of Orson Spencer and Others, and History of Primary Work* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1898), pp. 210-23.

meeting specific needs of the growing Kingdom made theirs a contribution in no way inferior to that of their brethren.

Certainly by the standard of gentile crusaders for women, the "poor, degraded women of Utah," were making significant contributions. Topics discussed at the first meeting of the International Council of Women held in Washington, D. C. in 1888 indicate that Mormon women were engaged in many of the same activities as their gentile counterparts: "Women in Journalism," "Women as Educators," "Women in the Trades," "Women in Medicine," "Hospitals Managed by and for Women," "How to Reach the Children," "Woman as Missionary," "Constitutional Rights of Women of the United States," "The Moral Power of the Ballot."<sup>31</sup> Apparently nineteenth century feminists and Mormon women expanded their responsibilities and influence in similar directions.

But however similar their directions, their points of departure were diametrically opposite. Feminists attacked a male-dominated society; Eliza R. Snow defended it. Miss Anthony decried "woman's utter dependence on man"; Eliza Snow deemed it essential to woman's salvation. Mrs. Stanton attacked established religion for placing women in an inferior position; "Presidentess" Snow, the most influential woman in a sect yet unbound by centuries of tradition, acknowledged man's superiority and never ceased to defend it doctrinally. Eliza R. Snow seemed to advocate every tenet radical feminists were working to uproot.<sup>32</sup>

Eliza did not ignore the woman question, but rather attempted to synthesize an assortment of Mormon doctrines into a neat package that would provide for the eternal expansion of woman's role. For Eliza, woman's earthly position had been unalterably determined. Aware of feminist campaigns for equality, she asserted, "We have no occasion to clamor about equality, or to battle for supremacy. We understand our true position—God has defined

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<sup>31</sup>"International Council of Women," *Woman's Exponent*, 15 March 1888.

<sup>32</sup>As early as 1869 the national suffrage movement was split along radical-conservative lines into the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were leaders of NWSA, the more radical of the groups. Though the NWSA alienated many religious American women, the AWSA made an effort not to lose the influence of the churches, and though Mrs. Stanton and Miss Anthony would have disagreed violently with the doctrine Miss Snow propounded, some of that doctrine was traditionally Christian and would have been accepted by many of the American women working for woman's suffrage. See Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), pp. 151-55.

the sphere of woman wherever His Priesthood is acknowledged."<sup>33</sup>

Woman

. . . led in the transgression, and was plac'd  
By Eloheim's unchangeable decree,  
In a subservient and dependent sphere:—<sup>34</sup>

"Order is heaven's first law," Eliza instructed, "and it is utterly impossible for order to exist without . . . gradation."<sup>35</sup> In that gradation, men and women did not occupy the same position. Apostle Orson Hyde, in 1857, addressed his audience "Brethren and sisters," rather than "Ladies and gentlemen," because, he said, "the order of heaven places man in the front rank; hence he is first to be addressed. Woman follows under the protection of his counsels, and the superior strength of his arm. Her desire should be unto her husband, and he should rule over her."<sup>36</sup> Countless times in her travels, Sister Snow enlarged upon that doctrine for her sisters. In the beginning, she explained, male and female were addressed as one, but the Fall brought about a change, and thus the "curse of Eve" rested upon all womankind. Regarding that curse, Brigham Young stated, "I do not know what the Lord could have put upon women worse than he did upon Mother Eve, where he told her: 'Thy desire shall be to thy husband.' . . . I would be glad if it were otherwise."<sup>37</sup>

Elizabeth Stanton's 1848 Declaration of Sentiments included her outrage that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of men toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of absolute tyranny over her."<sup>38</sup> However, Latter-day Saints felt that man's unrighteous dominion over woman was not only a result of his wickedness, but a result of the curse that woman's desire should be to her husband. George Q. Cannon explained:

Why, women, in their yearning after the other sex and in their desire for maternity, will do anything to gratify that instinct of their nature and yield to anything and be dishonored even rather than not to gratify it.<sup>39</sup>

Woman's degradation was a fact. For gentile women the only

<sup>33</sup>Snow address, "Celebration of the Twenty-fourth at Ogden."

<sup>34</sup>Eliza R. Snow, "The New Year, 1852," *Deseret News*, 10 January 1852.

<sup>35</sup>Snow, "Celebration of the Twenty-fourth at Ogden."

<sup>36</sup>Orson Hyde, Sermon, *Deseret News*, 18 March 1857.

<sup>37</sup>Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1855-1886), 16:167.

<sup>38</sup>Elizabeth Cady Stanton, quoted in Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, p. 75.

<sup>39</sup>George Q. Cannon in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:207.

recourse was to burst the bonds of slavery, but for Eliza and her sisters there was a different path. They proclaimed: "We stand in a different position from the ladies of the world; we have made a covenant with God, we understand his order, and know that that order requires submission on the part of women."<sup>40</sup> Mormon women did stand in a different position from the women of the world. They could submit to the rule of their righteous husbands and brethren, with the knowledge that they were honoring God through honoring his priesthood. Eliza boasted:

Let those fair champions of "female rights,"  
 Female conventionists come here.  
Yes, in  
 These mountain vales . . .  
. . . are noble men,  
 Whom woman may be proud t'acknowledge for  
 Her own superior.<sup>41</sup>

Latter-day Saint women did not admit that just any man could guide and direct woman. It was not the mere fact of masculinity; it was the righteous exercise of priesthood which gave a man wisdom and power that was from God and thus qualified him as woman's leader and protector. Eliza lamented the futile efforts of the feminists:

With all their efforts to remove the curse,  
 Matters are daily growing worse and worse;  
 They can as well unlock without a key,  
 As change the tide of man's degeneracy,  
 Without the Holy Priesthood: 'tis at most  
 Like reck'ning bills in absence of the host.<sup>42</sup>

When Eliza saw her gentile sisters working to eliminate prostitution and desertion, she disparaged their efforts, and taught instead that "man's wisdom is not sufficient—God alone can prescribe the remedy." The remedy was plural marriage. Sister Snow continued,

Here in Utah, through his servants and handmaidens [God] is establishing a nucleus of domestic and social purity, confidence and happiness, which will, so far as its influence extends, eradicate and prevent, in future, all those blighting evils. . . . God loves purity, and he has introduced the principle of plurality of wives

<sup>40</sup>"Miss E. R. Snow's Address to the Female Relief Societies of Weber County," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 33 (12 September 1871):578.

<sup>41</sup>Snow, "The New Year, 1852."

<sup>42</sup>Eliza R. Snow, "Woman," *Poems, Religious, Historical and Political*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: LDS Printing and Publishing Establishment, 1877), 2:174.



tried to accomplish. She was advocating not passivity, but righteous submission. "As sure as the sisters arise and take hold of the work," she exclaimed, "the brethren will wake up, because they must be at the head."<sup>47</sup> Relief Society president Willmirth East wrote Eliza from Arizona concerning her bishop's objection to frequent Relief Society visits from sisters to members. Sister Snow replied that the bishops might not be "properly informed relative to the Teacher's visits," and that it might be well for the sisters "to explain to him, but not oppose his wishes." She concluded her response with her consistent instructions to all Relief Society sisters: "We will do as we are directed by the Priesthood."<sup>48</sup>

Sarah Grimké and other leaders in the nation's woman's movement had asserted that whatever was right for a man to do was likewise right for a woman to do. Perhaps this sentiment was present among some Mormon sisters. Evidently as women became increasingly active in Church positions of leadership and responsibility they became confused regarding their status and authority. Church President John Taylor in 1880 explained that sisters "ordained" to Relief Society positions were not ordained to the priesthood. Subsequently, to avoid confusion women were "set apart" for these positions, rather than "ordained." As enthusiastic sisters organized MIAs and Primary Associations, some question arose regarding woman's authority to organize and reorganize Relief Societies. Eliza R. Snow, with twenty years of experience, was called upon to clarify woman's role. At a Sevier Stake conference she

spoke on the subject of organization; said there were some societies which women had a right to organize, such as the Y[oung] L[adies'] and Primary Associations, but they had no right to organize a Relief Society; but they could *assist* the priesthood in doing so . . . Sister Eliza explained that she had been given a mission to *assist* the priesthood in organizing the Relief Societies; hence, some had conceived the idea that she organized.<sup>49</sup>

Lest Relief Society sisters think that the strength of their accomplishments entitled them to strike out on their own, against the wishes of bishops and stake presidents, John Taylor admonished them: "While we appreciate the labors of our sisters, it must not

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<sup>47</sup>Salt Lake Stake, [General or Cooperative] Retrenchment Association Minutes 1871-1875, 30 August 1873.

<sup>48</sup>Eliza R. Snow to Willmirth East, 23 April 1883, photocopy of holograph, Eliza R. Snow Papers, Church Library-Archives.

<sup>49</sup>Sevier Stake Relief Society Minutes, 24 and 25 October 1880, in *Woman's Exponent*, 15 November 1880.

be forgotten that the man holds the Priesthood, and is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church."<sup>50</sup>

Women should be helpmeets to the priesthood, and they should assist their brothers, in Eliza's imagery, "like the devout and steadfast Miriam in upholding the hands of Moses."<sup>51</sup> Unlike her national contemporaries, Eliza was not even anxious to give woman the last word. Happy to see the brethren at Relief Society meetings and conferences, she invited them to speak last. Relief Society president Margaret T. Smoot from Provo explained, "Sister Snow says it is proper for us to speak first, and let the stronger follow the weak, that if we say anything that needs correcting it can be corrected."<sup>52</sup>

The accomplishments of Eliza R. Snow and Mormon women in general are not reduced in light of this absolute submission to the priesthood. They did not consider themselves slaves; they were stewards. The many who were faithful in their assignments epitomized the wise stewards who in the parable of the talents doubled the talents for which they were held responsible and were given more. Stewards relieve their masters of certain tasks and in that process make decisions of consequence. Just so, the purpose of the Relief Society was to relieve the bishop and Eliza advised, "Do not run to him with every trifle."<sup>53</sup> "If possible we should relieve the Bishops instead of adding to their multitudinous labors."<sup>54</sup> Stewardship is not passivity and the steward who fearfully hid his talent in the earth was condemned. "Many of the women of Zion [have gone] astray with the idea that they [have] no time to attend meetings, or to give to the culture of their minds, but that their whole being and time must be given to the drudgery of life."<sup>55</sup> But, "Do we realize our responsibilities? And that we have as much to do with the salvation of our souls as the brethren? They can not save us, we must save ourselves."<sup>56</sup> She counseled, "It is a choosing time and we should do the choosing ourselves."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Juab Stake Relief Society Minutes, 20 April 1879, in *Woman's Exponent*, 1 June 1879.

<sup>51</sup>Snow address, "Great Indignation Meeting."

<sup>52</sup>Provo Stake Relief Society Minutes, 27 May 1881, in *Woman's Exponent*, 1 July 1881.

<sup>53</sup>Sugar House Ward Relief Society Minutes, 20 July 1868, in *Woman's Exponent*, 1 May 1891.

<sup>54</sup>E. R. Snow Smith to the branches of the Relief Society, *Woman's Exponent*, 15 September 1884.

<sup>55</sup>Provo City Relief Society Minutes, 17 June 1875, in *Woman's Exponent*, 15 July 1875.

<sup>56</sup>Ephraim Relief Society Minutes, 25 June 1875, in *Woman's Exponent*, 15 August 1875.

<sup>57</sup>Nineteenth Ward Relief Society Minutes, 18 August 1875, in *Woman's Exponent*, 1 October 1875.

Eliza Snow was speaking to thousands of Mormon mothers with children. What would she, a childless "mother in Israel," have them choose? "Let your first business be to perform your duties at home."<sup>58</sup> "The sisters in Zion are required to form the characters of the sons who are to be rulers and bishops in the kingdom of God."<sup>59</sup> This "is a mother's first duty, but it is not *all* her duty."<sup>60</sup>

Inasmuch as you are wise stewards, you will find time for social duties, because these are incumbent upon us as daughters and mothers in Zion. By seeking to perform every duty you will find that your capacity will increase, and you will be astonished at what you can accomplish.<sup>61</sup>

The wise stewards did find time for other duties, and there were not only presidents and counselors for Relief Societies, MIAs and Primaries, but also storekeepers, printers, telegraphers, silk growers, surgeons and hospital directors.

Feminists taught women that through asserting themselves they could achieve social, political, and economic equality with men. Eliza R. Snow consistently held that only through obedience, and faithfulness in her stewardship, would woman change her sphere:

Inasmuch as we continue faithful, we shall be those that will be crowned in the presence of God and the lamb. You, my sisters, if you are faithful, will become Queens of Queens, and Priestesses unto the Most High God. These are your callings. We have only to discharge our duties.<sup>62</sup>

In the parable of the talents, a promise was given the stewards who discharged their duties: "Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things" (Matthew 25:23). Or, in the words of Zion's Poetess who penned these lines so carefully for her sisters:

What we experience here, is but a school  
Wherein the ruled will be prepared to rule.  
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And thro' obedience, Woman will obtain  
The *power of reigning, and the right to reign.*<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup>"An Address by Miss Eliza R. Snow . . . August 14, 1873," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 36 (13 January 1874):21.

<sup>59</sup>Ephraim Relief Society Minutes, 25 June 1875.

<sup>60</sup>Weber Stake Relief Society Minutes, 9 June 1882, in *Woman's Exponent*, 1 July 1882.

<sup>61</sup>"An Address by Miss Eliza R. Snow . . . August 14, 1873," p. 21.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Snow, "Woman," p. 178.