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## Lay Latitude: Latter-day Saint Women's Agency in Northwest Arkansas

Andrew Tompkins  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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Lay Latitude: Latter-day Saint Women's Agency in Northwest Arkansas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Anthropology

by

Andrew Tompkins  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, and Political Science, 2013

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Kirstin Erickson, Ph.D.  
Thesis Director

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JoAnn D'Alisera, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Ram Natarajan, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

## **ABSTRACT**

The question of women's agency in gender-traditional religions has been the subject of much scholarly attention over the past four decades, but little research has been done focusing specifically on Latter-day Saint women and their identities and roles within the structure and practice of the Church. In popular media representations, Latter-Day Saint women are often depicted as submissive or surviving, either powerless pawns or resistant warriors. However, many Latter-day Saint women find fulfillment and empowerment within and because of, rather than outside or in spite of, the institutional Church. In this thesis, I explore women's agency in Northwest Arkansas' Greendale First Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, analyzing women's expressions of faith in both ward and temple contexts. By qualifying and participating righteously, taking up lay leadership roles, engaging in theologizing discussions, and interpreting experiences through the Church's key symbols, women in the Church find a multitude of agential modes through which to exercise power and authority.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first Sunday I joined the Broussards for church, my plans grew exponentially.<sup>1</sup> What began initially as an hour-long service became an all-day excursion. Each of the day's happenings bled into the next, so that I was almost seamlessly carried along with the family in their Sunday rhythm. Would I like to stay for Sunday School, my friend Hannah asked? Of course, I said. She then invited me to visit her nearby friends' enormous garden, and then to her own home for a family reunion dinner. I took up the task of peeling and chopping vegetables, while the Broussard parents, their grown children and in-laws, grandchildren, and family friends alike set to work cooking the food, preparing the tables, and mixing lemonade. Hannah's brother-in-law John asked what I was writing my thesis about, and I explained my interest in Latter-day Saint women's experiences of agency in the Church. This immediately sparked an hours-long conversation with almost the entire family. Had I read Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*, John asked me? He would be sure to email some colleagues of his that were also working on issues of women's agency in religious contexts to see if they had anything to share. What about women who have left or are thinking of leaving the Church over issues of agency? Had I considered including them in the study? The family showered me with academic and Church resources, and eagerly facilitated my participation in their congregation.

"You should come to Relief Society!" Hannah's mother Leah said excitedly. I questioned whether or not I *could* do that, since it was a women's group.

"Of course. I run it," she said, settling the matter. We then launched into a conversation, led by the Broussard women, about the Church's inevitable, eventual evolution on doctrines like Heavenly Mother and women's role in the church's structure.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of people, congregations, locations, and other identifying features have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identities of informants.

I was astonished by the breadth of the discussions we had launched into, but I should not have been. The Broussards' responses almost overwhelmingly brought to the fore the complex realities and treasures that ethnographic subjects themselves bring to the ethnographic enterprise, as agents always-already themselves reflecting on phenomena in their own social milieu, observing and participating as much as any ethnographer. This first fieldwork foray underscored the main thrust of my research – that Latter-day Saints generally and women in the Church in particular are already engaging in an abundance of overlooked agential modes.

Women have profoundly shaped and participated in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since its founding. They have variously served as breadwinners, educators, mothers, sisters, priestesses, Sunday School teachers, organists, choristers, and Relief Society presidents. So often, however, this heterogeneous past and present is overlooked in favor of convenient oversimplifications that omit any recognition of women's power. Left unexplored are questions of agency. How are Latter-day Saint women acting as agents at Church? How have the roles of women in the Church changed over time, and how do they continue to change? How does agency operate, especially when it is agency in support of rather than against a structure? What does this agency look like at different levels – personal, familial, and church-wide? In this thesis, I examine Latter-day Saint women's agency primarily as it infuses their experiences in Church settings – the ward, or local congregation, and the temple. I begin by exploring popular representations of Latter-day Saint women's agency in literature, television, and film, and the ways in which these media have produced particular perceptions of women in the Church. Here, I employ Brenda Weber's concept of "mediated Mormonism" and Jeffrey Cohen's theses on monster culture to explore the ways in which Latter-day Saint women have historically and contemporarily been rendered social others and the functions that such renderings serve (Cohen

1996:4; Weber 2019:12). I then question these representations, drawing on both emic and etic theories of agency to contend that Latter-day Saint women find opportunities for participatory agency in the theological and practical latitude granted to lay members of the Church, especially as located in personal and collective apprehensions of what anthropologist Sherry Ortner calls key symbols (Brekus 2016; Burke 2012; Morrill 2016; Ortner 1973; Wei-Tsing Inouye 2016). For Latter-day Saint women, these principal key symbols are the eternal family and the expression of inner agency in obedience (Davies 2000:143, 189; Davies 2003:148; Givens 2015:267-274). As the primary organizing logics of Mormonism writ large and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in particular, these key symbols enable women to order their experiences and understandings in ways that maximize opportunities for agential participation.

### **Historical Background**

Mormonism erupted into historical time in the early nineteenth century in the “burned-over district” of western New York, the epicenter of a fervent Christian restorationist current (Bushman 2005:36-37; Davies 2003:33, 65; Quinn 1998:30-31). Joseph Smith, a young farm boy immersed in the ambient folk religious zeal of his time, sought answers from God (Quinn 1998:30). In the spring of 1820, he knelt down in a secluded tree grove in Palmyra to pray about which church to join. Several iterations of this event exist in the Latter-day Saint historical record, each offering a different emphasis (Allen 1970:4-13; Brooke 1994:151; Bushman 2005:38-41). In Smith’s own 1838 account, officially canonized by the Church in its scripture *The Pearl of Great Price*, he explains that he began to pray but was nearly overcome by a chthonic adversary. “Thick darkness gathered around me,” he writes, “and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.”<sup>2</sup> Then, the darkness let up, and, “just at this

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<sup>2</sup> JS-History 1:15, in *The Pearl of Great Price*.

moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head...which descended gradually until it fell upon me.”<sup>3</sup> He continues:

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!* ...I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.<sup>4</sup>

Having prayed earnestly, Joseph Smith received a direct visit from Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. This foundational theophany informs every other historical and extant aspect of Church doctrine and organization, from the power of prayer and personal revelation, to the nature of God and Jesus Christ as physical, separate and resurrected beings, to the Church’s unique Restorationist claims (Givens 2015:25-26, 82-83). Smith’s First Vision was not his last. Through a series of otherworldly visits over the course of the 1820s, an angelic being named Moroni instructed Smith to prepare himself and his family for the discovery and translation of an ancient scripture called *The Book of Mormon*, buried somewhere in New York (Givens 2002:11-13). After proving his worthiness, Smith dug up these records engraved on gold plates and began the process of translating them using accompanying biblical seer stones and spectacles (Bushman 2005:41-46, 58-59; Givens 2002:31-33). Smith’s translation revealed a narrative of native American groups called the Nephites and Lamanites, detailing the tensions between their civilizations, their prophetic dispensations, and the post-resurrection visit of Jesus Christ to the Americas (Givens 2002:43-45). In 1830, Smith and his followers established the Church of Christ as a community of Christians willing to receive God’s restored truths as revealed through

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1:16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 1:17-19.

revelations, visions, visits, and prophetic counsel (Bushman 2005:109-112). Constantly in tension with local communities, and fearing further persecution, the Saints spent the next two decades moving from New York to Kirtland, Ohio to Jackson County, Missouri to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they finally found a brief five-year respite from persecution before Smith's 1844 jail-cell martyrdom by an angry crowd of locals.

After a succession crisis, Brigham Young emerged as the prophet and leader of the largest contingent of Saints (Bushman and Bushman 2001:34-35). He led them west to present-day Utah, where they established Salt Lake City and began to practice polygyny and experiment with forms of collective economic organization (Leone 1979:15). From there, Latter-day Saints expanded into and colonized areas of the West, reaching as far down as Mexico (Bushman and Bushman 2001:37-39). The changing status of the Utah territory led to conflict between the Church and the United States government, eventually erupting into the Utah War of 1857 (Bushman and Bushman 2001:56-57). Tensions continued between the Saints and the government over polygamy until the Church's 1890 Manifesto put an end to the practice of plural marriage, a product of the government's threats to dissolve Utah and strip the Church of its power and assets (Leone 1979:153). At this point, Mormonism ceased to be a state and instead became a sect (Leone 1979:149). This profoundly impacted the modern Church, and throughout the twentieth century it oscillated between what Armand Mauss identified as, on the one hand, assimilation to American ideals, and, on the other, retrenchment to a distinct Latter-day Saint heritage and identity (Mauss 1994:5). This tension continues in the twenty-first century, with what many identify as a move away from more distinctive doctrines and an embracing of neo-Protestant orthodoxy and language (Davies 2003:190-191; White 1987:xiii). It also informs media representation of the Latter-day Saints, rooted in nineteenth-century anti-

Mormonism's polemics and caricatures, which reached a fever pitch during heightened church-government tensions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fluhman 2012:11-13, 22).

### **Latter-day Saint Theology**

Many scholars of Mormonism identify a punctuated equilibrium of Latter-day Saint theological development, with innovations marking each of early Mormonism's spatio-temporal nexuses, often catalyzed by the respective prophetic textual-translation or interpretive project at hand (Alexander 1980:15-29; Givens 2015:4-5; Park 2012:59-88). Though the reality of Smith's evolving doctrinal restoration is much more complex and integrated, the model is useful as a general outline (Givens 2015:4). In New York, from 1820 to 1831, Smith and his early followers established a preparatory gospel of faith and repentance open to restored truths, including the return of proper priesthood authority through the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods. *The Book of Mormon* did not in itself inaugurate much new doctrine or diverge from the Christian primitivism of the time. Rather than its contents as a "theological document," the scripture's primary significance was the very fact of its *existence* as continuing scripture, "as a sign" of more to come (Givens 2002:70-71,187). *The Book of Mormon* laid the groundwork for the unending nature of revelation. For Smith, the restorationist project was not so much a fundamentalist return as an ongoing "creative and innovative endeavour" of bricolage, a "salvaging, collecting, and assimilating" of scattered truths rather than a reversion to the past (Davies 2003:16; Givens 2002:24; Givens 2015:38).

In Kirtland, from 1831 to 1838, Smith worked on translating and correcting portions of the Bible (Alexander 1980:18). This work provoked a series of visions that expanded Latter-day Saint theology to include a form of temple Christianity, baptism on behalf of deceased family

members, and detailed visions of nearly universal salvation in a series of heavens, as well as an emphasis on building a Zion community (Alexander 1980:18; Bushman 2005:128-141). The Church's first temple was built, and a Pentecost-like outpouring of visions spiritual gifts ensued. Additionally, Latter-day Saint cosmology began to distinguish itself from its earlier Protestant affinities (Alexander 1980:15). Smith's 1835 work on the series of papyri he identified as the *Book of Abraham* precipitated divine visions revealing that matter is eternal and that God organized rather than creating ex-nihilo (Bushman 2005:285-290; Givens 2015:154-156). "Man was also in the beginning," one of his revelations read, and "intelligence, or light of truth, was not created or made, neither can be" (Givens 2015:154; Holifield 2003:336-338).<sup>5</sup>

In Missouri from 1838 to 1839, and more prominently in Illinois from 1839 to 1844, Smith's progressively unfolding, accumulative theology reached its zenith (Bushman 2005:436). The threads of temple Christianity, continuing revelation, matter and spirit's eternal existence, and humans' potential for perfection coalesced in "dramaturgical theology" of Smith's 1844 King Follet Discourse (Bushman 2005:534-536). Speaking at the funeral of a particularly well-loved Church member, Smith sought to console his audience. "God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man," he proclaimed (Smith 1976:345). "I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see" (Smith 1976:345). He continued:

Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation... When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it

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<sup>5</sup> See also D&C 93:29.

will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.  
(Smith 1976: 346-347)

This is the grand sweep of Latter-day Saints' theology. It unfolds throughout Smith's prophetic journey just as it is ascertained by members today, through piecemeal instruction, and in increasing degrees of complexity. In the plan of salvation as it is taught by the Church today, each human being is a spiritual offspring of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, and each has the potential to become like these Heavenly Parents through reception of ordinances and obedience to commandments (CJCLDS 2009:9-11).

With the aid of Smith's theological rhapsodies, it is logically assumed – and was in fact taught by Church leaders and Church manuals throughout the twentieth century – that our Heavenly Parents, too, went through a similar process. In a 2016 issue of the Church's official publication *Ensign*, Elder Larry R. Lawrence points out that “our Father in Heaven was once a mortal man who gradually progressed until He became a being with a fulness of light” and that “he wants the same for you and me because a fulness of light means a fulness of joy” (Lawrence 2016:64). As former prophet Lorenzo Snow famously quipped, “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be” (Givens 2015:103). However, contemporary Church members generally tend to espouse a less speculative permutation of this theology that focuses on the couplet's second half, emphasizing humans' potential divinization rather than God's possible origin. It is only in eternal family units, saved and sealed together through ward and temple ordinances, that Latter-day Saints can qualify for exaltation. This theological concern structures the Church's emphasis on family and on agency exercised in obedience to commandments.

### **Methodology**

To initiate my fieldwork, I reached out to friends and acquaintances of mine who are Church members in the northwest Arkansas area. My longtime friend Hannah Broussard and her

family are active members in the Greendale First Ward. Her mother Leah is Relief Society President, head of the ward's women's organization. Together, they served as key informants for this project. I began attending Church weekly with the Broussards in early June of 2019, and their unique and enthusiastic engagement with the project enabled me to participate and meet with countless other members and families in the ward.

In addition to attendance and participation at Sacrament Meetings, Sunday School, and Relief Society on Sundays, I attended Church-sponsored events including weekday Relief Society activities and Stake Conference, an annual area-wide meeting of local congregations. I was also able to attend dinners with the Broussard family and other families in the ward. I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine women in the ward, asking a series of open-ended questions about their faith, relationship to God and Jesus Christ, understanding of the priesthood, and experiences as women in the Church. Through active participation at the ward level, I was able to immerse myself in intraward interaction, observing how women negotiate their relationships with Church members and friends. This participation also helped to dislodge some of my well-intentioned etic predispositions.

I initially set out to structure my study around two central nodes that I identified as essential components of women's agency in the church: priesthood authority and Heavenly Mother. However, it quickly became clear that women in the Greendale First Ward did not organize their own concerns around either of these topics. I would repeat questions about women's exclusion from priesthood offices and would be continually shocked, first by responses that seemed to minimize the issue, and second by the multitude of ways in which women did find fruitful avenues for participatory agency outside of unavailable priesthood offices. Similarly, Heavenly Mother seemed to be a resonant but not a primary doctrinal concept for almost all of

the women I spoke to. Far from these attempted etic topical emphases, it was in the everyday living and activity of the ward that women situated their discussions of womanhood and agency. They made decisions, held jobs, discussed doctrine, theologized, bore testimonies, led lessons, shepherded children, and organized activities, framed by their righteousness as members of the Church and their worthiness to act and expound however they saw fit.

My own experiences with the Church, both personally and through friendships with members, profoundly shaped my interest in and my approach to this project. Growing up in a Southern Baptist community, my narrow understanding of Mormonism was hampered by the evangelical anti-cult milieu of the 1980s and its lasting effects on ecumenical relations. The only resource on Latter-day Saints that I had access to as a child was *The God Makers*, a controversial 1982 anti-Mormon smear film widely screened in Protestant churches of the time. It renders the Church in a less than savory light. Alongside inaccurate caricatures of theology and sectarian accusations of cult status, the film depicts women in the Church as, at best, powerless dupes. It collapses together disparate denominations that disagree on matters as fundamental as the practice of polygamy, participation in temple rites, and the ordination of women.

Steeped in this particular ideological context, I was surprised to find that I developed some of my closest friendships with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Far from brainwashed drones, these young women and men were and are engaging, critical, and intelligent individuals that thought deeply about their faith. I attended church with friends, spoke with missionaries, discussed doctrine at family dinners, visited temple open houses, and immersed myself in the broad literature of the Latter-day Saint movement. As my relationships grew, I felt the fog of misrepresentation begin to become visible and then evaporate. As an elemental moment of both ethnocentrism and consequent decentering in my own life, I believe

this exploration was the root of my ethnographic impulse today. It is only fitting that it became my primary fieldwork interest.

### **Chapter Overview**

In the first chapter of this thesis, I review the history of popular media representations of Latter-day Saints in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, detailing common anti-Mormon othering tropes. Drawing on three contemporary visual media examples, I elucidate the ways in which these representations obscure the reality of Latter-day Saint women's agency, rendering them social monsters. In the second chapter, I focus on women's experiences in the Church's temples, which act both as sites of righteous qualification and personal theologizing. In the third and final chapter, I examine women's exercise of agency in the ward, analyzing the ways in which lay leadership roles, talks, testimonies, and teaching positions provide ample opportunity for enacting participatory agency.

### **A Note on Terminology**

In accordance with prophetic counsel revealed at the Church's October 2018 General Conference, Latter-day Saints have made a concentrated effort to refer to themselves as "Latter-day Saints" or "Church members," and to emphasize the full name of the Church – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – instead of using shorthand expressions like "Mormon," "Mormons," or "LDS" (Nelson 2018). The Church published a style guide specifying terminological preferences for non-member use as well (CJCLDS 2019). In compliance with these suggestions, I use the terms "Latter-day Saints" or "the Saints" rather than "Mormons" to refer to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, except where members themselves or quoted academic works employ other terms. It should be noted, however, that

Church members' adoption of these terminological adjustments has been heterogeneous rather than wholesale.

Additionally, I use the terms "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," "Church," and "the Church" to refer to the Church organization itself, except in historical narratives when it was known by different names – for example, Joseph Smith's founding "Church of Christ." For brevity's sake, I have abbreviated the Church's name to CJCLDS in in-text citations. The term "Mormonism," which I use sparingly, is meant to denote the theological and religious movement inaugurated by Smith as a whole and which encompasses a multiplicity of denominations, branches and sects, of which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the most prominent and populous.

## CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

A quintessential Latter-day Saint mother sits in a pew for Sacrament Meeting. Three toddlers vie for room on her lap, playing with one another as she distractedly attempts to sing along with the hymn, pulling her son's hand away from her daughter's hair. Her face is tired but benign, and her blonde hair is perfectly styled. A voice-over begins, and the scene shifts to a one-on-one interview with scholar Fiona Givens. "Mormon women are plagued by this perfect woman figure," she explains. "She bakes cookies and, um, she bakes bread, and she always looks wonderful and she's never overweight and she's always smiling and..." She stops, closes her eyes, sighs, and smiles tiredly. "Yes. Totally impossible woman" (PBS 2007).

So begins the gender section of the PBS-American Experience documentary *The Mormons*, heralded as the first and only film of its kind to offer a comprehensive overview of the faith. Fiona Givens is a Church member, wife, mother, independent scholar, and published author, and her exasperation with the Molly Mormon stereotype presents one thread of Latter-day Saint women's representation in media – an exhausted woman, fed up with the impossible standards of Utah cultural Mormonism. Givens' unique emic aside interrupts the otherwise unrelenting flow of a journalistic documentary that favors external analyses of the Church. Other common representational tropes of Latter-day Saint women include that of the stay-at-home mother, portrayed with or without agency and that of the woman outside of Church activity, struggling with faith and finding alternatives. Givens complicates an otherwise undisturbed binary between perfectly faithful adherents and excommunicated advocates of women's ordination, positing the possibility of those who exercise agency within and for the Church not as passive objects but as active, thinking participants. This dichotomy is only the latest

representational distortion, one that overlooks Latter-day Saint women's many modes of agency within the Church.

Contemporary media representations of Latter-day Saint women have their roots in the anti-Mormon newspaper tirades, polemic pamphlets, cartoon caricatures, and fearmongering philippics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Brekus 2016:15; Mason 2011:69). In the secular media of the time, Latter-day Saints in general were singled out as a "peculiar people" and Latter-day Saint women in particular were limned as the passive victims of a system worse than chattel slavery (Mason 2011:71). The bacilli of anti-Mormonism continue to structure how Latter-day Saint women are popularly portrayed, always in conjunction with discourses on polygamy or priesthood authority and always as personally and institutionally subordinate to men. Drawing on Brenda Weber's concept of "mediated Mormonism," Jeffrey Cohen's theses on monster culture, and Kelsy Burke's review of agential modes in gender-traditional religions, I argue that Latter-day Saint women function representationally as agency-less social monsters (Burke 2012:122; Cohen 1994:3-20; Weber 2019:15). As boundary straddlers that threaten the categories of nineteenth century and present-day Protestant America, they reinforce mainstream identity and their narratives provide a surrogate substrate through which outsiders may dissect contemporary cultural issues. As a result of these stereotyped depictions, the complicated reality of women's agency fades.

### **Historical Background**

Latter-day Saints have faced persecution since Joseph Smith's first theophany in 1820. It was persecution of varying scales, after all, that lost Smith his life and drove the Saints through a series of migrations from New York to Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and eventually Utah. This wake of oppression trailing behind the Saints reveals the tenuous and limited nature of the American

mythos of liberty, one which allowed for freedom of belief only within the bounds of Protestantism, at the expense of Catholic, Jewish, and Latter-day Saint Americans who were labelled as “peoples” rather than “denominations” (Mason 2011:187).

For Latter-day Saints, polygamy and “theocracy” were the twin violations that defined their dangerous peoplehood, and it was these topics to which anti-Mormon antagonists addressed themselves (Mason 2011:126). Made aware of the Church and its beliefs and practices primarily through news media, American southerners in particular marked polygamy as the “cornerstone” of oppression (Brekus 2016:15; Mason 2011:69). Newspaper and sermon caricatures “confronted late nineteenth-century white southerners with the dilemma of how to defend themselves, their homes, and their wives and daughters from the intrusion of lust-driven Mormon missionaries and their depraved system of plural marriage” (Mason 2011:58) The post-bellum American “cult of true womanhood” with its emphasis on “sheltering girls from the evils of the world” – most commonly, the public sphere and its potential contact with “foreigners” – could only render Mormonism anathema (Mason 2011:71). Unfounded rumors spread of Latter-day Saint missionaries kidnapping women and keeping them as polygamous wives (Mason 2011:71). Newspapers decried the “decadence” of the Church and its members, calling it a “Mohammedan Paradise” and a great “Sodom” for its polygamous marriage system (Mason 2011:72-73). Panic about the “subjugated status of women in Utah” completely ignored the unique role of Latter-day Saint women as workers, educators, homesteaders, and suffragettes (Mason 2011:71). Conveniently, the narrative of women’s powerlessness did not spare them from the frenetic anti-Mormon lynch mobs that specifically targeted women and children in addition to men (Holbrook and Ryan Clark 2016:170-171; Mason 2011:71, 141). While overt violence against Latter-day Saints tapered off with the Church’s early-twentieth-century abandonment of polygamy and

assimilation into the United States, media representations maintained much more continuity in their development.

### **Media Monsters**

Historically, all sorts of cultural contingencies dyed the media portrayals of Latter-day Saint women, and these processes continue in altered forms today. For Brenda Weber, “mediated Mormonism” actually serves as a “lens” through which contemporary Americans sort through issues of gender, sex, nationality, race, and religion (Weber 2019:15-17). Much as anti-Mormonism in the South led to the creation of Southern identity, contemporary representations of Latter-day Saints constitute a hermeneutic social monster that enables the fashioning of non-monsters (Weber 2019:15-17). Literary scholar Jeffrey Cohen defines these social monsters – cultural representational Others – as categorial hybrids (Cohen 1996:4). For Cohen, “the monster’s body is a cultural body” that encapsulates the anxieties and fears of the moment and “exists only to be read” by those not called monsters (Cohen 1996:4). In so doing, it reveals hidden knowledge about the dominant culture itself. Further, “the monster is the harbinger of category crisis,” a “dialectical Other” complicating a dearly held “systematic structuration” (Cohen 1996:6-7). As such, the monster “policing the borders of the possible” because it delimits the perimeters of socially acceptable behavior by violating and muddying them (Cohen 1996:12). Ranging from evangelical anti-Mormon to secular ambivalent, *The God Makers*, *The Mormons*, and *Big Love* depict Latter-day Saints in ways that capture the anxieties and fears of those outside the Church, throw into crisis American systems of religious and cultural classification, delineate key social boundaries and with their desired subversion, and reveal more about Protestant American identity than about Latter-day Saint women, all the while obfuscating Latter-day Saint women’s agency.

Catherine Brekus explicitly connects the historical misrecognition of Latter-day Saint women's agency notions to media representational anti-Mormonism (Brekus 2016:15). She argues that this representational short-sightedness necessitates a new theory of agency, one which recognizes that agency "includes the reproduction of social structures as well as the transformation of them," that agency need not necessarily imply "freedom and emancipation" or "intentionality," that it must be understood as "relational and social rather than simply individual," that it is a continuum rather than a binary, and that it is "always shaped by cultural norms and structural constraints" (Brekus 2016:30-32). Similarly, Kelsy Burke argues for a consonantly expansive understanding of women's agency in "gender-traditional religions" (Burke 2012:122). Reviewing existing trends, she outlines four categories of agency: *resistance*, encompassing "attempts to challenge or change" a faith; *empowerment* through a personal change in response to unchanging beliefs; *instrumental* engagement as a means of securing non-religious "advantages"; and *compliance* with religious teachings (Burke 2012:122). For Burke, these agential modes are not mutually exclusive, and may not even themselves be complete, as our understanding of agency is always shifting. Unfortunately, popular media representations of Latter-day Saint women either entirely obscure their agency or depict only resistance. In *The God Makers*, *The Mormons*, and *Big Love*, proper recognition of women's participatory agency would disrupt the underlying cultural scripts that function only through Latter-day Saint and Mormon women's de-agented cultural monsterhood. Portrayed simultaneously as monsters and victims of monsters, Latter-day Saint women lose all agency.

### **Anti-Mormonism: *The God Makers***

Produced by American evangelist Ed Decker, *The God Makers* is a controversial 1982 documentary film claiming to depict the realities of "today's most respectable yet deceitful and

fastest growing cult!” (Haws 2013:113; Jeremiah Films 2020). The result of evangelical ire at the growth rate of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the late twentieth century, *The God Makers* spurred an “overt counter-evangelizing strategy” designed to destroy the Church by dissuading members and potential converts alike (Haws 2013:116). The film is framed as a roundtable discussion between Decker and two attorneys seeking to bring a lawsuit against the Church, though later analysis reveals them to be actors (Swenson 1985:18). The three lead the viewer through authoritatively presented but decontextualized segments of caricatured theology, interviews with unnamed former members, and explications from alleged experts on cult activity (Swenson 1985). While both Church members and non-member scholars have levelled well-argued critiques at *The God Makers’* treatment of Latter-day Saint theology and practice, few have focused specifically on its representation of women in the Church. By categorizing the Church as a cult, providing distorted portrayals of theology, and failing to distinguish between the Church and its polygamist off-shoots, *The God Makers* so downplays women’s agency that it completely vanishes.

Decker’s framing of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a cult robs Latter-day Saint women of any potential agential recognition. *The God Makers* is steeped in the cultural terror of 1970s and 1980s evangelicalism, with its concern over Latter-day Saints’ burgeoning conversion rate (Haws 2013:99-101). The Church appeared as an anomaly, neither Protestant nor Catholic but Restorationist. Like other faiths of the time that academics labelled New Religious Movements, “Mormonism” was consigned to the “cult” category (Haws 2013:123; Introvigne 1994:155-157; Wiles 2015:24). The hegemony of the evangelical-led anti-cult movement allowed it to label any competing religions as “cults,” marking them as legal and moral dangers (Dillon and Richardson 1994:186; Lewis 1994:27-28). By this logic, as Dillon and Richardson

quote ACLU attorney Jeremiah Gutman at the height of the anti-cult scare, “a religion becomes a cult, proselytization becomes brainwashing, persuasion becomes propaganda, missionaries become subversive agents, retreats, monasteries, and convents become prisons, holy ritual becomes bizarre conduct, and religious observance becomes aberrant behavior” (Dillon and Richardson 1994:186). In other words, it is a matter of positionality and representation (Dillon and Richardson 1994:187-190). Culthood lies in the eye of the beholder. Those who view others as joining cults rip all agency from those others, who they believe must have been brainwashed, kidnapped, and forced into joining, and whom they may believe require similar measures in order to be rescued.

*The God Makers* represents Latter-day Saint women as helpless damsels in distress and treats disaffiliated interviewees as survivors of catastrophe. “Ever since I was a little girl,” an unnamed but heavily quoted woman explains, “I was taught that my primary purpose was to become a goddess in heaven so that I could multiply an earth.” She pauses to let the bewildering nature of such a belief sink in, before continuing. “And I wanted that. I wanted to be eternally pregnant and look down on an earth and say, ‘That’s mine, I populated that whole earth, and all those little babies, I had!’” (Decker 1982). In order to clarify anything lost in the subtleties, Decker reiterates, “Heaven to the Mormon woman is being pregnant for all eternity, one spirit baby after the next” (Decker 1982).

Not only does this depiction gloss over the incredibly equalizing and empowering belief that exaltation for both men and women might lend Latter-day Saint women, it erases the multiplicity of processes involved in eternal progression and exaltation, collapsing them into a neat narrative about eternal spirit birth that does not at all accord with the vague, speculative nature of Latter-day Saints’ beliefs about exaltation. It also obscures the ways in which Latter-

day Saint women actively embrace the Church's family-centered model of salvation. By transliterating a theology of communal exaltation via eternal families into an evangelical caricature informed by the anxieties surrounding the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, *The God Makers* creates a mockery of Latter-day Saint women and their beliefs.

Further, *The God Makers* conflates the large, mainstream Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with other polygamist sects in the broader Mormon movement that the mainstream Church explicitly and expressly forbids and excommunicates. While decrying the evils of plural marriage, former polygamist Lillian Chynoweth repeatedly refers to herself as an ex-member of the "Mormon Church," and neither she nor Decker clarifies that the church to which she is referring is the Church of the Lamb of God, a small polygamist off-shoot that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints considers apostate (Tanner and Tanner 1993). Decker's depiction condenses and bequeaths to the mainstream Church all of the complexities of denominational schism and polygynous practice that it institutionally eschews and condemns. Screened in over a thousand evangelical congregations in the United States, *The God Makers* continues to inform public perceptions of Latter-day Saint women as either submissive pawns or survivors of and strugglers against oppression.

### **Documentary History: *The Mormons***

Unlike *The God Makers*, PBS's two-part series *The Mormons* aims for a more measured, secular look at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Produced and released in 2007 by Frontline and American Experience, the documentary traces the history of the Church from its origins to its contemporary existence as an organization with global reach. Over the course of its four-hour span, *The Mormons* provides variegated images of and interviews with women in the Church, polygamist members of other Mormon sects, ex-members, and non-member scholars.

Though a refreshing change from the distortions of *The God Makers*, *The Mormons* still tends to relegate Latter-day Saint women to the topics of family, priesthood, and polygamy. It represents women both in support of the Church and in resistance to it, but devotes most of its time to highlighting the latter. The first mention of women in the documentary occurs in a narrative of their victimhood alongside children during nineteenth century persecution campaigns. One has to wait until the hour and thirty-minute mark before again encountering women, this time in a seventeen-minute discussion focusing on the horrors of polygamy. The subject of womanhood is not broached again until three hours in, this time bringing contemporary Latter-day Saint women to the fore in segments on dissenters and the family.

Margaret Toscano, a scholar and former member of the Church, was excommunicated in 1993 for her publications on the idea of women's priesthood ordination and the Latter-day Saint concept of a Heavenly Mother. Speaking of her situation and subsequent Church disciplinary hearing, she explains, "I am Mormon on a deep level, and I do not believe that a community can be spiritually healthy when it silences people...I told [the stake president] at the time, I said, 'I cannot be silent because for me to be silent is to participate in an abuse of authority and to damage the community that I care about'" (PBS 2007). Toscano's story is emblematic of "resistance agency," with its emphasis on challenging and changing (Burke 2012:123). Inclusion of her narrative is essential. Despite *The Mormons'* foregrounding of her story, however, it is not the only or even the primary experience of Latter-day Saint women.

An entire portion of *The Mormons* is devoted to the topic of "The Family," and follows a day in the life of Colorado couple Annette and Timber Tilleman-Dick and their eleven children. The narrator sets up a dichotomy. "Annette has home schooled her children and sent some of them on to Ivy League schools," we are told, while Timber is a "busy and successful

businessman,” though they join together their seemingly mutually exclusive spheres for family gatherings with their children every Monday night (PBS 2007). *The Mormons* goes on to highlight both their daughter Kimber’s imminent marriage and their daughter Charity’s terminal diagnosis of primary pulmonary hypertension, without lingering to glean more than the basics of each situation and testimonies from each of cherished doctrines. These vignettes might serve as examples of what Kelsy Burke calls “compliant agency,” a catch-all category defined by willful adherence to religious teachings “without challenging religious institutions, striving for empowerment, or seeking non-religious advantages” (Burke 2012:127-128). *The Mormons’* framing of the Tilleman-Dick women as compliant agents minimizes women’s active participation. Kimber and Charity’s moments are peripheral to the thrust of the documentary.

The only practicing Latter-day Saint women that share direct statements about the role of women in the Church are scholar Fiona Givens and neuroradiologist Anne Osborne Poelman, each of whom are given only ten-second sound bites. Givens remarks on the “totally impossible woman” of Church culture (PBS 2007). A similarly careered professional, Poelman insists that “as a woman in the Mormon church, I feel very comfortable. I don’t feel denied any opportunity to serve and to do good for people in the church and in the ward and in our neighborhood, and so on. In service, do I feel limited? The answer is no” (PBS 2007). Her response, however, is awkwardly sandwiched between Margaret Toscano’s contention that “women and the work that they do in the church is always subordinate to what the men are doing” and a disembodied narrator’s unsympathetic voice-over detailing the Church’s “critical role in defeating the ERA” in the 1970s (PBS 2007). Poelman’s statement is left unexplored, and *The Mormons* never returns to her for further comment. While PBS’s *The Mormons* brings to light certain forms of women’s agency in and outside of the Church, it neglects others. The documentary’s

authoritative, encyclopedic tone suggests that it presents a complex and complete portrait of the faith, while it actually vacillates between two representational extremes and peppers them with uninvestigated qualifying fragments.

### **Television Serial: *Big Love***

HBO's *Big Love* ran for five seasons, from 2006-2011. More than *The God Makers* and *The Mormons*, *Big Love* reached a substantial number of Americans both religious and non-religious, and its triumphs and shortcomings are consequently more significant and impactful. Set in a Utah suburb outside of Salt Lake City, *Big Love* comprises the story of Bill Henrickson, his three wives Barb, Nicki, and Margene, and their children. Raised on a fundamentalist polygamist compound and exiled as a young boy, Bill joined the mainstream Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and vocally opposed polygamy in his young adulthood. After his first wife Barb nearly dies of cancer, Bill feels called to embrace "the principle" of plural marriage. He and Barb take on Barb's caretaker Nicki as an additional wife, and the three eventually marry Margene, the family's babysitter. *Big Love* traces the family's relationships with friends, neighbors, relatives on fundamentalist compounds, and the mainstream Church.

Throughout its run, the series avoids *The God Makers'* and other popular media's mistake of conflating the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with fundamentalist Mormon sects. In fact, as Michael Austin points out, *Big Love* takes pains to make explicit "the lines among all sorts of Utahns" (Austin 2010:53). These include:

the 'good polygamists' (the Henricksons and the Embries), the 'bad polygamists' (Roman and Alby Grant and other members of the Juniper Creek Compound), the 'really-scary-mega-bad-crazy polygamists' (the Greens), the 'monogamous polygamists' (Bill's brother, Joey, who eventually does attempt, unsuccessfully, to take a second wife), and the mainstream Mormons. (Austin 2010:53)

In doing so, however, it exacerbates another representational issue. The show's mainstream Latter-day Saint characters, from former bishops, to family members, to children's friends, to next-door neighbors, to politicians and businessmen, "are almost universally portrayed as narrow minded, self-righteous, bigoted, and hypocritical," hellbent on rooting out polygamy and decrying the polygamists in their midst (Austin 2010:53). At times, they seem involuntarily compelled by the Church into acting against their families and friends. Only Barb herself, still technically an inactive member of the mainstream Church until her excommunication at the end of Season 3, escapes this hollow characterization.

Simultaneously Latter-day Saint and fundamentalist polygamist, Barb is happy with neither, and dabbles in "higher education, alternative religious practices, and potentially breaking from the family and going it alone" before finally pursuing priesthood ordination (Weber 2019:237). Barb's exercise of agency encompasses Burke's categories of resistance, empowerment, and even compliance, though her attempts at finding compliant agency through reactivation in the mainstream Church ultimately fail (Burke 2012:122). In all of *Big Love's* specifically Latter-day Saint settings, Barb is fundamentally passive. In the program's controversial depiction of the sacrosanct temple endowment, considered by Church members to be a violation of the sacred and proprietary nature of temple covenants, Barb moves through the motions as a docile patron, shepherded by her mother and sister. In the disciplinary hearing, she faces and is excommunicated by a panel of Latter-day Saint men. Despite Barb's explicit disavowal of feminism, and her exercise of agency both in support of and against the institutional structures in her life, many scholars have read her journey as an elementally feminist quest. "Barb yearns for feminist selfhood," writes Brenda Weber. "The show's logic is unequivocal." (Weber 2019:237). While it's true that, as Weber points out, the show's creators wrote the series

as a commentary on marriage in general, this speaks to the larger trends inherent in representations of social monsters (Weber 2019:126-127). Barb's "cultural body" and that of her family speak less to depictions of either Latter-day Saint or fundamentalist women's agency and more to the concerns of the dominant cultural zeitgeist of the mid-2000s – the movement for same-sex marriage and, to a lesser degree, the struggle for women's ordination within the Church (Austin 2010:43; Cohen 1996:4). The Henricksons were a cultural proxy for any queer family arrangement, and the show a canvas for "sort[ing] through complicated arguments with respect to gender, race, religion, nationalism, separation, and belonging" (Austin 2010:43; Cohen 1996:4-5; Weber 2019:18). *Big Love* was an othering cultural text that existed primarily to be read by non-Latter-day Saints – a monsterring representation that allowed the *un-monstered* to work through the social questions of the day.

Whether it be *The God Makers* with its 1980s evangelical uneasiness over the Church's growth, *The Mormons* with its early excitement over the Mormon Moment of the 2000s, or *Big Love*'s allegorical allusions to the nation's enmity over gay marriage, popular representations of Latter-day Saint women always speak primarily to the social concerns of the time and place. Lost in the cultural flotsam is any true representation or analysis of women's agency within the Church. Televised, cinematic, theatrical, and literary representations of Latter-day Saints continue to multiply. Comedy Central's *South Park*, Netflix's *Stranger Things*, Amazon's *The Expanse*, TLC's *Sister Wives*, National Geographic's *Polygamy USA*, Broadway's *The Book of Mormon* Musical, USA's *Psych*, Showtime's *Dexter*, Carolyn Jessop's *Escaped*, and Tara Westover's *Educated* all feature Latter-day Saint characters, episodes, references, or subtexts. Far from presenting a cacophony, most of their depictions are disconcertingly homogeneous. It is crucial that we examine these critically and ground our understandings of women's agency in

qualitative ethnography. My first exposure to Latter-day Saint women came through visual and print media. Only through an ethnography immersed in the temple and chapel experiences of women in the Greendale First Ward could I begin to unravel some of these preconceptions and apprehend Latter-day Saint women's agency in action and process.

## CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN IN THE TEMPLE

When confronted with personal challenges, Latter-day Saints often make their way to the closest temple. After most temple rites, known to Church members as *ordinances*, participants can linger, ponder, and pray in the Celestial Room, a representation of the highest kingdom of heaven. Illustrative of just such a scenario, a twenty-five-year-old woman and lifelong member of the church named Hannah narrated to me an experience she had in the Provo Utah Temple in late 2018. She and her husband Jordan had just graduated from Brigham Young University; Hannah was contemplating pursuing a master’s degree in counseling, and Jordan a doctorate in mathematics. Both applied to a prestigious university. While Hannah was accepted and offered an assistantship, Jordan did not receive a funding guarantee. He was, however, offered a fellowship at another university. Jordan encouraged Hannah to pursue her course, reassuring her that he had no problem moving or otherwise accommodating her academic aspirations. Hannah, however, felt torn. Faced with the quagmire of where to go and what to do, she and Jordan took their questions to the temple. They signed up to take part in an endowment session, a sort of participatory ritual narrative of the plan of salvation that Latter-day Saints perform once for themselves and then continually on behalf of deceased ancestors.

“I was just praying throughout it,” Hannah explained. When she and her husband passed into the Celestial Room at the endowment’s conclusion, she experienced a profound spiritual confirmation. “Jordan came and sat next to me. We’re sitting there, and we’re praying, and I just like – It’s kinda like when you read something that’s written by yourself, and then you read something that’s written by somebody else, and the voice is just different.” She continued:

It’s not like I heard a voice, ‘cause I didn’t, but just, like, a really powerful thought came to me that wasn’t my own tone, really, you know what I mean? ...And it just said, ‘Your family will be happiest in the long run if you don’t go to school right now, if you choose to give that up, and you will be happiest in the

long run if you don't do that,' and I felt really strongly that we should start our family soon, like, that we should try having a kid soon. Jordan was sitting next to me, and he looked at me, and he just kind of started crying, and he was like 'Hannah, I'm really sorry, and you can tell me if you're not feeling the same thing, but I really feel like we're supposed to have a kid, and that you're not supposed-' –and we hadn't talked about this at all... The thing was that I was just really happy, which is how I knew it wasn't from me, because it wasn't what I wanted. I was just filled with this peace, and I felt really joyful. And it wasn't even hard.

By taking her temporal question to the temple, Hannah received a prompting from the Holy Ghost sacralized her decision. For Hannah, the communication was divine in origin. It was the product of a network of intersecting agencies; her own agency as a qualified, temple recommend-holding woman seeking revelation in the temple intersected with her husband's agency as an equally qualified man and with other agents – in this case, Heavenly Father, communicating by means of the Holy Ghost. Through qualification for temple ordinances, participation in these ordinances, living in an eternal companionship, and reception of personal revelation, Hannah exercised a performative, participatory agency – in collaboration with that of her husband and the Godhead – that supports both the Church's spiritual authority as a source of divine promptings and, by extension, the Church's theology of complementarian gender essentialism.

In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, women are theologically essential for the highest blessings of human salvation, as evidenced by their necessary participation in temple ordinances required for exaltation. After all, it is only through sealed, married heterosexual couples “who make and keep the covenant of celestial marriage” that individuals may reach the Celestial Kingdom and become like God (Givens 2015:271; CJCLDS 1995:67-69). Without such a theology and its implications, Hannah would not have had available to her the temple as a context for revelatory experience. Additionally, women actively engage in “roles of ritual

authority” and “officiate in ordinances of the priesthood” as both lay members and temple workers, receiving and wielding priesthood power only in temple settings (Ballard 2014:32; Gardner 2019:32; Kane 2017:100). It is in this priestly capacity, endowed with power from God, that Hannah participated in temple ordinances in the first place. Finally, women develop personal understandings of the meanings of temple ordinances and ancillary experiences. In this instance, Hannah’s agential interpretation of the event empowered both her role as a receptor of revelation and her role as a woman in an eternal family unit. Hannah’s narrative of personal revelation in the temple highlights multiple dimensions through which Latter-day Saint women exercise agency in temple contexts. The temple operates as a mediatory space, expanding the space available to Latter-day Saints to work out their own salvation and participate in the exaltation of themselves and their families. Temple ordinances equip women with power from God and enable them to craft meaning through key symbols. As righteous, qualified officiators, participants and interpreters of their own experiences, women wield power in the temple.

### **Temples and Temple Ordinances**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints currently operates more than one hundred sixty-seven temples worldwide. Unlike the Church’s thousands of meetinghouses in which congregations called wards hold weekly worship services, temples are open only Monday through Saturday, and only to specially qualified members. Temples provide venues for these members to engage in higher ordinances of the faith that cannot be performed elsewhere. These include the initiatory, the endowment, the sealing ordinance that binds family members together for eternity, and assorted vicarious ordinances including baptism, confirmation, priesthood ordination, and all of the temple ordinances mentioned above (Givens 2017:177-178). Members may perform each ordinance for themselves only once, and then over and over again on behalf of

deceased ancestors and relatives. I will refrain from discussing the specific details of the ordinances that Latter-day Saints consider sacred knowledge and are under covenant not to reveal, but a broad outline of each is necessary in order to understand women's agency and relationship to the temple.

Before entering the temple, members must obtain a special identification card called a temple recommend. Acquiring a recommend involves interviews with both the ward- and stake-level priesthood holders – bishop and stake president, respectively – to ensure that specific qualifications are met, including a testimony of the church's core doctrines and an adherence to its codes of moral conduct – for example, the dietary Word of Wisdom, the law of chastity, and other church teachings (Hunter 1995; Nelson 2019:120-121). Adult members typically attend the temple for their own living ordinances either in their late teens and early twenties prior to serving a mission or in the early to late twenties prior to getting married. Despite the endlessly invoked sacred silence surrounding temples, however, the average church member will enter the temple for the first time having sung hymns, read about, heard, and perhaps even spoken of the blessings of temple work all her life.

At the temple itself, all participants wear white clothing. The first self-oriented temple ordinance in which members partake is the initiatory or *washing and anointing*, which serves as the first portion of the larger *endowment* ordinance (CJCLDS 2019). During the washing and anointing, members are symbolically cleansed and blessed with water and oil by an officiant of the same sex, ordained a priest or priestess, and “authorized to wear the sacred temple garment,” a form of sacred underclothing that Latter-day Saints wear as a reminder of their temple covenants (CJCLDS 2019; Givens 2017:171-176, 192). The second and significantly lengthier portion of the endowment lasts over an hour and revolves primarily around a participatory,

dramatic rehearsal of the plan of salvation, encompassing the creation of the world, Adam and Eve’s garden transgression and ejection, their return to God through the “plan of redemption,” and the apostasy and restoration of the gospel by latter-day prophets and apostles (CJCLDS 2019; Givens 2017:177-179; Talmage 1976:100-101). Originally presented as a live performance, the endowment drama in most contemporary temples is narrated through film (Buerger 1994:166-169). Each portion of the endowment takes place in a different room of the temple, varying in number depending on the size and design of each temple. The most common configuration sees members moving from the initiatory rooms where the washings and anointings take place, to a Creation or Garden Room, then to a Terrestrial Room representing earth life, before passing into the Celestial Room (Buerger 1994:76).

In a descriptive passage regularly quoted in current church publications, former prophet Brigham Young summarizes the endowment as receiving “all those ordinances in the house of the Lord which are necessary to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens pertaining to the holy priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell” (CJCLDS 1990:130; Givens 2017:178). Participants in the endowment figuratively take on the roles of Adam and Eve respectively and make specific covenants with God, including commitments to observe the “Law of Obedience, Law of Sacrifice, Law of the Gospel, Law of Chastity, and Law of Consecration” (Benson 1977; CJCLDS 2019; Talmage 1976:84). They learn and rehearse verbal and physical symbols of a sacred and proprietary nature associated with each covenant, don additional ceremonial vestments, and conclude by “symbolically returning to the Lord’s presence” as they pass from the Terrestrial to the Celestial Room (CJCLDS 2019). For those planning to marry, the endowment is a prelude to a short but infinitely important

ordinance known as *sealing*. Considered the apex of Latter-day Saint religious experience and the culmination of years of righteous living, sealing entails an eligible couple covenanting with one another and with Heavenly Father to create an eternal companionship (Givens 2017:186). Sealing ensures that one's marital relationship will last beyond death, binds spouses and children together forever, and qualifies one for the highest blessing – exaltation, or godhood, and its privilege of eternal lives, meaning the potential of eternal procreation in a glorified family unit (CJCLDS 1990:130). Thus, the temple concretizes the Latter-day Saint theology of corequisite exaltation for women and men in eternal families.

### **Temple Talk**

Scholar Douglas Davies describes Mormonism as a kind of “post-Protestant priestly mystery religion,” with unfolding layers of theological development (Davies 2000:203). Such a characterization would resonate with the familiar Latter-day Saint adages “line upon line” and “milk before meat” that describe the piecemeal nature of one's theological development in the Church. Anthropologist Bradley Kramer points out that Mormonism's system of “ontological separation, threshold, meditation, and interpenetration” is reflected in a “spatial ontology” that maps the telestial-terrestrial-celestial gradient of heavenly kingdoms onto the physical spaces of the world, the meetinghouse, and the temple, and, in microcosm, onto the spatially progressive nature of the temple endowment itself. Thus, each space in the Latter-day Saint world has its own sacred logics, its own thresholds of righteous qualification, and its own theological expansion. Full membership and participation at the ward level requires obedience to commandments, a baptismal interview, and a series of ordinances – faith repentance, baptism, and confirmation – collectively referred to as the “preparatory gospel,” administered by the Aaronic priesthood and centered in meetinghouse or chapel (Kramer 2014:66-67; McConkie

1978:404). Access to the “fullness of the everlasting gospel,” the exalting ordinances of the endowment and sealing and their corresponding doctrinal exposition, is administered by the Melchizedek priesthood, centered in the temple, and requires another interview process for a temple recommend, even more stringent obedience to additional commandments (Kramer 2014:67-68; McConkie 1978:404). The temple itself replicates this pattern a third time, with participants’ symbolic return to the Celestial Kingdom as the final threshold. This theological unfolding and its corresponding spatial gradient writ large comprise a key sacred logic that Kramer identifies as central to the Latter-day Saint enactment and discourse of holiness (Kramer 2014:15). It was thus across these thresholds that the women I interviewed described their temple experiences to me, often obliquely, as they themselves met requisites of righteousness that I myself had not (Kramer 2014:14). They spoke primarily in spatial terms about their experiences.

“When you walk into the temple,” Mary told me, “you leave the world behind... There’s really no other way to describe it.” Charlene offered a similar portrayal. “When you’re stepping into the temple,” she explained, “you’re stepping out of the world, so it’s like your changing realms.” Others described the action in reverse, noting that “coming out of the temple” entails coming “back into the world,” but with renewed perspective as to one’s eternal purposes.

While many of the women I spoke to used markedly vague language in their descriptions and avoided descriptive details of temple ordinances, this same obscurity did not always extend to the language used in Sacrament Meetings and Sunday School classes. After the announcement of the construction of the Bentonville, Arkansas Temple at the church-wide October 2019 General Conference, there was a pronounced upsurge in temple discourse at the local ward level. From the rostrum, the stake president exhorted members to increase their righteousness in preparation for the coming temple, citing the prophet’s recent admonishment that “it is easier to

build a temple than to build a people worthy of the temple” (Nelson 2019). The tangible excitement spilled over into members’ Sunday talks. During Fast-and-Testimony Meeting, held once a month during the church service as an opportunity for members to spontaneously share testimonies, one woman shared her renewed testimony of the temple now that she had returned with friends who helped her understand the symbolic significance of the endowment, “the motions,” and the poignant experience of a friend who “took [her] through the veil,” the most sacred and inviolate portion of the endowment. Another woman, encouraging members to qualify for temple recommends to access the personal power the temple can bring, spoke of the powerful revelation she received after participating in the “prayer circle,” a specific sub-rite within the endowment that involves stylized group prayer. Whether or not these represent flukes or a slowly opening attitude toward temple rhetoric, it is clear that language leaks along the telestial-terrestrial-celestial gradient. Women feel free to speak of temple experiences in ways that they themselves have deemed appropriate, depending upon how they judge the righteousness and receptivity of their audiences. They find ways to incorporate “temple code,” phraseology that functions on different semiotic levels depending on the listening member’s doctrinal progression (Kramer 2014:67). In addition to righteous qualification for and ritual performances in the temple itself, temple-centered performances of righteousness extend back down the spatial gradient into members’ rhetorical performances in talks, testimonies, and lessons in the ward. The act of crossing and then negotiating these sacred thresholds is a form of participatory agency in support of the institutional church that is often obscured by other notions of agency – resistance agency, empowerment agency, and instrumental agency, for instance – that only emphasize action against institutional structures (Brekus 2016:29; Burke 2012:123-124).

Performing temple discourses in appropriate ways for varying audiences bespeaks not only a reverence for the temple, but also an agential performance of holiness itself.

Commenting astutely on the Latter-day Saint fidelity to righteous living, historian Kathleen Flake concluded that “the Mormon exercise is about holiness” (Flake 2007). This captures the fundamentally performative nature of Latter-day Saints’ faith, and its emphasis on orthopraxy over orthodoxy (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008; Webb 2013:69-70). Indeed, it is possible to argue, as some scholars have, that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no official doctrine as such, both because of its essentially sacramental character and its emphasis upon personal revelation rather than creedal affirmation (Birch 2012:48; Faulconer 2006:21). Nowhere is this orthopractic phenomenon more evident than in the temple, the most sacred and performative space available to Church members. Structured around scripted collective dialogue and ritual action, the format of temple ordinances is communal while the meaning is wrought individually. There is, as one woman temple worker told me, “no discussion portion, no question and answer section.” In other words, there is no shared exegesis of temple experiences in any direct sense. Rather, Church members cull individual meanings from the material for themselves, often via revelation.

### **Key Symbols in the Temple**

It is precisely through this high degree of individualization that Latter-day Saint women are able to carve out spaces of participatory agency on a personal level by using what Sherry Ortner calls “key symbols” to organize their experiences and gain access to divine insight (Ortner 1973:1338). Key symbols are, in Ortner’s terms, “vehicles for cultural meaning” (Ortner 1973:153). In other words, they are objects, images, myths, rituals, actions, or concepts that serve as organizational catalysts for integrating life experiences into a given cultural order.

Ortner divides key symbols into two main classes. Summarizing symbols “synthesize” or “collapse” complicated events and experiences in order to “summarize them in a unitary form” (Ortner 1973:154). Elaborating symbols provide “vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas,” in order to then communicate them or translate them into action (Ortner 1973:158). Elaborating symbols are further subdivided into conceptual or “root metaphor” symbols that “provide a set of categories for conceptualizing other aspects of experience,” and key scenario symbols that “[imply] mechanisms for successful social action” (Ortner 1973:155). In examining Latter-day Saint temple ordinances, we can see a multitude of key symbols at work, the most fundamental of which is the concept of the eternal family.

The eternal family operates as Mormonism’s key summarizing and elaborating symbol. The fractal-like nature of the eternal family concept extends all the way from the minute nuclear family unit of a living wife, husband and children sealed in the temple, to their extended network of ancestors, to Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother’s own family of spirit children that comprises the entire earth, and, presumably, to each of their Heavenly Parents further up the lineage. Danielle, a single Church member in her fifties, explained the logic of the eternal family for me as we sat together in her living room.

“You know, [God]’s got a father, too, who wants everything for Him, to have what he’s got, so it - it’s just infinity. Everything just keeps growing and progressing. Our God’s gonna get greater. And He’ll always be our God, because we’re His children and that’s what He wants for us. And He’s getting more glory, and then we have children, and then we populate earths, and we want all of them to come back. They’re His grandchildren! Their glory is His glory because He’s grandpa!” Danielle stopped herself and laughed.

“You know, I’m sure we don’t use those words, probably, but it’s the same meaning, right? I mean, my grandparents would want the best for me.”

The logic of kinship explains the doctrine of exaltation. In the larger pattern of Mormon theology, according to the prophet Joseph Smith, “God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man” (CJCLDS 2007:59). His father instructed Him in righteousness, and now He does the same for us. It is only a natural progression that we will one day do the same for our own spirit progeny. Charlene shared a similar sentiment.

“Family, to me— well, the family unit I believe has a purpose. It teaches us to be more like our Heavenly Father. It teaches us to be selfless,” she elaborated, “because you’re serving each other.”

The key symbol of the eternal family permeates the orthopraxis of the temple. Temple ordinances serve to weld together nuclear families, seal them to ancestral lineages, and link them back to the Heavenly Parents themselves. In a practical sense, women’s agential enactment of temple ordinances solidifies their status as “saviors on Mount Zion,” co-participants with their elder brother Christ in the salvation of the world (CJCLDS 2007:472-473). At the level of narrative, the endowment drama itself traces the history of a celestially married couple, Adam and Eve, who seek to return to their Heavenly Parents. And, when women bring questions about their earthly families to the temple, as Hannah did, they are imbued with eternal perspective. This type of symbolic functioning may seem foreign in a largely Protestant American religious milieu, but we must remember that Mormonism is a branch of Christianity with a priesthood order and a sacramental theology, perhaps closer to Catholicism than to Protestantism. The stacking of progressive ordinances, priesthoods, spatial gradients, theologies, and symbolic meanings only works for Latter-day Saints’ because Mormonism “reorganize[s] the distinctions

between past, present, and future so that these are no longer separate from each other but equally understandable because they are equally accessible” (Leone 1979:9). By understanding life as an eternal and endless existence within families, neither created nor ceasing, Latter-day Saints are able to interpret their earthly families in light of the Heavenly Family, and vice versa.

There is not one Latter-day Saint woman experience of the temple. Rather, there exists a constellation of experiences, some positive, some negative, and all in process. I do not seek to minimize or ignore the experiences of alienation, oppression, and negativity that many women in the Church associate with the temple. However, I do want to draw attention to the women in the Greendale First Ward who I attended church with, fellowshiped with, and interviewed – women who limn their temple experiences in a different light. Because of the intensely individual nature of temple meanings, experiences all along the agential continuum can coexist simultaneously, even amongst women performing ordinances together. Whereas many are tempted to locate the temple as a site of the most acute renderings of gendered issues in the church, the focus has shifted over the past three decades from the temple to the ward. Far from being the center of agency loss, for women in the Greendale First Ward the temple functions as a venue for successfully mediating these issues because of the way it organizes social and personal experience. While the sacred logic of the temple operates on collective experiences of silence and individual exploration, women’s experiences in the ward are primarily predicated upon collaborative theologizing, lesson-leading, and testifying of truth.

### CHAPTER THREE: WOMEN IN THE WARD

I sat at the picnic table with twelve women, some in their mid-twenties and thirties and some in their seventies. We had gathered under a pavilion for a ward Relief Society event commemorating the spirit of the earth. It was a pleasantly balmy evening for being so late in autumn. We ate Thai lettuce wraps and turkey sandwiches and sipped warm water from bottles as we let the cyanotype leaf prints we had made earlier dry in the sun. Conversation ranged from recent births to outgoing missionaries to the Netflix original series *The Crown*, before taking a more doctrinal turn. The Church had just recently released an announcement clarifying its teachings regarding the Word of Wisdom, a scripture-based health code that forbids the drinking of “hot drinks,” which church leaders have interpreted as referring to coffee and tea (Church 2019d:28). Talk of the announcement arose after one woman, Rose, had revealed that her husband found green tea to be a precious boon in dealing with chronic headaches.

“I was so excited that he finally found something that worked for him, but then— Did you see the new announcement?” Murmurs spread through the group. “It just came out yesterday. No green tea. Apparently it’s that part of the Word of Wisdom.” Where there had previously been a natural lull in conversation, a plurality of voices erupted.

“That’s interesting, because I was just —”

“I didn’t realize that —”

“Why did they release it there? Of all places...”

Published in the Church’s youth magazine *New Era*, the announcement specified that coffee-based drinks, vaping, and green tea are, in fact, proscribed by the Word of Wisdom (Church 2019:28). For many women in the group, the inclusion of green tea in the list posed a particularly

indissoluble quandary, especially given the high esteem the Church affords to personal revelation.

“That’s so odd,” remarked Carolyn, a counselor in the Relief Society. “I just recently spent some time praying about that, and pondering, and I felt like I received a really clear answer that the Lord— that it was okay, that green tea was fine!” I asked if perhaps it was the caffeine in green tea that rendered it as illicit as coffee or black tea, especially considering that non-caffeinated herbal teas are not forbidden by the Word of Wisdom.

“Well, technically it’s not that. Church leaders have said that it’s not the caffeine. We really don’t know why,” explained Renee, the ward organist. “It could be something else health-related that we just don’t know yet, but...Honestly, we just don’t know.” I brought up the fact that some Church members avoided caffeinated sodas and other soft drinks because of this sort of reasoning.

“That’s true,” said Renee, “but it’s just been an assumption. That’s been some people’s interpretation in the past, but it’s never been a commandment.”

“Let me see if I can find it,” said Adrienne, scrolling through the Church’s *Gospel Library* app on her phone. “Oh, okay. Here. ‘Green tea and black tea are both made from the leaves of the exact same tea plant. They’re both tea and against the Word of Wisdom.’ And it talks about vaping, too.” As small conversations began to sprout up about the technicalities of the health code, sparked by her reading of the announcement, Adrienne offered to me and few others her own take.

“I think it’s about obedience, and not necessarily because of the tea itself. For example, in France, the drinking culture is very different, and it’s common to drink a glass of wine every night. So there aren’t necessarily health risks associated with it, there. But they still keep the

commandment, because of obedience. And it's probably the same with this." Several others voiced similar understandings of the Word of Wisdom. For them, the commandments were not always or even primarily about their content; they were about a particular relationship to Heavenly Father predicated upon obedience. Others brought different readings of the commandment and announcement to the fore.

"You know, the Word of Wisdom also says that we should eat mostly fruits and vegetables, and eat meat 'sparingly,' but how many people actually do that?" Rose said. The issue was clearly far from resolved, yet conversation meandered onward.

Far from being an exceptional instance enabled only because of its setting outside of the Church, this moment captures wonderfully the crux of Latter-day Saints' faith. This type of theologizing discussion is the nucleus around which all other components of the religion orbit, and it permeates every aspect of congregational life for Church members. Women are coequal if not principal participants in this discourse, in the Greendale First Ward. From prepared talks to extemporaneous testimonies, taught lessons to informal conversations, righteous and qualified Latter-day Saint women use the key symbols of their cultural lexicon to participate agentially in the shaping of personal and collective meanings, carving out spaces for themselves in which to act. As the primary site of this agency, analysis at the level of the *ward* – or local congregation – is crucial to understanding women's agency in the Church.

### **The Structure of Ward Meetings**

Latter-day Saints are organized geographically into local congregations called wards, equivalent to Catholic parishes (Alder 1992). Multiple wards usually share the same building or *meetinghouse*, staggering their meetings to enable maximum use of space. A bishop and two male counselors preside over each ward. Clusters of local wards, including multiple

meetinghouses, are organized into stakes, an ecclesiastical grouping similar to the Catholic diocese and headed by a male stake president (Alder 1992). In contrast to the Church's lavishly and symbolically decorated temples, the average meetinghouse is clean and functional, with no crosses or crucifixes, and only a half-dozen or so panels of religious art lining the hallways. The interior of the chapel itself is similarly unadorned, with rows of pews facing a raised rostrum.

Every Sunday, Church members meet for a total of two hours, one devoted to a ward-wide worship service called Sacrament Meeting and the other to an alternating second-hour meeting (Gates 1992). Second-hour meetings vary depending on the week. All adults in the ward meet together for Sunday School on the first and third Sundays of each month, and they meet as the women's Relief Society and men's Elder's Quorum on the second and fourth Sundays of each month. Children age eleven and under meet every week for Primary, a children's version of Sunday School class. At age twelve, young men and young women meet in smaller, gendered groups according to age, preparing them for their eventual graduation into Relief Society and Elder's Quorum. This two-hour block is only a recent development, begun in January of 2019 (CJCLDS 2018:123). It replaced the three-hour block schedule that had been in place since 1980, in which Sacrament Meeting, Sunday School, and Relief Society or Elder's Quorum meetings were held consecutively every Sunday.

For the Greendale First Ward, the first hour is Sacrament Meeting, a low- or non-liturgical worship service centered on two important components: the ordinance of the sacrament, a rite similar to communion or eucharist in other Christian faiths; and, the giving of *talks*, in which selected lay members share prepared sermons (Gates 1992). Each Sacrament Meeting follows a familiar pattern. A male priesthood holder, typically the bishop of the ward or one of his two counselors, presides over the meeting, beginning with announcements. The ward

sings an opening hymn together, and a pre-chosen man or woman offers an opening prayer. Then, the Aaronic priesthood holders – young men aged twelve to seventeen, classified as deacons, teachers, or priests depending on their age – pray over and pass the sacrament bread and water to the congregation on trays. After the sacrament has been administered, the bishop calls the first of three or four members who have prepared talks to come to the rostrum and speak. The bishop may ask members to speak on any number of topics – temples, love, charity, obedience, family history work, perseverance, honesty, missionary work, the Book of Mormon – or may allow the speaker to choose her own topic. Talks range anywhere from two minutes to twenty minutes, depending upon the age of the speaker, his or her topic, and the amount of time left in Sacrament Meeting. On the first Sunday of each month, in a special type of Sacrament Meeting called a Fast and Testimony Meeting, prepared talks are replaced with a general invitation to members of the ward to come forward voluntarily, as the Spirit leads, and bear short testimonies about the truths of the restored gospel. The meetings are so named because members typically observe a two-meal fast prior to attending. Both Sacrament and Fast and Testimony Meetings end with a concluding hymn and prayer, followed by a ten-minute interval allowing members to make their way to their second-hour meetings.

Sunday School lessons follow a Church-published curriculum, the most contemporary iteration of which is called *Come Follow Me*. The curriculum focuses on a different volume of scripture each year, with 2019's curriculum studying the New Testament. A Sunday School teacher leads the class in a sort of outlined discussion that can vary from rigid to collaborative, depending on the teacher's inclination and the class's level of preparation. Ideally, each member will have read their at-home *Come Follow Me* material in advance of the lesson, bringing their own questions to the discussion. This does not always work out in practice, however. All of the

members that served as Sunday School teachers while I was conducting fieldwork were women, though a member of either sex can serve in this capacity. Relief Society and Elder's Quorum meetings follow a nearly identical format to Sunday School meetings, except that they are grouped by gender, and thus allow for the occasional discussion of topics typically deemed too gender-specific to be dealt with in mixed-gender settings.

Just as the temple is a site for specific ordinances, the ward is where members of the Church are baptized at age eight or date of conversion, confirmed, and receive the Holy Ghost; and where eligible men receive priesthood ordination enabling them to give baby blessings, anoint the sick, prepare and pass the sacrament, and ascend through the offices of the priesthood. As anthropologist Bradley Kramer observes, Latter-day Saint sacred spaces are organized along a continuum of thresholds, each marked by proper forms and topics of speech, appropriate ritual and dress, and corresponding levels of theological understanding (Kramer 2014:68). The ward is a terrestrial space of salvation, between the telestial outside world and the celestial temple of exaltation (Davies 2003:6; Kramer 2014:68). As such, it is the space that is most widely accessible to members and non-members alike. Because of its intermediary status, the ward houses fragments of temple-related discourse from further up the gradient while allowing them to comingle with aspects of the preparatory gospel – faith, repentance, baptism, confirmation, sacrament – and its investigators.

### **Lay Leadership**

One component of Latter-day Saint worship at the ward level that sets this faith apart from most other Christian denominations is its lay leadership. Every position in the ward, from Sunday School teacher, to organist, to compassionate service coordinator, to Relief Society president, to bishop, to mission president, to genealogy coordinator, to ward librarian, is

voluntary and unpaid. Each assignment is referred to as a *calling*, of which there are as many as there are members of a ward. As the Relief Society president Leah informed me, “*Everyone* has a calling. It’s normal. You *should* have a calling, if you’re a member.” Members are called to these positions by revelation. The ward council – comprised of the bishop and leaders of all other ward organizations – meet together, pray, and receive guidance about which members should be assigned to which tasks. Both callings and releasings are announced during Sacrament Meetings, and members in good standing raise their hands to sustain each action. Members are free to raise their hands in objection, though I have never seen anyone do so.

Callings normally last from several months to several years, depending on the position to which one is called. By the time one is forty or so, it is expected that a typical adult member will have cycled through almost all of the callings available to her in the Church. It is this superabundance of opportunities for lay participation at the ward level that seems to ameliorate the lack of access women have to priesthood offices and creates an environment of participatory agency for many women in the Greendale First Ward. Aside from the presiding bishop or bishopric counselor and his announcements, it is entirely possible to hear women’s voices exclusively in a Sacrament Meeting.

### **Talks and Testimonies: Key Symbols in Sacrament Meetings**

I met Hannah, Leah, and their extended family for Fast and Testimony Meeting one Sunday. Like many Latter-day Saint families when gathered all together, they took up the entirety of the first two pews. After the bishop extended the invitation for members to share their testimonies, Leah made her way up to the podium.

“Brothers and sisters, today, I am so thankful for family,” she testified. She explained that her sons and daughters, in-laws, and grandchildren had all come into town for a week-long

family reunion. “I’m so grateful that family is not just a social construct,” she continued, “but that it is – well – it’s divine. It’s more than just a good idea.” The gathering together of her entire family evoked a sense of oneness and eternity that rendered their eternal relationships poignantly real. Leah found comfort, logic, and an impetus for personal progress in the family format. There are so many things, she pointed out, that she, as a selfish human being, never would have learned if not for the crucible of family life and the ways it instructs one in love and sacrifice. Leah’s testimony bears all the hallmarks of a productively agential employment of what Sherry Ortner calls key symbols.

For Latter-day Saints, the eternal family is both a key summarizing symbol and an elaborating symbol; it simultaneously facilitates the “synthesizing” of complicated experiences and the “sorting out” of complicated “feelings and ideas” (Ortner 1973:154, 158). The family has primordial theological precedence. After all, Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother birthed all human spirits in heaven, marking us all as spiritual brothers and sisters. Earthly families are just microcosms of this greater family tree, and, as scripture states, that “same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.”<sup>6</sup> It is in sealed family units that Church members can achieve the highest blessings of exaltation. The goal of Latter-day Saint theology is to reunite all individuals into one eternal family, and ward-level work reflects this focus on the sealing of living and dead family members to one another just as strongly as work in the temple context. Just as the temple provides a context for specific teachings about the role and significance of men and women in the eternal family, so the ward offers a venue for fleshing out the substance of Church teachings on faith, family, and gender. Leah’s earthly family rendered the eternal family a tangible truth for

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<sup>6</sup> D&C 130:2.

her. It would also be accurate to say that Leah makes no clear distinction between her earthly family and her eternal family. The two exist on a continuum, one as a smaller, fractal-like iteration of the other. Leah sacralized her family relationships, the importance of her roles as mother, wife, and grandmother, in her testimony. At the same time, her testimony itself was sacrosanct. The testimony is a medium not to be controverted, bolstering it as a space of agential leeway in the ward.

In addition to the eternal family, another key symbol permeates Latter-day Saint thought and discourse: the notion of agency, especially agency exercised in obedience. Douglas J. Davies explains the role of obedience in Latter-day Saint faith. “Obedience is enacted through agency, itself a power of personal intelligence embodied in priesthood” (Davies 2003:148). He continues:

It is expressed in vows and covenants and manifested through marriage and parenthood. Its goal lies in attaining the highest possible exaltation in eternal realms of glory as detailed in the plan of salvation. Freedom to engage in it only really begins when, after repentance and faith, someone is baptized and gains the benefit of Christ’s atonement. Once in the Church’s baptized membership, believers must use their agency in obeying divine commands in order to avail themselves of all ritual benefits of the Church.

Coupled with this agency-obedience nexus is its recurrent explanatory mythos – the Fall. The Fall encompasses the moment in which Eve, and at her prompting, Adam, ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which introduced mortal death, sexual reproduction, and children into the world (Givens 2015:184-194). For Latter-day Saints, who eschew the concept of Original Sin, the Fall was a necessary transgression on the part of Eve, lauded as a step toward eternal progression for humankind (Givens 2015:193). As Eve herself puts it in the *Book of Moses*, a unique Latter-day Saint scriptural account of the Fall found in the larger work *The Pearl of Great Price*, “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life

which God giveth unto all the obedient.”<sup>7</sup> Eve’s sacrifice of a comfortable life free of hardship for the potential to advance in human and divine capacity is the archetypal exercise of agency-in-obedience. It serves as a leitmotif for Latter-day Saints, who often interpret their own experiences, consciously or not, as Falls in miniature – events of darkness or hardship as preludes to greater light. The key symbol of the Fall and its twinned agency-obedience nexus cropped up again and again in my discussions with Church members about their conversions. Many explicitly linked their own personal tribulations to those that Joseph Smith experienced just prior to the First Vision, the Church’s foundational theophany in which the prophet encountered God and Jesus in a grove of trees, and, incidentally, another iteration of the Fall narrative.

“I pretty much had a breakdown.” Carolyn described a period of depression and anxiety in her life during a particularly difficult semester of medical school.

I hadn’t been super active in the Church. I kinda fell away for a while. And I was reading the Book of Mormon again, and I was reading the First Vision, and everything that he was feeling...Darkness came over him right before God and Jesus appeared to him...It was probably the lowest point in my life, but it was also very enlightening, because it felt like I was in this deep, dark hole and just– Relating to that experience, it made me gain a testimony of Joseph Smith, that he is real. And it also confirmed that Satan is real, and he will try to tear us down.

Carolyn was able to use the language of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, with its harrowing trial of darkness and its rewarding light, to organize her own experiences. In a sort of doubling effect, her own experiences also helped her to understand the prophet’s story, so that the stacked narratives resonated with one another in a spiritually rewarding way.

Sister Gwen, a recently graduated high school student preparing to leave on her mission, shared a common Latter-day Saint distillation of the Fall narrative when describing the “bittersweet” nature of the final talk she gave in the ward. “‘Opposition in all things,’ right?” she

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<sup>7</sup> Moses 5:11

said through happy tears, quoting the famous passage from the Book of Mormon describing the dialectical nature of reality.<sup>8</sup> It makes sense for Latter-day Saints that each phenomenon is limned only in contrast with its opposite, that Gwen's departure must be melancholy because her family and ward relationships are so cherished. Where not serving a mission may render a man virtually unmarriageable, women in the Church face no such pressure. Gwen framed her choice to go on a mission, then, as an Eve-like act of agency – an entirely voluntary obedience to God to endure this trial by fire in order to strengthen her faith and serve the Church.

Sister Judith, a young mother having just given birth to her second child, bore her testimony of total spiritual and life upheaval. "I'm rethinking everything again," she said, which she felt like she did every time she passed a major milestone. She confessed that she struggled to relate to Jesus Christ and experienced some pain and confusion in sorting out her spirituality. "I don't always know what I believe about everything. But," she concluded through tears, "I know that I have a Heavenly *Mother* and a Heavenly Father who love me and want everything for me. And I leave that with you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen." Judith used her testimony to underscore an issue close to her own heart, and one which she struggled with the Church over: the little-discussed and often overlooked notion of a Mother in Heaven, God's female counterpart and wife. At the same time, she found room to express herself within the familiar Fall narrative of willful engagement in trial and tribulation. Eve is one prototype of this key symbol, and Christ another.

The focal point of Sacrament Meeting, sacrament itself can be seen as a commemoration of a Fall narrative – in this instance, Christ's own obedient agency in His atonement (Davies 2000:38). Douglas J. Davies notes Latter-day Saints' distinctive emphasis upon Jesus Christ's

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<sup>8</sup> See 2 Ne. 2:11.

suffering and atonement primarily in the Garden of Gethsemane rather than on the cross, especially because this site foregrounds Christ's voluntary willingness to take on the sins of the world as opposed to his forced murder (Davies 2003:153-154). The Gethsemane mythos highlights the "inner crucifixion" endured by Christ, and Latter-day Saints imitate Christ by engaging in their own inner crucifixions – mental battles for righteousness, purity, and chastity that serve as agential Falls of sacrificial obedience in preparation for personal growth and familial exaltation (Davies 2003:154). They use these key symbols to make sense of and help one another endure tribulation. This makes sense, especially in light of Latter-day Saints' implicit penchant for the moral exemplar theory of atonement. They tread in the tracks of Jesus, their Elder Brother and Friend, just as he "treads in the tracks of the His Father, and inherits what God did before," so that "God is thus glorified and exalted in the salvation and exaltation of all His children," as the prophet Joseph Smith puts it (Smith 1976:348). For Latter-day Saints, this is all part of a plan drawn up at a pre-mortal Council in Heaven, at which Heavenly Father and His spirit children, including Christ, Lucifer and every human being, reviewed a plan of salvation. Lucifer proposed that he be the savior, and rescue everyone regardless of choice. Christ, however, suggested that he himself serve as Savior, stipulating that He would obey Heavenly Father's commandment to respect the agency of everyone to choose whether or not to be saved (CJCLDS 2009:11; Davies 2003:4; Givens 2015:131). Thus, when Latter-day Saints sing Hymn #188, 'Thy Will, O Lord, Be Done' during the administration of the sacrament, it is not insignificant that they echo Christ, asking for strength in replicating this principle of Christ-like obedience as they sing, "that we may say, as He, thy will, O Lord, be done" (CJCLDS 2002:188). In singing hymns, bearing testimonies, and describing personal experiences, women are drawing upon layers and layers of meaning, from Joseph Smith's theophany, to Christ's

obedience in the Garden, to Christ's obedience in the council, to Eve's transgressive obedience in opening to the way for salvation.

Prepared talks, too, provide a space for women in the Church to enact performative agency, choosing how to frame certain topics, how personal or general to keep their messages, and how to use the talk itself as a platform for other issues. Having been assigned to speak on the topic of modesty, for example, Sister Deluca chose to define modesty as "keeping in good measure." This avoided both frank discussions of sexuality and also sexist emphases on women's clothing as the primary sites for enacting modesty, instead focusing on modesty as "good hygiene."

"Taking care of ourselves is modesty," she declared. "Feeding ourselves is modesty. Not being too modest is modesty." Sister Deluca built up a discussion around the importance of self-care and healthy living in what might otherwise have been a condemnatory fusillade against immodest dress.

In the course of her talk on her imminent departure for her mission, Sister Gwen took the opportunity to restructure the normal mode of testimony at the end of her speech on faith. Rather than following the standard pattern, a series of declarative statements about Church doctrine begun with the prefix "I know that..." she substituted a series of less certain verbs.

"I *believe* Jesus is the Christ," she proclaimed. "I *hope* His love covers all of us. I *trust* that God loves each and every one of us. I *believe* in the power of the Book of Mormon to change people's lives. I *hope* I can share it with others in a way that is meaningful. I *trust* that I will learn a lot from them as well, along the way." Though these changes may seem cosmetic, they are startling in comparison to the standard testimony, which typically reads "I know Heavenly Father loves me. I know Jesus Christ is the Savior. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet

of God, and that we have prophets today. I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know the Church is true. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen” (Mason 2017:195). Gwen took the opportunity to expand her use of language, finding space in which to breathe with her faith as she defined it, not as a “perfect knowledge” but as a hope.

### **Theology-Building as Agency: Relief Society Lessons**

When I first asked Hannah if it would be possible for me to sit in on Relief Society, the second-hour women’s meeting, she responded, without missing a beat, “My mom’s in charge there.” Though not representative of all women’s experiences in the Church, the Greendale First Ward afforded this kind of latitude to the Relief Society. Relief Society meetings generally follow a set pattern, beginning with introductions of any new members or visitors, the sharing of good news, prayer requests, any meaningful moments from the week, the lesson, closing prayer, and hymn. Lessons range from more formatted lectures to more collaborative question periods, depending on the sister selected to speak that week.

Hannah led the week’s lesson on Apostle Dale Renlund’s talk “Abound with Blessings” (Renlund 2019). Like many lessons, the discussion centered around a series of practical analogies. Hannah drew a pile of logs staged like a bonfire and a match next to it, on the chalkboard. The logs represented God’s potential blessings. Matches were our own actions. Hannah drew attention to a conundrum she encountered in her reading of the lesson: *Are blessings earned, qualified for, or gifted?* She asked for possible theories of reconciliation of the issue. Nearly the entire class weighed in on the discussion. One woman emphasized that we do nothing to qualify for blessings, because we are weak and lowly, and have no understanding of the Lord’s ways. Another woman offered an umbrella analogy: God continually rains down blessings, and we need only lower the umbrella in order to receive them. This seemed to strike a

balance between required action without perfect earning of blessings. Others worried that such a model ignored the importance of righteous living.

“We do have to obey commandments, though,” Ruth countered. “Honest, true, chaste, benevolent, and so on, to qualify.”

Hannah agreed. “Eternal life, eternal families, these do require us to do certain things,” she conceded.

Leah offered another analogy: electricity. Blessings are like electricity, and we only have to plug in to what is already offered to us. We always have an agency to choose. Sometimes we may not like the matches, though, Leah admitted. Hannah interjected that all of these analogies might operate more logically if we add in the missing element of oxygen – Christ – which enables the entire process. Her friend Tori offered a theory. Christ had already earned all blessings for us, through the atonement, because we could never qualify for them alone. Tabitha emphasized a similar line of thinking, noting that “we are already good enough, already whole,” and that we don’t need to constantly strive.

“There’s love and there’s the law,” she concluded, “and sometimes in the Church I think we get the law part down but we forget that we’re loved. We have to remember the love part, and sit in our enoughness...if that makes sense?” Such profound ruminations bubbled forth over and over again.

There are at least three theological threads intersecting and in tension with one another in this discussion. One emphasizes the importance of righteous living, the keeping of commandments, and the covenantal nature of the relationship between human beings and the Godhead. Ruth even quoted scripture to this effect, when she cited Joseph Smith’s revelation that

“I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say.”<sup>9</sup> We might call this approach The Law. Another emphasizes the importance of wholeness, of God’s loving provision of blessings for us regardless of personal worthiness. We might call this approach Love. Still another skein sought to strike a balance between both, emphasizing that the blessings are offered to us but that we must exercise agency in order to secure them. Many women would argue one point, only to question and qualify their initial thoughts. As one sister pointed out, she had “swung to both extremes at one point or another during my life.” These various reconciliations of the theological puzzle were left unresolved. The women themselves were theologizing in the course of the discussion, creating, revising, discarding and resurrecting various explanations as they withstood or dissolved in the flow of discussion. Most importantly, each thread articulated in some way with the key symbols of the eternal family and the agency-obedience nexus, whether by accentuating Heavenly Father’s parental love for us, His respect for our agency, or His provision of clear guidelines by which to return to Him.

It may be tempting to read discussions of this sort as instances of Latter-day Saints “speaking past each other,” as Mark P. Leone argues in his groundbreaking work *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Leone 1979:189). He is indeed correct to point out that “every Mormon is the preacher, teacher, exegete, and definer of meaning before an audience of peers, who a moment or month later may switch positions with him,” articulating Latter-day Saints’ lay collaboration in theology-building (Leone 1979:169). However, members are engaging one another, testing and amending ideas in a dynamic social process. The intensely individual and fundamentally social aspects of Latter-day Saint theology are bound up together, not gliding past one another. It is only this dialogic interaction that makes it possible to conclude, as Leone does,

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<sup>9</sup> D&C 82:10.

that Latter-day Saint doctrine, “safe in the hands of the people, can take whatever turns are required...keeping a vital faith vital, creating and recreating Mormonism just as Joseph Smith wanted” (Leone 1979:195). In the Greendale First Ward, doctrine is safely in the hands of women, especially.

### **Latitudinal Agency**

The Greendale First Ward meets in the afternoon, enabling a late sleeper like me to occasionally arrive early. One day, I made my way toward a pew in the front of the chapel, where my friend Leah, the Relief Society president, and her friend Tabitha were sitting. Waiting for Sacrament Meeting to start, Tabitha had a small paperback open in her lap, and she and Leah were speaking animatedly over it.

“Andrew! You should look at this. You’ll love this,” Tabitha greeted me. The book was collection of poetry called *Mother’s Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother*. I was shocked. Had I brought an equally theologically speculative, adventurous tome to browse in the Southern Baptist church of my childhood, I think the reception would have been less than warm. Tabitha, however, seemed unperturbed, and Leah, positively giddy. We had a long discussion about the book, the concept of a Heavenly Mother, and the role of poetry as a vehicle of expression for Latter-day Saint women throughout history. However, it was the book itself, the object and its very materiality, that moved me. Tabitha, as an active and full member of the Church, as a deep thinker and an engaging Christian, felt empowered to bring *Mother’s Milk* with her as meditational reading before her worship. She felt enabled to discuss it with the Relief Society president, the head of the ward-level women’s organization. She felt compelled to share it with me. It was not so much the concept of a Heavenly Mother as much as the practical and

theological latitude afforded women in the Church to explore *whatever* topic or direction their faith led them to, that I found most compelling about women in the Greendale First Ward.

## CONCLUSION

I was nearing the end of my interview with my friend Hannah. Having made our way through all of my questions, we pivoted more toward catching up. The topic of her recent move came up. I asked how it was being a young mother in Philadelphia. She paused, overcome with a recent memory.

“Andrew, people have said the weirdest things to me. And I’m like ‘Excuse me?’ This one man said to me the other day, ‘What’s your situation?’”

“A stranger?!” I asked.

“Yes. And it took me a second to figure out what he was talking about. It was because I’m young and had Jenny with me,” she said. Jenny is Hannah’s one-year-old daughter. “I don’t know, just, like, living here on the east coast, everyone thinks I’m crazy for having a baby in the first place, and just wanting to be home with her. I feel a major lack of respect for that decision, and I respect other people’s decisions to work and do whatever they want, but I’m an intelligent and educated woman, and I’m contributing to my society in lots of ways, and to me this is the most important thing, so...I take it really seriously.”

We talked more about feminism and family, and I asked how her husband Jordan was doing, but as I reviewed my interviews, I kept returning to her account. Hannah is a brilliant, engaging, college-educated woman with a wonderful husband and daughter. She cherishes and thinks deeply about her faith, and she isn’t afraid to explore its tensions and questions while leaving them intact. Yet, she finds that many interpret her decisions as quaint or backward. There must be a way to recognize that Latter-day Saint women make all kinds of agential choices, from at-home parenting to career pursuit, running for office to delving into genealogy, fighting for ordination to finding practical inroads in the ward. Some of these choices will align with the

institutions and structures in women's lives, including the Church and their own family and ward contexts. That does not make them any less agential.

In his book *History and Presence*, religious studies scholar Robert Orsi argues that “the study of religion is or ought to be the study of what human beings do to, for, and against the gods really present, and what the gods really present do with, to, for, and against humans” (Orsi 2016:4). Immersed as we are in modernist interpretations of religion which not-so-subtly imply that people's experiences of the divine are never what they seem to be nor what people claim they are, beholden to the prevailing paradigm in which “what participants say, as a matter of fact, does not faithfully represent actual historical occurrences,” it is crucial to remember that the power of a key symbol like the eternal family derives not from its signification of something else but from its immanent reality to members of the Church (Orsi 2016:59). The eternal family is not a “social construct,” as Leah pointed out in her testimony, or a convenient social lubricant, or even a signifier for something else. It is an extension of tangible, earthly families into the heavens, a network of relationships reaching all the way back to Adam and Eve and, eventually, up to Heavenly Father. The eternal family is an incubator for humans' divine potential, and it encompasses every being on the planet, including God.

Yes, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are immersed in social relationships, world-historical trajectories, national consciousnesses, theological debates, changing structures, semiotic webs, and hegemonic systems, but their expressions of faith cannot be reduced to these things. Latter-day Saint women's agency is participatory not just as a solitary exercise in empowerment but in the sense that they collaborate agentially with Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, ancestors, and other divine beings in the crafting of their lives. Through key symbols grounded in the real, through theologizing discussion, through talking and

testifying of their relationships with God, and through teaching, serving and directing others in the Church, Latter-day Saint women participate in the Greendale First Ward in a thousand and one fulfilling, empowering, and often unrecognized ways.

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## APPENDIX

### IRB Approval Memo



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**To:** Andrew N Tompkins  
**From:** Douglas James Adams, Chair  
IRB Committee  
**Date:** 06/14/2019  
**Action:** **Expedited Approval**  
**Action Date:** 06/14/2019  
**Protocol #:** 1904194650  
**Study Title:** Exploring Latter-day Saint Women's Agency in Northwest Arkansas  
**Expiration Date:** 05/12/2020  
**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kirstin C Erickson, Investigator