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YEA, YEA NAY, NAY

OLD "WHINE"

MARGARET TOSCANO'S MISTITLED Heavenly Mother essay in the July 2004 SUNSTONE turns out to be nothing more than a '70s-vintage feminist whine about male chauvinist ecclesiastical power and the oppression of so-called female intellectuals. She hits the nail right on the head with her words, "I am reopening the 'old issues' that many think feminists have complained about too much already."

Toscano uses the Heavenly Mother theory as a "metaphor"—really an example—of how the male power structure in the Church suppresses feminist "discourse" about Mormon theology. She presumes that a Heavenly Mother most certainly exists, asserts that such a doctrine ought to be more actively taught, and contends that it would be were it not being unfairly blocked by the Church's all-powerful, male chauvinist hierarchy. She implies further that if she and other excommunicated feminist activists were given more ecclesiastical power, this vital truth would achieve its deserved stature in Mormon theology. "If we relegate the Heavenly Mother to the dustbin of theology," she cries, "we visit this same treatment upon her daughters—and upon all the outcast and despised . . . and [even] upon Jesus Christ and the Heavenly Father."

Toscano bemoans "the dearth of women theologians," which can't possibly be due to a lack of interest. No, no—it is because the LDS authority structure "discourages women from full participation in theological and philosophical discourse . . . [which] creates a class system where at least half of the Church is denied the benefits of full citizenship." The entire essay is filled with other examples of fuzzy logic that would seem uncharacteristic of a professor at my alma mater.

Governance of the LDS Church is based on its members' faith that it is led by the collective divine inspiration of the First Presidency and the Twelve, whose role is to define, interpret, and implement Mormon theology. Toscano observes, "Sparse referencing to the Mother in Heaven [in Church literature and talks by General Authorities] implies that she should not be a topic of major concern for members of the Church." It's important to her, though, so it should be important to the membership—especially women—whether true or not.

Whether or not there is a Heavenly Mother, I fail to see how a precise knowledge about the genitals of the Godhead would improve either the understanding or practice of Christianity. Possibly gender itself is only a temporal attribute, and not all human attributes are necessarily analogous to Deity's.

An essay containing a logical and convincing argument about whether or not there is such a thing as a Heavenly Mother might be engaging. A feminist dissertation about a male ecclesiastical power structure that abuses the right of women, or anyone, to rewrite Mormon theology is not very interesting.

STEVEN HANSON
Vancouver, Washington

MARGARET M. TOSCANO'S response: Steven Hanson's letter in response to my article, "Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology? An Investigation into Discourses of Power" (SUNSTONE, July 2004), exemplifies the major obstacle any woman faces who speaks out about gender inequity in Mormon culture. She will immediately be accused of being angry, whiny, illogical, and man-hating. Such name-calling is a convenient technique for Hanson (and others) to sidestep the two major questions my article poses: Does denying women access to formal power (priesthood and leadership positions) limit their ability to speak and thus to define doctrine and practice? And does the limited or prohibited discourse about the Heavenly Mother make it difficult for women to think of themselves as fully in the image of God and thus fully citizens in God's kingdom?

Hanson says that he fails "to see how a precise knowledge about the genitals of the Godhead would improve either the understanding or practice of Christianity." But my point is that how we view God absolutely shapes the way we treat each other and live our everyday lives (at least, we use it to justify our actions). If we believe God is judgmental and vengeful, then we will think these are appropriate responses to those who are not complying with the rules of the Church (i.e. God disapproves of the "gay life-style," so we should punish and disenfranchise gay people). If we view the Godhead as exclusively male, then we likely will see Church leadership as a male prerogative. If the gender of God does not matter or is only temporary, as Hanson suggests (does Hanson really think this is the doctrine of the Church? The second paragraph of "The Family: A Proclamation" asserts both the existence of heavenly parents and the eternal nature of gender), then why can't we refer to God as "she" or "Mother"? And would it matter to men if God were only female?

Hanson also states that Church members

have faith they are "led by the collective divine inspiration of the First Presidency and the Twelve, whose role is to define, interpret, and implement Mormon theology." Therefore, it is their decision, not mine, that prevails; so I should not complain if they are not interested in the Heavenly Mother. Again, Hanson's argument reinforces my thesis. Only men are in a position to define Church doctrine and practice. And the hierarchical nature of the Church ensures that no one will question whether the status quo fully reflects the will of God. Has any male leader desired a revelation about the Heavenly Mother, or sincerely asked for one?

In the Sunday afternoon session of the recent October Conference, President Hinckley instructed men not to think of themselves as superior to women and not to use their priesthood to hold dominion over women. I applaud President Hinckley's inspiration and sensitivity in addressing this topic. But the very fact that he has to give such instruction illustrates the nature of the problem. Women would not have to be told they are of equal worth with men if there were no question about their status or if women felt fully empowered. When was the last time men had to be told that their role is just as important as women's? The problem is systemic; the Church structure privileges men and maleness.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY

A BIG FAN OF SUNSTONE'S ILLUSTRATIONS, I was disappointed by the July 2004 cover showing our Heavenly Mother emerging from behind a brick wall. Is Heavenly Mother a battered woman? Why does she look so frightened? Was violence necessary to tear down the wall that the cover suggests separates us from her? By contrast, the September 1980 SUNSTONE cover, also depicting Heavenly Mother, was truly inspiring. It included an unfinished drawing by Leonardo da Vinci in tune with the unfinished image LDS theology offers of our Mother in Heaven.

As far as I have been able to determine, there has been only one previous Mormon representation of our Mother in Heaven: the attempt by John Hafen for the 1909 illustrated version of Eliza R. Snow's hymn "Oh My Father." Apparently Hafen concluded that if God the Father is a white, gray-haired old man, then God the Mother must be a conventional, white, gray-haired older woman.

Mormon feminists have collected impressive Goddess images: "The Birth of the Goddess" on the cover of Maxine Hanks's *Women and Authority*; "Tower of Mothers," on the cover of Janice Allred's *God the Mother*; cover author Margaret Merrill Toscano's own collection of ancient sacred icons displayed during the most recent Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (session SL04–271). Couldn't some of these images have inspired a more enduring cover? With images of God the Mother so conspicuously absent from LDS art, SUNSTONE missed a unique chance to create something original and powerful.

HUGH SALLEY
Charlotte, North Carolina

ARTIST'S RESPONSE: I put a great deal of thought into the cover, consciously designing it to incorporate issues and themes from Margaret Toscano's article. In choosing an expression for Heavenly Mother, I deliberately chose to make it ambiguous. I also made the drawing slightly sketchy, so her face and overall look would be even more open to interpretation. The only expression I absolutely wanted to avoid was the "beatific" look so often encountered in religious art depicting powerful female religious figures.

In sharing the SUNSTONE cover with many others, I have heard Heavenly Mother's expression called everything from sad and angry to concerned and powerful. Mr. Salley is the first who has interpreted it as that of a battered woman.

I think Heavenly Mother looking through a wall of bricks with her light blocked yet still spilling forth is a powerful statement about a figure we don't really know much about. While art is subjective, I believe I actually did create an "original and powerful" piece of art, and I'm rather proud of it.

JEANETTE ATWOOD
Salt Lake City, Utah

DELIBERATELY MESSY

I READ WITH INTEREST WILLIAM D. Russell's article, "Let's Put Warning Labels on the Standard Works" (SUNSTONE, July 2004), and wholeheartedly agree that the scriptures occasionally contain doctrine that, if taken to the extreme, has resulted, currently results, and will continue to result in genuine evil. Pascal said it best: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." However, I've begun to wonder if providing opportunities for evil to be done in the name of religion might be the whole point, the underlying design and purpose of the scriptures.

Some of the most potentially toxic Bible stories are also the most central. In a modern court of law, the God of Genesis would be characterized as a monster. He allows inno-

JEANETTE ATWOOD

"Quit complaining, Adam. You're the one who named it 'poison ivy.'"

cent children to play next to deadly fruit in a garden without anything more than verbal warning to protect them. Then he knowingly allows a stranger to entice the children into eating the fruit so they can die. Once poisoned, instead of rendering aid, he drives them out into the wilderness to suffer a painful and protracted death. On the face of it, this is a profoundly sick story. But the creation story is also one of the most important—presented three times in the standard works and again in the temple endowment—because it is a compelling symbolic portrayal of the law of opposition (among other principles).

Joseph Smith framed much of his theology in terms of the Abrahamic covenant, but the founding of that covenant involves a sick story as well. Abraham believes God wants him to sacrifice his son (and all the promises God declared would flow through his son). Abraham knows human sacrifice is evil, having almost been a victim of it at the hand of his own father, but he decides to follow his "inspiration" anyway. In the Bible, an angel stays Abraham's hand, but in our times, some folks actually follow through with the act. In my BYU masters program, I knew a student who had previously worked at a mental institution. One of his former patients was a father who, to demonstrate his faithfulness, had sacrificed his child to God on the kitchen table. Why would God link obedience and human sacrifice, knowing full well that some would take it to evil extremes?

Christ himself epitomized this principle of intentionally teaching something that could potentially lead to evil in John 7, when he found many disciples following him for the wrong reasons. Fully recognizing this fact, he deliberately introduced controversy and confusion by apparently linking salvation to the ostensibly paganistic practice of eating his body and drinking his blood. Since shunning idolatrous, pagan practices is one of the central tenets in Judaism, many of his disciples were justifiably horrified by this revelation and followed him no more. On the face of it, Jesus's teaching was a sick affirmation of a barbarism that had previously brought divine condemnation and captivity upon the Jews.

So why might God choose ambiguity and use contradictory or dangerous affirmations? I wonder if it might be because the first, most fundamental and important act of a religious person is creating a personal image of God. Based on our mental image of God, the nature of faith, sacrifice, consecration, and salvation take shape in us. The scriptures themselves are of little help, offering a variety of contradictory descriptions of God and his attributes. On the one hand, God is loving (1 John 4:16), merciful (1 Peter 1:3), gentle (2 Corinthians 10:1), patient, meek, lowly of heart (Matthew 11:29), and the good shepherd (John 10:7–18; Alma 5:38–60). But God is also portrayed as an omnipotent "King of Kings," both "mighty" and "terrible" (Deuteronomy 7:21; Jeremiah 20:11), a "God of Battle" (D&C 98:23–48; 105:14), a being full of wrath toward the wicked (D&C 1:9), and, since we are all wicked, someone who must be approached with "fear" and "trembling" (Psalms 2:11; Colossians 3:22; D&C 1:7).

We are left to reconcile and integrate these metaphors—the mighty, terrible, and gentle God; the humble and lowly God who yet must be approached with fear and trembling; the God of love who occasionally commands wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children. We need to proceed wisely, for at the start of the Third Lecture on Faith, Joseph Smith taught that one of the three things "necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation" is "a correct idea of his character, perfections and attributes." If we use religion to strengthen and justify our pride, our God will take the form of the evil in our souls, and we will find scriptures that allow us to define him as elitist, sexist, harsh, cold, cruel, or in whatever form our own evil embodies. If we use religion as a tool to strengthen our spirituality, God will take the form of the love in our souls, and we can find scriptures that define Him as gentle, patient, compassionate, and meek. This choice must be freely made, and it has great repercussions. Perhaps this is what Christ meant in the Sermon on the Mount when he warned some of the outwardly religious but spiritually bankrupt listeners: "I never knew you: depart from me" (Matthew 7:23)—or, better yet, as the Joseph Smith Translation renders the final line, "ye never knew me."

In his SUNSTONE essay, Russell suggests that teaching children the scriptures are not always inspired and are sometimes downright evil will inoculate them against acting out religious principles in toxic ways. Even if parts of the scriptures are uninspired, I believe this approach is naïve. When it comes to favorite sins and powerful emotional urges, do any of us listen to counsel? Children (and most of us adults, for that matter) do not listen to preaching. We look instead for examples and then draw our own conclusions as we evaluate those examples through a filter of our own emotional and spiritual experiences. I have developed a fundamental faith that people who are loving and spiritual are more influential than those who are proud and elitist, unless such wickedness happens to appeal to someone more than does the Spirit of God. If it does, no words nor warnings will have much effect.

Taken as a whole, the scriptures and other teachings of the prophets are a contradictory mess. But the problem does not end there. Priesthood leaders, taken as a whole, are a contradictory mess, full of human failings and struggles, teaching a mix of divine inspiration and their own human precepts. I have seen priesthood leaders who are so loving, kind, and inspired that I have expected them to be "twinkled" any day. I have also seen a bishop enable a high priest group leader's sexual abuse of both his daughters and granddaughters. (Postscript: the stake presidency felt differently and acted to stop the abuse.] I believe God wants life and scripture to be messy so we can pick and choose. We define ourselves by how we define the sacred, how we experience the fruits of our choices, and how we adjust accordingly. Given the scripture's inherent contradictions, no person can follow all of them, nor can one follow every leader—what we remember and act on reveals our beliefs and lusts, and we ignore or conveniently forget the rest. The scriptures and leaders we use to define God and testify of him say much more about our nature than they do about God's. Can warnings, annotations, or explanations compete with the forgetfulness and rationalization that accompany pride and unrighteous desire? I haven't seen it in my life. Before a truth will stick, I must want it. If I do not want it, I will find a way to avoid it every time.

Given our different states of spiritual development, there are probably as many different conceptions of God and interpretations of His scriptures as there are people, and almost every conception can be grounded in some prophet's teaching. Given our powers of self-deception and rationalization, prophets have consistently taught that to truly find God, to know Him, to see Him, we must first truly know and see ourselves (e.g., Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 10:2). As we act on the principles we believe, we can feel our hearts changing—softening or hardening, becoming more open and loving or more closed and indifferent. And, as we feel these things, we can adjust if we choose to. Without exception, with each choice, one part of our soul will become stronger and another weaker. Until we progress to the point where the Spirit can fill us with truth and light, our conception of God and our interpretation of the scriptures

will act more as a mirror of ourselves than as a window to the divine (1 Corinthians 13:9–12).

The law of opposition suggests that were we to rid the scriptures of all their potentially evil interpretations and applications, we would at the same time be stripping them of their transformational power. In my experience, the choice between good and evil is more a personal choice between good and evil influences, spirits, and examples; words, alone, are relatively impotent. Hence, I would very much prefer to avoid a Mormon Talmud, whether that body of commentary be constructed by the Church's Correlation Committee or the Sunstone Board of Directors. Because of their paradox and contradiction, the scriptures act as a mirror with which we can explore ourselves. In the end, the image and attributes of God that we develop and act on are the personal creation that defines our soul. By them, we will be judged because we will have transformed ourselves in their image. We are walking on holy ground, but ground that is full of danger. Our only safety harness is holding onto the covenants we make. I would not have it any other way. How we deal with the contradictions we meet is the primary test of our second estate. As Eugene England asks: will we endure to the end in faith and love or choose another path?

ROB PAGE
Cheshire, Connecticut

CONTENTION FOR TRUTH

CONGRATULATIONS TO JOHN-Charles Duffy and SUNSTONE for one of the finest articles *ever* written in Mormondom ("Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy," SUNSTONE, May 2004). Although I was disappointed that Duffy (correctly) defines himself to be an LDS "revisionist" rather than an "apologist" like me, I nevertheless appreciate the clarity of his analytical history of LDS polemics or argumentation. He lists the major players: (1) LDS orthodox apologists, (2) Christian countercultists, (3) LDS revisionists, (4) and secular academics. He clearly and helpfully articulates the Church's historic rejection of "contention" and apologetic conflict, of scholastic "intellectualism," and the recent rise of independent, "progressive" LDS argumentation. Duffy's analysis is good, and I agree with his condemnation of the increasing "verbal aggression" that has arisen in response to LDS semi-critics such as himself.

As a retired lawyer, however, I naturally side with Daniel Peterson's "indispensable" and "entertaining" contention for truth. Indeed, if the law is a correct teacher, "contention" is essential in clarifying issues, determining genuine agreement or disagreement, revealing assumptions, and tracing the history of error in an opponent's and one's own assertions. The Church's "no contention" principle was responsible, no doubt, for the discipline faced by my close friend (a stake missionary) who had attended anti-Mormon meetings in order to understand their positions and correct their errors. My friend was summoned for his excommunication by a stake president who had "warned" him not to attend those kinds of meetings. That stake president's "solution" to the then-prevalent anti-Mormon assaults was to ignore them. But surely, we must ask by what "priesthood authority" that stake president coerced my believing LDS friend into ceasing his defense of orthodox LDS doctrine and practice against anti-Mormon disputants. As a result of this coercion, my friend is now inactive in church but very active in verbal and email defense of LDS orthodoxy. How ironic that he had to go "inactive" in order to become a genuine missionary to well-informed intellectual controversialists. His testimony, he says, has been fully enhanced by serious study of anti-Mormon principles. He refers to his stake president's "priesthood-coerced ignorance" as "priesthood arrogance," and he feels quite safe to ignore it per Doctrine and Covenants 121:36–37. I tend to agree with him.

While I applaud Duffy's clarity and thoroughness, I disagree with him on two points: First, where Duffy suggests that few "outside" (or missionary) conversions will occur as a result of orthodox apologetics, I report my own "conversion" primarily at the hands of Arthur Budvarson (founder of the anti-Mormon Utah Christian Tract Society) in his Del Mar, California, residence many years ago. Taken to Budvarson's by friends seeking to dissuade me from converting to Mormonism, I was soon convinced of the fallacy of Budvarson's transcendent apologetic—especially his repeated references to "original sin" and the inherent evil of little children. Apologetics may be efficacious in the "conversion" of others—or of ourselves. We "prove" truth not merely from the probity of our own positions but also the apparent falsity of the assertions of our detractors.

Second, I disagree with Duffy's repeated pessimism that LDS apologists "will find mainstream skepticism insurmountable." Even though a formal defense of LDS theological positions is in its infancy, many non-LDS philosophers, theologians, and historians have already begun to recognize the strength of our approaches. Further, we've just recently begun seeing the formation of scholarly groups such as the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, which will undoubtedly build upon the success of its first conference where Latter-day Saint thinkers engaged in open-hearted discussions with leaders in the "open theology" community. I believe Mormons may yet influence "mainstream skepticism," and even if we don't, our LDS minority influence is fully consonant with Jesus's claim that "few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14).

GERRY L. ENSLEY
Los Alamitos, California

LET IT BEGIN WITH ME

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE MAY 2004 issue of SUNSTONE! You have produced an excellent assemblage of complementary essays, literature, poetry, tributes, and columns. They represent some of the finest examples of diverse thinking within Mormon intellectual culture. To us genetic Latter-day Saints who have been around for a long time and are enriched by hearing differing points of view, SUNSTONE is a treasure!

How encouraging to have John-Charles-Duffy in his "Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith," point out the contributions made by the diverse kinds of Mormon apologists. As we know, in most cultures, change can be a long, slow process (much too slow for most of us). Thanks also to J. Bonner Ritchie's, "A Paradigm Shift from Conflict to Peacemaking." It reminds us of a more hopeful time in our nation's history when the leaders of our country acted from the peace paradigm. One way to make a contribution to peace is by respecting a person's differing opinion—by listening to what they are saying instead of just trying to persuade them to agree with us. The magic response would be, "Now that is an interesting point of view." Try it and see what happens.

The song lyrics, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me," converge nicely with the Thirteenth Article of Faith's declaration, "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, we seek after these things." If only people and leaders of people could learn to listen to each other, the world would be a better place. Once in a while, we should remember that our own religion came about because Joseph Smith was a seeker who listened to the Lord.

DAWN SANDBERG
St. George, Utah

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