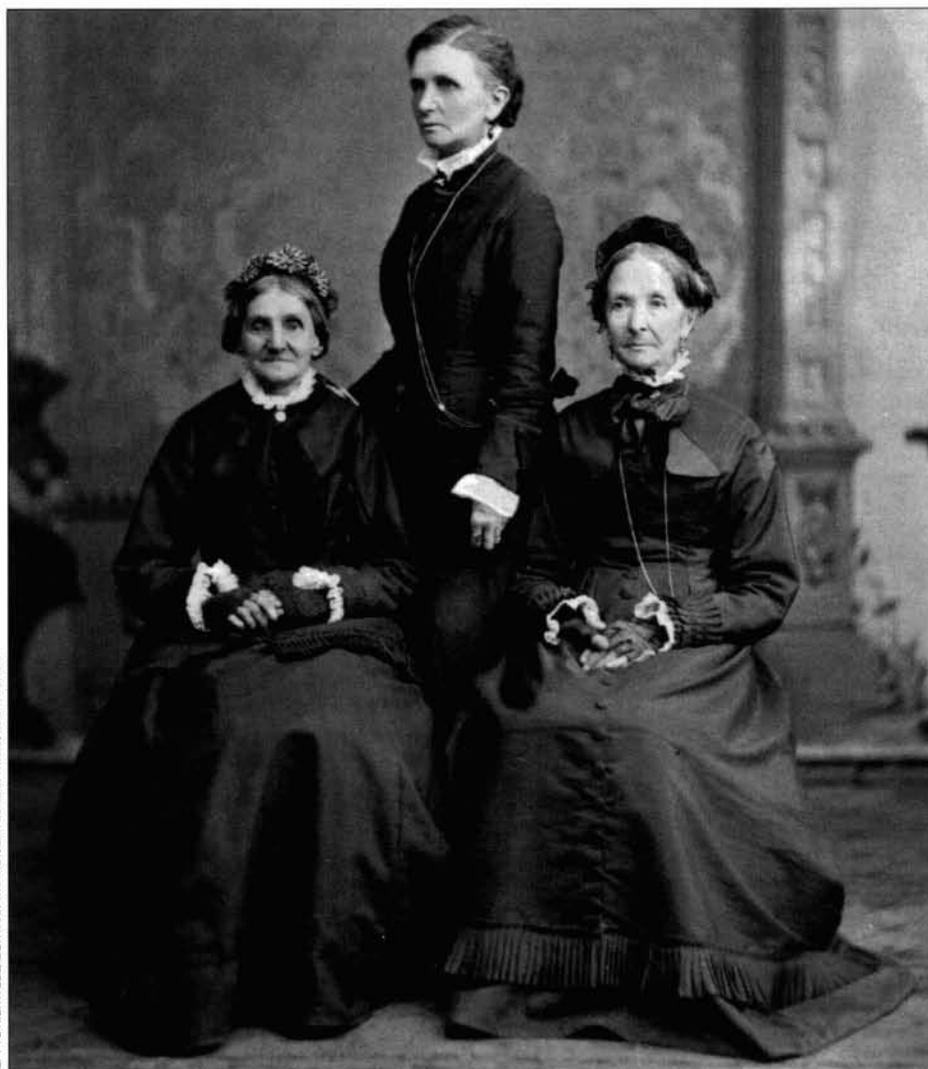


*Latter-day Saint women have historically performed blessings and other healing rites we currently regard as solely priesthood duties. But if Joseph Smith and other Mormon prophets condoned and even at times encouraged such practices, when did women lose this privilege? And why?*

## A GIFT GIVEN: A GIFT TAKEN

### WASHING, ANOINTING, AND BLESSING THE SICK AMONG MORMON WOMEN

*By Linda King Newell*



LEFT TO RIGHT: ELIZABETH ANN WHITNEY, EMMELINE B. WELLS, ELIZA R. SNOW

FOR MEMBERS OF THE MODERN CHURCH OF Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the term “washing and anointing” is synonymous with the initiatory ordinances of the temple endowment. Joseph Smith first introduced the practice to male members of the LDS church in the Kirtland Temple; he included women when he gave the endowment and sealing ordinances to his select “Quorum of the Anointed” in Nauvoo.<sup>1</sup> By the time the Mormons had established a refuge in the Great Basin, washing and anointing had also been combined with healing. Although it grew out of the temple ordinances in Nauvoo, the practice by women was carried on outside the temple. Even after the establishment of the Endowment House in Salt Lake in 1855 and the later dedications of the St. George, Manti, and Logan temples, the ordinance took place both within the confines of those sacred structures and in the privacy of individual homes. This paper focuses on the latter practice. These washings and anointings were clearly done in connection with “administering to the sick.” The wording took different forms as the occasion demanded. One of the most common uses of the washing and anointing blessing came as women administered to each other prior to childbirth.

#### PIONEER WOMEN'S PRACTICES

*Women's washings and anointings for healing were officially sanctioned.*

THAT women could and did participate in blessing and healing the sick was a clearly established and officially sanctioned fact by the time the Saints had established a refuge in the Great Basin. Women like Sarah Leavitt and Edna Rogers left records of their experiences with healing others in Kirtland.<sup>2</sup> In Nauvoo, the Prophet Joseph Smith not only formed the Relief Society as an essential part of the Church, but he also introduced the ceremony of the temple endowment, including washings and anointings. With the coming of the Relief Society, the women had an organization through which they manifested the gifts of the spirit. Of this period, Susa Young Gates, a daughter of Brigham Young, wrote: “The privileges and powers outlined by the Prophet in those first meetings [of the Relief Society] have never been granted to women in full even yet.” Then Susa asked, “Did those women, do you and I, live so well as to be worthy of them all?”<sup>3</sup>

There is considerable evidence within the minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society meetings to suggest that Joseph Smith

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seemed to envision the Relief Society as an independent organization for women parallel to the priesthood organization for men.<sup>4</sup> Yet both seemed to come under the aegis of the priesthood as a power from God, not as an administrative entity.

The women themselves saw their organization as more than a charitable society. Spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and healing the sick were not only discussed in their meetings—the sisters openly practiced them. With Joseph's approval, Emma and her counselors laid hands on the sick and blessed them that they might be healed. The fifth time the Relief Society convened, Sarah Cleveland invited the sisters to speak freely, and women stood one at a time in this testimony meeting. Sister Durfee was among those who spoke. She “bore testimony to the great blessing she received when administered to after the last meeting by Emma Smith and [her] Counselors Cleveland and Whitney, she said she never realized more benefit through an administration.” She added that she had been healed and “thought the sisters had more faith than the brethren.” Following the meeting, Sarah Cleveland and Elizabeth Whitney administered to another Relief Society sister, Mrs. Abigail Leonard, “for the restoration of health.”<sup>5</sup>

In the intervening week, someone apparently reported to Joseph that the women were laying their hands on the sick and blessing them. His reply to the question of the propriety of such acts was simple. He told the women in the next meeting “there could be no evil in it, if God gave his sanction by healing . . . there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water.” He also indicated that there were sisters who were ordained to heal the sick and it was their privilege to do so. “If the sisters should have faith to heal,” he said, “let all hold their tongues.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1857, Mary Ellen Kimball recorded her visit to a sick woman in company with Presindia, her sister wife. They washed and anointed Susannah, cooked her dinner, and watched her “eat pork and potatoes” with a gratifying appetite. “I felt to rejoice with her for I shall never forget the time when I was healed by the power of God through faith in him which power has again been restored *with the priesthood*” (a phrase that indicates a distinction in Mary Ellen's mind).

But after I returned home I thought of the instructions I had received from time to time that the priesthood was not bestowed upon woman. I accordingly asked Mr. [Heber C.] Kimball if women had a right to wash and anoint the sick for the recovery of their health or is it mockery in them to do so. He replied inasmuch as they are obedient to their husbands, they have a right to administer in that way in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ but not by authority of the priesthood invested in them for that authority is not given to woman.

Mary Ellen then noted an argument that would calm apprehensions for the next four decades: “He also said they might administer by the authority given to their husbands in as much as they were one with their husband.”<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, strong official encouragement for women

to develop and use their spiritual powers is evident. Brigham Young, speaking in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on 14 November 1869, scolded both men and women for not improving themselves. The example he cited was of "Why do you not live so as to rebuke disease?" he demanded. "It is your privilege to do so without sending for the Elders." He laid down some practical advice; if the child is ill of a fever or of an upset stomach, treat those symptoms by all means, beware of too much medicine, and remember that prevention is better than cure. He ended by addressing himself specifically to mothers: "It is the privilege of a mother to have faith and to administer to her child; this she can do herself, as well as sending for the Elders to have the benefit of their faith."<sup>8</sup> Having enough faith to heal was clearly, for Brother Brigham, "practical religion" like having enough food on hand.

The previous year in Cache Valley, Apostle Ezra T. Benson had called on all the women who had been "ordained to wash and anoint" to exercise their powers to rebuke an unspecified disease, which had so destructively coursed its way through the valley.<sup>9</sup> This record neither identifies the ordained women nor who ordained them. It says only that they were "ordained to wash and anoint." Zina Huntington Young's journal mentions several healings. On Joseph Smith's birthday in 1881, she washed and anointed one woman "for her health" and administered to another "for her hearing." She remembered the Prophet's birthday and reminisced about the days in Nauvoo when she was one of his plural wives: "I have practiced much

with My Sister Presindia Kimball while in Nauvoo & ever since before Joseph Smith's death. He blest Sisters to bless the sick." Three months later: "I went to see Chariton [her son] & administered to him, felt so sad to see him suffer. The next year she notes with satisfaction hearing an address by Bishop Whitney in the Eighteenth Ward wherein he "blest the Sisters in having faith to administer to there own families in humble faith not saying by the Authority of the Holy priesthood but in the name of Jesus Christ. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

#### THE LATE 1800S: QUESTIONS ARISE

*Were women performing "ordinances"?  
What was their relationship to priesthood?*

**S**TILL, healing by women caused some confusion; this quiet, routine practice on the local level occasionally raised questions that, when answered publicly by Church leaders or the Relief Society, seemed to start a ripple of uneasiness that sooner or later set off another inquiry. Church leaders began to issue general cautions about women blessing the sick. Angus Cannon, president of the Salt Lake Stake, included the following in his answer to a question about women holding the priesthood: "Women could only hold the priesthood in connection with their husbands; man held the priesthood independent of woman. The sisters have a right to anoint the sick, and pray the Father to heal them, and to exercise that faith that will prevail with God; but women must be careful



"GRACE, DID YOU HAVE TO OPEN YOUR COAT WHEN THE PROPHET CAME THROUGH THE CROWD AND SHOOK MY HAND?"

CALVIN GRONDAHL



There could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water. . . . If the sisters should have faith to heal, let all hold their tongues.

—JOSEPH SMITH

how they use the authority of the priesthood in administering to the sick.”<sup>11</sup> Two years later, on 8 August 1880, John Taylor’s address on “The Order and Duties of the Priesthood” reaffirmed that women “hold the Priesthood, only in connection with their husbands, they being one with their husbands.”<sup>12</sup>

A circular letter sent from Salt Lake that October “to all the authorities of the Priesthood and Latter-day Saints” described the organization of the Relief Society, its composition, its purposes, the qualifications for its officers, and their duties. The letter includes a section called “The Sick and Afflicted”:

It is the privilege of all faithful women and lay members of the Church, who believe in Christ, to administer to all the sick or afflicted in their respective families, either by the laying on of hands, or by the anointing with oil in the name of the Lord: but they should administer in these sacred ordinances, not by virtue and authority of the priesthood, but by virtue of their faith in Christ, and the promises made to believers: and thus they should do in all their ministrations.<sup>13</sup>

It seems clear that the First Presidency was answering one question: anointing and blessing the sick is not an official function of the Relief Society, since any faithful member may perform this action. However, by specifying women’s right to administer to the sick “in their respective families,” the Church leaders raised another question: what about administering to those outside the family circle? They gave no answer, although the practice of calling for the elders or calling for the sisters had certainly been established.

Another question also bears on the topic: “Is it necessary for sisters to be set apart to officiate in the sacred ordinances of washing, anointing, and laying on of hands in administering to the sick?” Eliza R. Snow used the columns of the *Woman’s Exponent* in 1884 to answer:

It certainly is not. Any and all sisters who honor their holy endowments, not only have the right, but should feel it a duty whenever called upon to administer to our sisters in these ordinances, which God has graciously committed to His daughters as well as to His sons; and we testify that when administered and received in faith and humility they are accompanied with all mighty power.

Inasmuch as God our Father has revealed these sa-

cred ordinances and committed them to His Saints, it is not only our privilege but our imperative duty to apply them for the relief of human suffering.

Eliza Snow, in 1884, then echoed the language of Joseph Smith in his 28 April 1842 instructions to the Relief Society: “thousands can testify that God has sanctioned the administration of these ordinances [of healing the sick] by our sisters with the manifestation of His healing influence.”<sup>14</sup>

In answering the question of who should “officiate in the sacred ordinances,” Eliza Snow’s language is instructive. By limiting its performance to those who have been endowed, she definitely places the source of their authority under the shelter of those ordinances in the temple. In other words, she saw washing and anointing the sick as an *ordinance* that could and did take place outside the sacred confines of the temple. Women, through their endowment, had both the authority and obligation to perform them.

Two differing points of view were now in print. Eliza Snow and the First Presidency agreed that the Relief Society had no monopoly on the ordinance of administration by and for women. The First Presidency, however, implied that the ordinance should be limited to the woman’s family without specifying any requirement but faithfulness. Eliza Snow, on the other hand, said nothing of limiting administrations to the family—indeed, the implication is clear that anyone in need of a blessing should receive it—but she said that only women who have been endowed may officiate.

As the washings and anointings continued, women attending an 1896 Relief Society conference in the Logan Tabernacle heard a Sister Tenn Young urge: “I wish to speak of the great privilege given to us to wash and to anoint the sick and suffering of our sex. I would counsel every one who expects to become a Mother to have these ordinances administered by some good faithful sister.” She later gave instructions on how it should be done. Her counsel was endorsed by Mary Ann Freeze, who “said she attended to this and the curse to bring forth in sorrow was almost taken away.”<sup>15</sup>

But doubts kept surfacing among women whose desire for approval from their presiding brethren inevitably led to questions of propriety. Answers varied, however, depending on who provided them.

In 1888, Emmeline B. Wells, editor of the *Exponent* and soon to be general president of the Relief Society, sent Wilford



















