I believe that the Book of Mormon is indeed a book written for our day, that it contains many powerful lessons that can greatly benefit us. I propose that a society that negates femaleness will likely be a society that is militaristic—or that a society that is militaristic will likely be a society that negates femaleness; whichever the cause and whichever the effect, the result will be disaster.

Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?

By Carol Lynn Pearson

Almost every time I have mentioned the title of this article to anyone, it has brought a laugh—not a laugh of derision, a laugh of delight. The very idea, mentioning woman-power and the Book of Mormon in the same breath. Humor depends on the incongruous, and what could be more incongruous than feminism and the Nephites?

Let me propose a very modest definition of feminism, one that appears in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism: “Feminism is the philosophical belief that advocates the equality of women and men and seeks to remove inequities and to redress injustices against women.”

I would now like to trade the word “feminism” for a word that I like even better—“partnership”; yet there are some who find the word “partnership” threatening. I find it a beautiful word. To me, partnership is the goal, and feminism is the journey absolutely necessary to get us there. Where? That wonderful land in gender relationships, choice above all other lands—that space in our minds and hearts and society where we are truly one. Perhaps we could even call it Zion.

My twenty-two-year-old son Aaron is a rock guitarist with gorgeous blond hair down to the middle of his back and a smile that dazzles. Not long ago he said, “Oh, Mom—I’m writing a new song. I think you’ll like it.” He reached for his guitar and sang to me:

Behind every good man there’s a woman,
Behind every good woman there’s a man.
Understand we’re all in this together—
It’s much easier standing hand in hand.

That’s as scary as it’s going to get in this piece. “It’s much easier standing hand in hand.” Partnership.

In October 1992, I was invited to perform Mother Wove the Morning on Crete at an international conference to celebrate partnership between women and men. While I was sitting in the audience of about five hundred people from all over the world, waiting to hear a talk by Margarita Papandreou, former first lady of Greece (and who had invited me), I visited with Hilkka, a striking Finnish woman who had represented her country at the United Nations. When I asked about her areas of study, she said, “I’m doing some writing on the relationship between patriarchy and militarism. Patriarchy cannot survive without militarism, nor militarism without patriarchy.” Instantly there flashed into my mind the Nephites, the Lamanites, and the dreadful, dreadful warfare that had led to their destruction.

Ever since high school, I had puzzled over the near-unrelenting militarism of that people, and I had mourned over the absence of women in the record and the stunning, negative female imagery. But only in the last few years had I said to myself, “There is a connection here. It is not an accident that extreme warfare and extreme bias against women are found in the same society.”

I believe that the Book of Mormon is indeed a book written for our day, that it contains many powerful lessons that can greatly benefit us. I propose that there is a lesson in this book that we have not really examined, one that is profoundly important. I propose that a society that negates femaleness will likely be a society that is militaristic—or that a society that is militaristic will likely be a society that negates femaleness; whichever the cause and whichever the effect, the result will be disaster. I choose to believe that the anti-female bias I find in the Book of Mormon is not there from malice but from lack of awareness. I also choose to believe that with awareness comes a desire to do better.
THE DANGERS OF PATRIARCHY

HISTORICALLY, patriarchy and militarism are blood brothers, and the operative word is “blood.” Technically, patriarchy is “the rule of the fathers.” As it translates into experience, it is the view that male is primary and central and female is secondary and auxiliary—that God is male and there is no complementary female divine. Resultantly, the “masculine” is idealized and worshipped, and the “feminine” is diminished, marginalized, and abused.

So it is not just as an academic exercise that I examine this proposition. We are deeply affected by the way we view gender. And I believe that the wonderful ways the Church assists us in developing godly self-images and relationships are undermined by the distorted view of the sexes we receive from a variety of quarters, including the Book of Mormon.

Recently, I found a remarkably insightful statement in an Ensign article about how Hollywood's images of life conflict with the realities of our own lives. The author's description of Hollywood producers helps to explain this:

Most of them are male. There are some incredibly talented men running film studios, producing TV programs, and creating Hollywood magic. But if most of the perspectives we see expressed dramatically are male perspectives, we're only seeing half the story.

That explains a lot about the way women are presented, doesn't it?2

It also explains a lot about the way women are presented (or ignored) in Church programs, manuals, talks, scriptures—certainly in the Book of Mormon. Keep in mind that the abridger of this book was a military man as well as a prophet, a fact that unavoidably affected his abridgement. If General Patton had condensed Gone with the Wind, we might have lost Scarlett altogether.

In my youth, I thought patriarchy was as firmly fixed as gravity, that nothing else had ever existed. In college, I began to rethink that notion. I used to enjoy brief visits with Hugh Nibley now and then. I had studied Hebrew in Israel, and he found it fun to chat with me in that language as we walked across campus. Later, as I was doing the research that ultimately led to Mother Wave the Morning, I cornered him one day and said, “Brother Nibley, what about all this stuff I'm reading about a time before the patriarchy?”

“Of course,” he replied. “The matriarchy. We all know about the matriarchy.”

“I beg your pardon, Brother Nibley,” I said. “We do not all know about the matriarchy.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “There was a time when women were more important, and that had to be balanced by a time when men were more important. But neither of those styles is correct. They're both perversions.”

In a talk at Brigham Young University, Brother Nibley said essentially the same thing: “There is no patriarchy or matriarchy in the Garden; the two supervise each other ..., -archy means always to be first in order, whether in time or eminence; the point is that there can only be one first. To be first is Satan's first principle.”

Argument about the existence of a bona fide “matriarchy” abounds. The evidence seems to indicate that there never was a time that could be described as upside-down patriarchy where women ruled over men as men have ruled over women in historical time. A growing body of archeological evidence, however, indicates—certainly in old Europe—that for thousands of years in the neolithic era there was a civilization that lasted longer than our war-torn variety, one in which weapons, fortifications, violent death, animal or human sacrifice, male dominance, individual wealth, and images of a male sky-god simply did not exist; its people honored femaleness in mortal women and in the Great Goddess of creation.

This time came to an end. In the words of mythologist Joseph Campbell, who described the “milder, gentler day” of the Goddess, this time gave way to “the patriarchal overthrow,” a “sordid, sorry chronicle of collision, vituperation, coercion, and spilled blood [that brought in] the order of the Patriarchy, with an ardor of righteous eloquence and a fury of fire and sword.”3

The arrival of this order has been well documented in numerous other books, including Gerda Lerner's The Creation of Patriarchy and Riane Eisler's The Chalice and the Blade. Before these, Erich Neuman wrote The Great Mother, and Robert Graves, in The White Goddess, warned that our repressed desire
for a divine Mother is ignored at our own peril.

Militarism. War. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu said, "War is exclusively a masculine invention and ghastliness." I was chilled to read recently that Edward Teller, hailed as the "father" of the H-bomb, announced the success of its first test with the words, "It's a boy!"

I do not suggest that all men are warlike and all women are peaceable. It is possible, and has happened, for women to be warriors and to lead armies. And many men give their all to proclaiming and living peace. But current research shows that there does seem to be a particular tendency in either the female brain or female socialization that encourages women and girls rather consistently to choose cooperation over competition. Simon LeVay, a neurobiologist whose recent book, The Sexual Brain, explores the differences between male and female brains, says that—not surprisingly—men seem programmed to be more aggressive than women. I am reminded of Alan Alda's assessment that our society suffers from "testosterone poisoning." At any rate, it is not hard to guess in what direction society moves when runaway masculinity is untempered by a balancing femininity. I propose we find a remarkable example within the pages of the Book of Mormon.

Let us examine these two phenomena—militarism in the Book of Mormon and the accompanying bias against and negative portrayal of women. We will spend little time on the first because it is so obvious. According to Warfare in the Book of Mormon, approximately one hundred separate instances of armed conflict exist in the Book of Mormon record.7 Hugh Nibley estimates that the book devotes approximately one-third of its content directly or indirectly to military matters.8 Scenes of bloodshed and almost unbelievable violence stain the pages of the book. In just one battle, the Nephites slay 12,532 Amlicites, and the Amlicites slay 6,562 Nephites. Nephi cuts off the head of Laban, Ammon cuts off the arms of the enemies of King Lamoni. The book's violence is unforgettable.

NEGATIVE PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

There is not one woman who appears to have her own connection with heaven.

EVIDENTLY less obvious to some is the parallel absence and/or negative portrayal of women in the Book of Mormon. A few years ago, I read the book specifically to focus on what it says about women, circling in red every female reference. And as I did, it became more and more clear why I had always felt like an unwelcome visitor as I entered Nephite society, a stranger in a strange land indeed. The valuable things I have gleaned from the Book of Mormon have been bought at the expense of putting my feminality aside and ignoring what is said of it. And while I am more than my feminality, my feminality is a profound and highly valued part of me, and to have to put it away when I pick up the book violates my spirit.

When I encounter the occasional statement that would appear inviting to women, I stare at it as at an anachronism: "He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness, and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female . . . , and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile." (2 Ne. 26:33) Or, "And now, he imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men but women also." (Alma 32:23)

Where are the stories to demonstrate this expansive doctrine? In the account we have been given, a huge division exists between male and female, a clear deviating of the female. Angels do not visit women. Do we have here preaching without the practice? Was there something going on that did not make its way into the record? All we know is what appears in the book's pages, and what appears does not invite women or honor feminality.

Only two instances in the entire 522 pages provide evidence that women are being specifically addressed along with men. Lehi speaks to and blesses both the sons of his sons Laman and Lemuel: "Behold, my sons and my daughters . . . I would that ye should give ear unto my words." (2 Ne. 4:3.) That is the first and nearly the last time in the book that I, as a woman, feel specifically invited to the party. Thereafter, I have to invite myself until the very end of the book, where I read, "O ye fair sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye fair ones, how is it that ye could have fallen!" (Morm. 6:19)

Sometimes the exclusion of women seems particularly surprising. For instance, during King Benjamin's beautiful address in Mosiah 2, women are obviously physically present: "They pitched their tents round about, every man according to his family, consisting of his wife, and his sons, and his daughters, and their sons, and their daughters." (v. 5.) Then King Benjamin speaks from his tower: "My brethren, all ye that have assembled yourselves together . . . Yet, my brethren . . . And now, I say unto you, my brethren . . . O, all ye old men, and also ye young men, and ye little children who can understand my words . . . " (v. 9, 15, 20, 36, 40.) One instance indicates that the listeners shall become the sons and the daughters of Christ, but every salutation is to only "my brethren."

This is the case throughout the book. King Mosiah sends a written word" to the people: "Behold, O ye my people, or my brethren, for I esteem you as such. . . . " (Mosiah 29:5.) We have come to assume that the good teachings in the book apply to both sexes, and yet there is room for us to quip: "Men are they that they might have joy, and women are that they might provide it."

Nowhere in the book do we find the phrase, "My brethren and my sisters," or anything comparable to it. I am an outsider overhearing something important that is going on in another room. "Arise, my sons, and be men! . . . Awake, my sons!" Did Nephite women feel similarly ignored? Certainly, if only on a subconscious level. The general overhaul of school textbooks in the last couple of decades brought with it substantial evidence of what happens to the self-image of girls (and other groups) when they are excluded from the teaching material. Psychologists tell us that for one's mental health, being ignored
SUNSTONE

is worse than being beaten.

If women are not spoken to in the Book of Mormon, they are spoken of. Occasionally. Except for references to the biblical women Eve, Mary, and Sarah, there are three women mentioned by name in the Book of Mormon: Sariah, wife of Lehi; Abish, the Lamanitish woman in the story of Ammon and King Lamoni; and Isabel, the harlot. This starkly contrasts with the presence of women in the Bible. One hundred eighty-eight women are mentioned by name in the Bible, compared to three in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, two books of the Bible—Esther and Ruth—are named after women.

In the Old Testament, “he” and “his” appear six-and-a-half times more often than “she” and “her.” But in the Book of Mormon, the masculine pronouns appear, on average, thirty-five times more often than the feminine ones, and in the abridgement after the small plates, forty-six times more often. And many of the “she’s” and “her’s” refer not to people, but to objects, many of them negative, which we will consider in a moment.

Numerous biblical women can serve as spiritual role models for women today: Huldah was a prophetess; Deborah was a prophetess; Miriam was a prophetess. Not one woman in the Book of Mormon appears to have her own connection to the heavens. Sariah does not receive anything like the visionary experience that Lehi has. Nephi receives the vision of the Tree of Life after his father, but Sariah does not. Abish, who performs one of the few strong deeds by a woman in the book, had converted to the Lord because of a remarkable vision her father had had years before, not a vision of her own. Lamoni’s queen is another spiritually dependent woman; she does not receive from God but from her husband’s servants the knowledge that Ammon is a prophet. And she says to Ammon, who asks if she believes, “I have had no witness save thy word . . . nevertheless I believe . . . .” (Alma 19:9.)

Whenever I think of that nameless queen of King Lamoni, I remember the vivid lesson given by my seminary teacher at Brigham Young High School in Provo: When the king had lain upon his bed for the space of two days and two nights and some said he was dead and stank and ought to have been placed in a sepulchre, the queen says, “As for myself, to me he doth not stink.” My teacher chose this as a wonderful example of good wifehood and instructed all the girls in the class that for a happy marriage—no matter what the husband does or what anyone else says about him—our position must be firm: “To me he doth not stink.” (Alma 19:5.)

I venture to guess that the only story about women in the Book of Mormon most of us have heard used in a Church talk is the story of the mothers of the stripling warriors who instilled faith into their sons. (See Alma 56:47.)

Predictably, the huge majority of the references to women are to the nameless, faceless “our women” or “our wives” clearly listed with the Nephite men’s possessions:

And now, may the peace of God rest upon you, and upon your houses and lands, and upon your flocks and herds, and all that you possess, your women and your children . . . . (Alma 7:27.)

Our women did bear children in the wilderness . . . . our women did give plenty of suck for their children . . . . (1 Ne. 17:1, 2.)

I. Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters . . . . (2 Ne. 5:6.)

What? Nephi had sisters? Finally, after reaching the promised land and telling numerous stories of his brothers, Nephi mentions he has sisters? They are not spoken of before or after. And I did cause that the women should spin, and toil, and work, and work all manner of fine linen, yea, and cloth of every kind, that we might clothe our nakedness . . . . (Mosiah 10:5.)

And now the design of the Nephites was to support their lands, and their houses, and their wives, and
their children... (Alma 43:9.)

And it came to pass that he rent his coat; and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it—In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children... (Alma 46:12.)

Behold their women did toil and spin, and did make all manner of cloth, of fine-twined linen and cloth of every kind, to clothe their nakedness. (Hel. 6:13.)

The strong anti-female statement made by Nephite society, however, comes not only from the lack of meaningful stories about individual women in the Book of Mormon but also from female imagery applied to things rather than people. Numerous objects are rendered female, some of them neutral in value, some of them with a positive connotation. We read:

One other ship also did sail forth; and whither she did go we know not. (Alma 63:8)

I have grafted in the natural branches again into their mother tree... (Jacob 5:60.)

For they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them! (Mosiah 8:20.)

And all the nations that fight against Zion, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision... (2 Ne. 27:3.)

However, as I created my list of feminine imagery, I was distressed to see how many were negative symbols:

And I beheld that their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the water, and upon the land also, to battle against them. (1 Ne. 13:17.)

Touch not that which is unclean; go ye out of the midst of her. (3 Ne. 20:41.)

Of course, the Mother of all negative female images in the Book of Mormon is—have you guessed?—the great and abominable church, the mother of the abominations, the mother of harlots, the whore of all the earth. I wonder if we appreciate what this really means. The males who lived in Book of Mormon times—and the males who read the book today—have as major symbols for their maleness: God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, and all the prophets. And the females who lived in Book of Mormon times—and the females who read the book today—have as a major symbol for their femaleness: the great and abominable church, the whore of all the earth.

In a chiasm in First Nephi, chapter 22, we find the great whore paired directly against her opposite, the Holy One of Israel. There is no mistaking the gender of ultimate good and the gender of ultimate evil.

Joseph Campbell, in his important book The Power of Myth, reminds us that the word “abomination” is the Old Testament word for the Canaanite Goddess. And the Canaanite Goddess—and the other pre-patriarchal goddesses—were historical descendants of the ancient Mother Goddess, worshipped by many names in nearly every known part of the prehistoric world. I find this to be astonishing irony: the genealogy of the great and abominable church can be traced in a convoluted, upside-down and inside-out journey to the best vision our primitive family had of our Divine Mother.

The Book of Mormon’s Isaiah material gives further negative female images. Without having to turn a page, I find six separate images uncomplimentary to my femaleness:

Children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. (2 Ne. 13:12.)

Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched-forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go... therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion... (13:16, 17.)

And her gates shall lament and mourn; and she shall be desolate, and shall sit upon the ground. (13:26.)

And in that day, seven women shall take hold of one man, saying... let us be called by thy name to take away our reproach. (14:1.)

When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion... (14:4.)

Therefore, hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure... (15:14.)

In the middle of these six negative female images, we find:

And then will I sing to my well-beloved a song of my well-beloved, touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill. (15:1.)

Thus, “he”—my well-beloved; “she”—hell and the filthy daughters of Zion.

BOOK OF MORMON SEXISM VS. NEW TESTAMENT
Why did the Jesus of the New Testament give such wonderful female images while the Jesus of the Book of Mormon did not?

So much for Isaiah as a friend to the female. Surely I would do much better with the words of Jesus. Let us see. In Third Nephi, we have an acknowledgement of “the slain of the fair sons and daughters of my people,” and there is the biblical image of “how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,” but any inclusion of women or positive statements about women end there. Instead, we find speech directed only to males:

And as many as have received me, to them have I... (Alma 36:23.)
given to become the sons of God... (3 Ne. 9:17.)

Whosoever looketh on a woman, to lust after her... whosoever shall put away his wife... (3 Ne. 12:28, 32.)

Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your children may be blessed. (3 Ne. 18:21.)

Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch not that which is unclean; go ye out of the midst of her... (3 Ne. 20:41.)

"Go ye out of the midst of her." In the words of Jesus? My heart dropped. And then I said to myself, "Wait a minute. This does not sound like the same Jesus that spoke to me in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." I had long rejoiced in the fact that Jesus was a clear revolutionary in his treatment of women. And, as I owned a red-letter edition of the Bible, I could easily examine his words. Did Jesus ever, ever make a statement in the New Testament that used negative female imagery? I searched through every word. None. Not one. Indeed, on an occasion where he might have chosen a negative female image, Jesus chose a male one: the father of lies. (See John 8:38-44.) To contrast the Heavenly Father with the father of lies is not necessarily a statement on gender. But to contrast the Heavenly Father with the mother of abominations is very much a statement on gender.

What a delicious experience to read the words of Jesus in the New Testament after reading the Book of Mormon account. Here Jesus does address women:

Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. (Matt. 9:22.)

Frequently Jesus chooses a male and a female example and pairs them with each other in a way that is clearly deliberate:

The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation... [paired with]... The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation... (Matt. 12: 41, 42.)

The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took... [paired with]... The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took... (Matt. 13:31, 33.)

Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left... [paired with]... Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left. (Matt. 24:40, 41.)

These pairings are not accidental.

Images of women in the words and the life of Jesus are not hard to remember: His mother, who was visited by an angel that asked no man's permission. His relationship with Martha and Mary. The virgins with their lamps. The woman at the well. The woman with the ointment. The woman with the issue of blood. The woman of Canaan whose daughter was healed. The sinner he would not condemn. The daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, who was healed. The widow who gave her mite. Women—first to hear of his mission and first to witness his resurrection. Even Paul singles out women by name in his letters and gives them titles comparable to his own.

With the richness of these stories in mind, I find it difficult to understand how the same Jesus who gave us these wonderful female images in the New Testament would not speak to women or significantly of women when with the Nephites, and indeed chose to say, "Touch not that which is unclean; go ye out of the midst of her." (3 Ne. 20:41.)

The Old Testament ancestors of the Nephites—while surely not a partnership society, and guilty of many abuses toward women—nevertheless had a rich tradition that included women. The New Testament contemporaries of the Nephites—in spite of certain statements that demean the position of women—had a rich tradition that included women. The descendants of the Nephites—and those other people who lived later on the American continent—have in their lit-
erature many positive and powerful references to women and to the concept of the feminine. In the *Popul Vuh* of the Mayans, we read: "The Creator and the Maker, the Mother and the Father of Life, of all created things, he who gives breath and thought, she who gives birth to all the children..."[11]

In the histories of many American Indian tribes, we find evidence of women owning all the property, ruling as queens, controlling agricultural production, and inheriting from mother to daughter. These traditions ended with the coming of the white man.

What does all this mean? What indeed was Mormon's role in shaping the account? Is this anti-female slant a mirror both of the society and of the historian? Is this view of women precisely what God intended, and should I, therefore, cease my questions?

LOW STATUS OF NEPHITE WOMEN
An entirely male event will not succeed.

I n any event, the low status of women in Nephite culture was predictably coupled with abuse of women. To be sure, Nephite men suffered enormously—being sent off to kill and be killed is a terrible fate. But it is a general rule that in every culture women receive an additional level of abuse because of their gender.

Various parts of the Nephite record refer to women being beaten (see Alma 50:30), having their tender hearts broken because of the faithlessness of their polygamous husbands (Jacob 2:23–35), being stolen as wives (Mosiah 20:5), being required to defend those who stole them (Mosiah 23:33), being taken prisoners (Alma 54:3), being offered as sacrifices (Morm. 4:21), being burned to death (Alma 14:8), being raped, being tortured to death and then having their flesh devoured by men, and being fed on the flesh of their husbands with only a little water (Mor. 9:8–10).

I found interesting the discussion my Sunday School class had about a year ago regarding the story of Alma and Amulek being forced to watch the women and children of Ammonihah being thrown into the fire and consumed. "What a painful thing," the teacher lamented, "it must have been for these brethren to stand and watch this terrible scene."

"Well," I asked, "what about the pains of the women and children who were being burned? We are assured, of course, that it's all right because the Lord receives them to himself in glory, but I notice that we're all very happy when Alma and Amulek get away unharmed. We don't want them to be received unto the Lord in glory. Women, of course, have a long and honorable tradition of being devoured by the flames." (Men are burned in the Book of Mormon and throughout history, but in nowhere near the numbers that women are. Probably 85 percent of "witches" burned in the Inquisition were female.)

Besides contributing to the obvious abuses of women in the narrative, the anti-female bias evident among the Nephites may have been one of the numerous causes of their downfall, for the reasons presented in the first part of this discussion. We are told that after the visit of Christ there were approximately two hundred years of peace, when the people were as one. Who knows what softening of hierarchical status there was then in terms of class, race, gender? The only explanation of the end of that idyllic period is that the people began to be lifted up in pride, wearing costly apparel and no longer having their goods in common. They began to be divided into classes. One can only speculate how those divisions related to gender.

None of the prophets in the Book of Mormon suggest that the low status and negative portrayal of women is a characteristic of their fallen society, but they do suggest that their imperfections were many. The next to final prophet, Mormon, wrote: "Give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been." (Morm. 9:31.)

"That ye may learn to be more wise than we have been." I have been taught all my life that the Book of Mormon gives us voices from the dust preserved that we may learn the lessons of this fallen people. Let me state again: A society that marginalizes its women and creates negative images of femaleness is a society that will not succeed, and indeed is a society that may very well destroy itself through war.

Have we any examples, closer to our own day, that pair militarism and the low status of women? What about Saddam Hussein's Iraq, hungry for conquest, its women hidden behind veils and its leader using such imagery as the "mother of all battles"? What about Nazi Germany, "the Fatherland," in which women were sent back to the kitchen, and of which Hitler said, "The Nazi revolution will be an entirely male event."

A government, a movement, a view of history, a church, a marriage, a philosophy that is "an entirely male event" will not succeed.

WHAT IF?
Ways to be more wise than the Nephites have been.

I n a way, it is useless to ask the question, "Could feminism have saved the Nephites?", though it so intrigues me. What if? What if the Nephite women and the Lamanite women—like the great women of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*—had said to their warriors, "I'm sorry, I will not share your bed until you find a better way than all this warring nonsense."

What if a woman had walked from her tent to the foot of the tower and said, "King Benjamin! I'm here, too! Speak to me!"—or approached King Mosiah or any of the other prophets and said, "Wait! What about me? What about the women?"

What if a committee of women from the Zarahemla Toiling and Spinning Society had approached the leadership and said, "Dear Brethren: We are weary of toiling and spinning and making all manner of cloth and watching you kill each other. We wish to weave the fabric of a new society. We would like to sit in your councils and help figure out how to save the world for our children's children!"

What if a few Nephite women had stood up in their Sunday
School class and said, “Brethren, I object to my femaleness being rendered in terms of the great and abominable church. Brethren, you tell me of the Father and the Son; where is my Mother?”

And what if some young Nephite rebel with long hair (or more probably with short hair) had picked up his guitar or his zither and sung, “Understand we’re all in this together—It’s much easier standing hand in hand.”

What if one or more of the Nephite prophets had said to himself, “There’s something wrong with this picture. We are seeing things through only one eye. Why don’t we open the other eye and invite the women to participate in our decision-making, in our political life, and in our spiritual life? Perhaps they have something to contribute more important than all manner of fine cloth.”

What if? What if? But what if? What if? But whatever female voices, or sympathetic male voices, may have ever spoken, they are long, long lost to the dust, and what they said, or wished they could have said, or might have said if they had had the awareness and the power, we will never know.

We have the awareness. And the power. Our voices are not yet lost to the dust. We can speak. And we must. It is time to say—on behalf of our Nephite sisters and brothers—on behalf of ourselves and our posterity—let us learn to be more wise than they have been.

I suggest three ways to be more wise.

First, I suggest that we teach the Book of Mormon in an expanded context, that we teach these stories with an acknowledgment of what they say about women and a clear statement that that message about women is not the message God wants us to have. And, in fact, that the Nephite view of women may have been one of the many things that led to their downfall. In the hundreds of talks and lessons on the Book of Mormon I have listened to in sacrament meeting, Relief Society, Primary, seminary, firesides, stake and general conferences—from men and women alike—I have never once heard the Book of Mormon approached with a sensitivity to what it says about my femaleness. Occasionally there has been a jest about the lack of women in the book, but never has there been a serious acknowledgement of what this means to all of us.

Because what it means is profoundly important, we cannot afford to ignore it. The messages that go into our spirits and our psyches as we study this book and absorb the positive images of the male and the absent or negative images of the female affect our lives, our self-images, our images of the opposite sex, our relationships to God, and our relationships to one another.

Second—and I argue with myself about this, because in a way it might muddy the clarity of one reason this was indeed a fallen people, but I suggest we examine it—it may be possible to correct some of the problem. For example, “the great and abominable church, the mother of harlots, the whore of all the earth”: does this entity need to be female? The Church has a history of responding to demonstrated need and to voiced offense. The great and abominable church used to be characterized as the Catholic Church, but the later editions of McConkie’s Mormon Doctrine show the change from that because we do not want to offend Catholics.

The statement “white and delightsome” in the Book of Mormon has been changed to “pure and delightsome,” clearly because we do not want to offend people of color.

The statement in our hymnal, “Long shall the blood that was shed by assassins stain Illinois,” has been changed to “plead unto heaven,” because we do not want to offend the people of the state of Illinois.

I was interested in the April 1993 Ensign report on the recent and highly successful tour the Tabernacle choir made to Israel. Jerold Ottley is quoted as saying.

We had to be sensitive to singing for a non-Christian audience. For instance, when we sang, “God Be with You Till We Meet Again,” we could sing the word God because that is not necessarily a reference to Christ. But in the chorus, instead of singing “Till we meet at Jesus’ feet,” we sang, “Till we meet at our Redeemer’s feet” . . . We had to go through every lyric and make those kinds of adjustments.”

I am happy that we do not wish to offend the Jewish
people. But how happy I will be when finally we make some adjustment in our language because we do not want to offend women. Perhaps the situation is just too close to us. I see it, really, as similar to my narrative poem "The Steward," in which the conscientious farmer, Heber, cultivates his lands while he completely fails to cultivate the spirit and the talents and the needs of his wife. I believe that we have devoted our energy to seeing that our language does not offend the people of the world and have given no thought to how it may affect the women working so devotedly in our own homes. And when we see the suffering this has caused—spiritually, psychologically, physically—our lamenting will be great.

The third thing I suggest—whatever we do about the past, making alterations or changing the context—is that we realize that the present is the point of greatest power; that now, this moment, we create new and powerful images of women and femaleness, that we create new volumes of history and indeed new scripture that will fill our minds and our hearts with positive female pictures, pictures of women serving as full and fully honored partners in our religious life. That we let the mother of abominations die a final death, and in her place welcome back to the family our long-lost and near-forgotten Divine Mother.

Perhaps it does take someone to say it out loud. Clearly a Catholic spoke up. Clearly a person of color spoke up. Clearly an Illinoisan and a Jewish person spoke up. Today I am speaking up, and I am saying that I deserve better. The magnificent Mormon women and girls that I know and love deserve better. The church that I grew up in and that I love and that my grandmother Sarah walked across the plains for deserves better. Let the women speak up and say, "This is not good enough for me." Let the men speak up and say, "This is not good enough for my daughters, for my wife, for my mother, for my sisters—or for me as a man, because what damages the female damages all of us, and it's much easier standing hand in hand." I believe there are huge numbers of men who are ready to say this. The men that I associate with personally—in my ward, in my stake, in my family, and as I come and go in various parts of Mormondom—are good men, enlightened men, teachable men. I have full confidence that we are ready to move forward together. And as we move forward, the healing benefits will be felt in every ward, in every home, in every heart.

Patriarchy can be transformed into partnership, hastening our journey to Zion. And in that happy land, the beautiful daughters of Zion will dance and the beautiful sons of Zion will dance, and we will sing together a new song, and great will be the joy of it.

NOTES


FALLOW FIELDS

The fields where we stood just yesterday
Edged with grasses and flowers feeling their way
To the spring light are blighted with an autumn wind.
The spaces in our home where the unborn walked
Are now lined with shadows and dust.
In the dark, we take turns, you and I, listening
To the other offer prayers that end in tears.
Be fruitful and multiply, the Father said.
Give me a child lest I die, cried Sarah to Abraham.
Did she know how many nights he stood in the desert,
Watching the stars, waiting for the promises?
Did he know how many mornings she woke
To find gone the dream child suckling at her breast?
Come, my brother, my spouse—take my hand
And we can walk into the unknowing darkness together.

—CARA O'SULLIVAN