

THE ORDER OF EVE: A MATRIARCHAL PRIESTHOOD¹

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It began in such a Mormon way: with a question. I asked a single daring question of my mother, and it turned into many. The questions began on a typical Sunday night, which is when I tend to putter around my kitchen fiddling over stacks of dishes, papers, and other things that accumulate and bother me. While I do this, I call my mother, and we have meandering catch-up-on-the-events-of-life chats. These are favorite hours in my weekend, which always end with me feeling close to my mother, and with my life a little more in order. Meanwhile, the bright lights of my busy kitchen are dimmed to only the hanging stained-glass pendant lights, which cast their warm orange glow over the sink. I think I bought the house because of these lights. My grandmother had similar ones, and I associate them with a deep, soothing childhood sense of peace and safety. My child self would get a drink of water at the sink late at night and hear my mother and grandmother laughing in the next room. I would soak in the security of my world. Now as an adult, I bask in that same gentle orange glow and connect to my mother.

1. For an introduction to women's blessings, see work by Fara Anderson Sneddon, "The History of Women's Healings and Blessings: An Interview with Author Fara Sneddon," *Segullah*, Mar. 22, 2019, <https://segullah.org/journal/the-history-of-womens-healings-and-blessings-an-interview-with-author-fara-sneddon>; Betina Lindsey, "Woman as Healer in the Modern Church," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 3 (1990): 63–76; Linda King Newell, "A Gift Given, A Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick Among Mormon Women," *Sunstone* 6 (1981): 30–43.

This particular Sunday night, my mother sounded tired and sad. Her sorrow reached across the miles and hurt my heart. For years, she had been dealing with the kind of painful life heartaches that mothers experience because of the choices of others. My mother's weariness made me long to be able to fix something, anything. I wanted to offer some comfort beyond phone calls and prayers. This is the scientist in me—I like data and results. Biology is the lens through which I filter my world and my faith. I only like the unknown if I am able to start actively collecting data to make things known and fixed, or to make lost things found. Yet here was my mother with such feelings of loss, and I could not fix anything for her.

Our conversation shifted into an unusual area as we started talking about women giving blessings. The topic wasn't an obvious one for us, given her more orthodox Mormonism and my tendency to attend Mormon feminist conferences and other things that I suspected made her nervous. Yet female blessings speak to our pioneer heritage, and even the most orthodox women in my family were very certain of their capacity to give a blessing. If they had not themselves given such a blessing, they certainly knew of those who had done so. My mother surprised me with a few family stories of female relatives who had given or assisted in blessings decades ago.

As we discussed the tender nature of a mother's blessing and how many more women seem to be doing them these days, my mother expressed wistfully that she wished she had known about them earlier and been able to receive one from my grandmother. I had been reading and exploring the space of women's blessings. Many ideas crystallized for me and I felt deeply that I could stand proxy for my grandmother. I could hardly believe my ears when I heard myself say out loud, "Momma, do you want a mother's blessing? I can do it. I know how. I could stand proxy for Grandma."

There was silence. A big silence. A big, very loud silence. I had offered my straight-and-narrow mother a mother's blessing. This

was not done lightly. How had I felt such conviction and powerful a prompting forcible to overcome my anxiety at such a thought? And why was this silence so loud? I exhaled with relief and shock as she finally answered, "I would love that. But I have questions."

Mormons always have questions. A question is what kicked off this whole religion. My science brain can't handle how many questions my mother had and the non-linear path our conversations took over the next month, but here is a good summary of what they were and how I answered them. All of the following questions stemmed from the main question: Do women have the power and authority to do this?

Why did we need a restoration of priesthood?

The answer to this came from a common visual aid used with cups for family home evening and/or what was known as the third discussion in my mission era. The bottom twelve cups had the names of the apostles, and then cups with principles and ordinances were added on top, creating a lovely pyramid with the top cup displaying a picture of Christ. This was his church. The fun bit was killing off the apostles until the whole structure tumbled down, followed by some solemn statement like: "And this was the great apostasy. With the death of the apostles, no one on earth had the authority to build Christ's church, so we needed a restoration."

We needed a restoration of priesthood authority because the original line through Christ was broken in the apostasy. This is the Restoration lesson from my childhood. Priesthood in the scriptures has been associated with a patriarchal order, passed from father to son. However, there is a problem with patriarchal lines, and it is probably one of the reasons for having or requiring a written record. The problem with patriarchal lines is that they cannot be guaranteed. Paternity for most of human history has not been verifiable. This awkward fact has led to all sorts of fear-driven controls over women and their bodies, but

go Momma. If you like, I can extract and sequence the mitochondrial DNA. Frame it with something from Deseret Book.”

What do mitochondria have to do with priesthood authority?

It seems that everyone these days is spitting into test tubes and mailing their samples off to get all the juicy details of their DNA. We love to see how the genes shuffled out and what highs and lows are part of our genetic code. Most of us understand the concept of getting half of our DNA from Mom, half from Dad, and getting a brand-new combination creating a unique new person. That is nuclear DNA. It resides in the nucleus of the cell, providing our species with much needed and healthy diversity.

But there is another kind of DNA in your cells, known as mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). This DNA resides in the mitochondria and does not undergo the shuffling that nuclear DNA does with sexual recombination. Rather, it is copied and passed from parent to offspring without the drastic changes from recombination. You inherited your mtDNA from your mother, who inherited hers from her mother and so forth. Sons have their mother’s mtDNA, but they will not pass this on to their own daughters. Any mitochondria in sperm is destroyed shortly after egg fertilization. Because of this, mtDNA provides a way for us to track ancestry through females over hundreds of generations and millions of years. Mitochondria with their mtDNA provide an unbroken, matrilineal record.

When discussing by what authority this blessing could be done, I assured my mother that it was not the men’s priesthood I invoked. Those were patriarchal lines, and I would not pretend I had an ordination into these lines of authority. My priesthood was matriarchal. I carry my line of authority in every cell of my body, in an unbroken chain, without question; and I can read the code if I wish and trace back

all of my mothers. All the way back to our archetype of all women, Eve. We do not receive our priesthood by ordination; we are born with it.

In this way, matriarchal lines of authority are the most inclusive. Unlike patriarchal lines, they are not limited to only men. Every human alive has mitochondria that lets them trace their lineage back to the beginning of our species. It is not tied to gender, sex, or whether you have reproduced. You were born; therefore, you are connected and empowered.

Is it priesthood? What is a woman's priesthood?

In response to many questions regarding priesthood and women, Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, "We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be?"²

Elder Oaks clarified that priesthood is the authority and power of God. By extension, that must also be the authority and power of our Heavenly Mother. I decided to give it a name. Not the Order of Aaron, that great Old Testament wingman to Moses, or the Order of Melchizedek, mentor and life coach to Abraham, but the Order of Eve, a matriarchal priesthood, in honor of the mother of all living. I carry her mtDNA within me, and her power resides in my body.



A month after the phone call, my sister and I traveled to my mother for the blessing. That morning, I stood looking in the mirror and could see so much of my grandmother looking back at me. I look like my grandmother, more than I do my own mother. I have her sharp angles,

2. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," Apr. 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

which work great for cheekbones but not so great for noses. I wish I'd inherited that glorious red hair she was not a little vain about. Genetics are a mixed bag. I have some of her good traits and one or two of her spicier traits. But above all else, I felt her hunger to comfort and bless her daughter, my mother. When I placed my hands on my mother's head, I felt my grandmother. I felt her maternal, all-encompassing love for her child.

We headed for the woods, seeking quiet and inspiration. The morning light filtered through leaves, creating a familiar maternal orange light. I inhaled, paused, and let the exhale carry my hands upward, stretching them out until they rested gently on my mother's soft hair. My sister's hands joined mine, our eyes locked together, she gave a short nod and I bowed my head. I closed my eyes and felt the power of a thousand generations of ancestral women steady my hands. "Elizabeth Williams, having authority as an endowed woman of Christ and authority as one in your matriarchal line, I place my hands on your head and give you a mother's blessing, for and in behalf of Roberta Stevens . . ."

As I spoke, I realized that it was a mother's blessing, but also a Mother's blessing. Just as you do not need to be a father to give a blessing on behalf of Heavenly Father, so it is with a Mother's blessing. We are Their children, and our blessings are a chance to give voice to the blessings of our Heavenly Parents.

My wise mother said it best: "Oh! Our priesthood didn't need to be restored because it was never lost!" Our matriarchal lines have never been broken. Mother to daughter, that unshuffled mitochondrial DNA handed down even when we weren't aware of it. There is never a question of who the Mother is; she cannot be erased.

We are not lost. We have always carried within us the power to bless and heal. I close my eyes when I am afraid, and feel the warm orange glow of maternal safety, and whisper to myself: "Nothing is lost. We are not lost. I am not lost."

I think about the authority of the prophetess Deborah, the leadership of Miriam, the zeal of Rebekah, the grit of Mary, and the sheer force of Eve. Eve didn't wait for permission either. She trusted herself and did what was needed. She never hesitated when it came to her children. I am my Mother's daughter.

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