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Binding Earth and Heaven: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism. By Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. xiii +169 pp. cloth.

In *Binding Heaven and Earth*, sociologists Gary and Gordon Shepherd address the question of how heretical new religious movements not only attract but also maintain those who convert. “Exactly what is it that new religions actually do to preserve, and even strengthen, the faith and loyalty of their converted members when faced with concerted opposition to the promulgation of their putatively heretical beliefs and practices?” (p. 3). Taking early Mormonism as their case study, they focus on the theory and practice of patriarchal blessings in early Mormonism (1834-1845). They argue that, although patriarchal blessings were not “the only or single most important commitment mechanism,” it was a powerful one for two reasons. First, it enacted key themes in Mormon theology, such as continuing revelation and prophetic guidance, priesthood authority, continuity with the ancient Israelites, and building the kingdom of God on earth, and, second, blessings articulated the import of these beliefs in messages that were personally tailored to the individual.

The co-authors approach the study of new religions with the assumption that successful NRMs cannot be viewed simply “as the product of a single religious prodigy or prophetic oracle,” but rather as “the product of an interactive socially creative process (pp. 4, 106). The primary data for their study are chronological compilation of over 750 blessings given by the first three Presiding Patriarchs (his father, Joseph Sr., and his two brothers, Hyrum and William), which Michael Marquardt collected from a wide range of sources and published in 2007 (p. 70). Over the course of the book, the authors situate the blessings in the context of early Mormon struggles to maintain their members’ commitment in the face of conflict and opposition (ch. 2), the emergence of the office of Church Patriarch and the character of the early blessings (ch. 3), the possibilities and limits of the blessings as historical sources (ch. 4), statistical analysis of themes and subthemes in the blessings (ch. 5), gender differences in the blessings (ch. 6), and a comparison of the early blessings with blessings offered today (ch. 7).

The statistical analysis in chapters 5-6 constitutes the heart of the book. Their content analysis of a random sample of the blessings reveals that the two most common themes were “salvation and eternal life” and “lineage.” The first theme, which encompassed the most distinctive and radical aspects of Mormon theology, assured those who remained faithful of eternal life in a celestial kingdom in which they could advance through degrees of glory toward ultimate deification (78). The second most common theme, lineage, informed converts of their lineage as direct descendants of the Hebrew patriarchs and members heir of the restored covenants and promises made to God’s chosen people (79). In addition to thematic analysis by frequency, the authors analyzed themes by each of the three first patriarchs and by gender. They found that the blessings of the third patriarch, Joseph’s younger brother William, were the lengthiest and most effusive and attribute this either to differences in personality or the growth and elaboration of church doctrine (85). The authors found less difference between men’s and women’s blessings than they anticipated. While not perfectly egalitarian, the majority of major themes failed to show

significant gender differences. Among the subthemes, there were some significant differences: men disproportionately received blessings related to preaching the gospel and receiving their inheritance in Zion, while women were more likely to receive blessings in common with their husbands, blessings for health and long life, and blessings related to ministering angels (97). These differences were not too surprising, given that men alone were expected to preach and blessings for health and long life were most likely linked to the risks of child-bearing.

Overall, this is a careful study of a significant commitment mechanism within Mormonism that is not widely known or understood outside the tradition. The book is noteworthy for its focus on social processes in the formation of NRMs and specifically on mechanisms that heighten lay commitment to doctrines and practices. It develops a fruitful line of inquiry that should be considered in investigations of other NRMs and lays the foundation for the comparative study of different types of commitment mechanisms.

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