

LETTERS

Augusta Adams Cobb Young: Priesthood Holder

In response to Jonathan Stapley and Kristine Wright's article, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism" (37, no. 1 [Winter 2011]: 1–85), at least one prominent LDS woman certainly believed in the 1840s that she held priesthood.

Augusta Adams Cobb Young (Brigham Young's second plural wife) specifically stated that she held "the holy priesthood" in two contemporary documents written two months apart. Augusta, a second-tier Boston Brahmin, was not only a faith healer, but also a midwife and "doctor" who received some minimal medical training in the Salem and Boston areas. She also became an ardent opponent of Thomsonian medicine, which many of the other early Mormon doctors (male and female) espoused, such as Willard and Phineas Richards, and Patty Bartlett Sessions.

She felt that mainstream medicine, combined with common sense and priesthood blessings/faith healing were the best path, while Thom-

sonians primarily prescribed *Lobelia inflata* as an emetic panacea to induce vomiting. Augusta apparently was a founding (or at least a very early) member of the Utah Council of Health, begun in February 1849. However, she was expelled in November 1851 for two reasons. First, she vehemently insisted that simply causing sick people to vomit was not necessarily conducive to their health; and second, she publicly defended Dr. Jeter Clinton when he was being expelled from the Council of Health, apparently because he too opposed Thomsonian medicine.¹

(Note that *Lobelia inflata* is extremely high in nicotine and has psychoactive properties, making it widely used by early New England Indians as an entheogen—a drug that induces a "high" and frequently leads to encounters with "the God within." These properties would clearly make it against the modern interpretation of the Word of Wisdom.)

Before coming to Utah in 1848, Augusta wrote two significant statements indicating her belief that she held Mormon priesthood. The first

¹For Augusta's early participation in the Utah Council of Health, see Augusta Adams Cobb, Letter to Brigham Young, October 6, 1851; Augusta Adams Cobb, Letter to "the Presidentess and Her Councilors" of the Council of Health, November 4, 1851; and Augusta Adams Cobb, Letter to Brigham Young, November 20, 1851, all three in Theodore A. Schroeder Collection on Mormonism, Wisconsin State Historical Society; microfilm and scanned images in my possession.

is found in a letter she wrote in December 1847 when she returned to Boston from Nauvoo to visit family once more before making the cross-country trek. While in Boston, she wrote a long-time Mormon friend, Amey Cecilia Cooper Aldrich, who had also returned to her home in Northbridge, Massachusetts (about forty-five miles west of Boston) after having been in Nauvoo where Aldrich was sealed to Brigham Young as his thirty-fourth wife.

The letter is unique in that Augusta basically frames its first half as a kind of patriarchal blessing (minus a tribal designation)—a matriarchal blessing, as it were. The blessing ends with: “Thou shalt have powr to save thy kindred and if thous canst believe thou shalt have powr to influence your husband to sell off[f] all and gather with the Saints and go over with them next Spring, taking your Children along with you for their never will be so good and [sic] opportunity again.”²

Then Augusta *seals* the blessing as follows: “This blessing dear sister I seal upon your head ^in the name of Jesus C^ by virtue of the priesthood vested in me amen.”

Then in February 1848 from Winter Quarters, Augusta wrote out a curious document she called her “Last Will and Testament.” (She did not die until 1886.) It was actually a for-

mal plea to have her sealing for eternity (but not for time) to Brigham Young canceled, so she could be sealed by proxy to either Jesus Christ (her first priority) or failing that, to Joseph Smith. Her relationship with Brigham Young had completely deteriorated because of several issues, including jealousy because he had married some three dozen women in Nauvoo. Augusta ended her request to the First Presidency with: “I do this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by virtue of the Holy Priesthood vested in me, because I consider it necessary to my salvation, exaltation, calling and Election.”³

Here again Augusta stated that she was vested with “the Holy Priesthood.” This fascinating “will” was witnessed and signed by none other than Young’s two counselors in the First Presidency, Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards, indicating that they, too, actively believed that Augusta Adams Cobb held priesthood in 1848. (By the way, although Brigham Young rejected her several requests to be sealed to Jesus Christ, he did cancel their sealing for eternity and stood as proxy as Joseph Smith for her sealing to the founding prophet on April 14, 1848.)⁴

In future academic research and thoughtful debate on the issue of female sacerdotal and spiritual au-

²Augusta Adams Cobb, Letter to Amey C. Aldrich, December 28, 1847, Schroeder Collection.

³“The Last Will and Testament of Augusta Adams,” February 21, 1848, Brigham Young Collection, MS 1234, Box 62, fd. 6, LDS Church History Library. (I am grateful to Todd Compton for informing me of the will.) For her desire to be sealed as a polygamous wife of Jesus Christ, see Augusta Adams Cobb, Letters to Brigham Young, January 20, 1846, and February 14/16, 1851, Schroeder Collection.

thority in Mormonism, Augusta Adams Cobb's two statements must now be included, weighing heavily on the side of women's full right to

hold and use LDS priesthood.

*Connell O'Donovan
Santa Cruz, California*

⁴Sealing record of Augusta Adams Cobb Young, Brigham Young, and Joseph Smith (in Thomas Bullock's hand), MS 1234, Box 62, fd. 6, LDS Church History Library.