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DIALOGUE

# DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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# DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

*is an independent quarterly established to express Mormon culture and to examine the relevance of religion to secular life. It is edited by Latter-day Saints who wish to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought and with human experience as a whole and to foster artistic and scholarly achievement based on their cultural heritage. The journal encourages a variety of viewpoints; although every effort is made to ensure accurate scholarship and responsible judgment, the views expressed are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or of the editors.*

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# THE DIVINE FEMININE IN MORMON ART

Margaret Olsen Hemming

For the first century of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, members generally did not condone artistic renderings of deity, including those of Christ.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the mid-twentieth century that Mormon artists shifted toward portraying God, and even then did so in fairly limited ways. Laura Paulsen Howe, art curator for the Church History Museum, describes the Church's embrace of images of Jesus as "a big cultural shift."<sup>2</sup> When they did appear, Church-approved images of Christ and Heavenly Father skewed heavily toward depicting white, European-looking men in an illustrative style. In May 2020, the Church announced that meetinghouse foyers ought to display only paintings of Jesus Christ and offered a list of twenty-two approved paintings for this purpose, all of which featured Jesus Christ in this style.<sup>3,4</sup> This version of Jesus—tall, white, and bearded—is one well-known to modern viewers and widely identifiable within European art traditions. At its highest levels, the LDS Church has adopted this relatively stagnant and narrow depiction of God.

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1. Laura Paulsen Howe (LDS Church History Museum Art Curator over Global Acquisitions), discussion with author, Jan. 8, 2021.

2. Howe, discussion with author, Jan. 8, 2021.

3. "Art in Meetinghouse Foyers and Entryways to Reflect a Deeper Reverence for Jesus Christ," *Newsroom*, May 11, 2020, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/art-foyers-entryways-reverence-jesus-christ>.

4. The list of approved images has since expanded, with many images added and some removed. Laura Paulsen Howe, email message to author, July 15, 2021.

If images of Heavenly Father and Jesus within Mormon art are a relatively recent and stable development, images of Heavenly Mother are cutting-edge and creative. The sudden increase in art about the divine feminine is far more varied and diverse in its conception of deity. Although lacking official approval, Mormon artists have created numerous images of Heavenly Mother since 2012. Before then, images of Heavenly Mother were almost nonexistent.<sup>5</sup> In 2014, the art contest *A Mother Here* called for submissions of art and poetry on the subject of Heavenly Mother.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, authors McArthur Krishna and Bethany Brady Spalding published *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother*, which included dozens of images of Heavenly Mother by Mormon artists around the world. Professional and amateur artists on social media platforms have shared thousands of images of Heavenly Mother in just a few years.<sup>7</sup>

If “religion is a projection of human ideals,” as scholar Taylor Petrey has argued,<sup>8</sup> then much of Mormon art depicting God tells a story of the primacy of white masculinity. However, images of Heavenly Mother are expanding and may eventually present a challenge to this primacy.

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5. An exception to this is artist John Hafen’s “O My Father” series from 1908. The series portrayed images to accompany each set of lyrics from the Mormon hymn of that title, which includes a reference to Heavenly Mother. Hafen used his wife and daughter as models for the image depicting the words, “In the heavens are parents single? No; the thought makes reason stare! Truth is reason, truth eternal tells me I’ve a mother there.” This series was published in the August 1976 issue of the *Ensign*, available at <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1976/08/o-my-father?lang=eng>.

6. “A Mother Here: Heavenly Mother Art and Poetry Contest,” *Exponent II*, Aug. 8, 2013, <https://www.the-exponent.com/a-mother-here-heavenly-mother-art-and-poetry-contest/>.

7. A search for #heavenlymother on Instagram, for example, yields over seven thousand results at the time of writing.

8. Taylor Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (2016): 317.

It is important to consider this expansion of the images of female deity in light of another concern Petrey has articulated: that the doctrine of Heavenly Mother may be used to further solidify a highly gendered, heteronormative divinity that can be weaponized against people who are transgender, queer, single, or otherwise nonconforming to a male/female pairing.<sup>9</sup> The concern is that by focusing so heavily on gender, “Mormon feminist liberation and empowerment of Heavenly Mother has often shackled her with a new set of discursive constraints” of heteronormativity and reductive femininity.<sup>10</sup>

The search for the divine feminine in Mormon art has resulted in more diversity in conceptions of Mormon deity than have ever existed before. If, as Petrey argues, the threat of a theology of Heavenly Mother stems from “collaps[ing] the difference of women into a singular representation,”<sup>11</sup> art has already begun to offer a very different response. A broad desire for the divine feminine has prompted individual artists to see her in countless diverse ways. Petrey’s wish for a “multiplicity of interpretations without a claim to completeness or supremacy”<sup>12</sup> is a work already begun.

This paper examines sixteen pieces of artwork produced since 2014 by male and female artists around the world who have taken up the challenge to represent a divine female. The collective body of recent LDS art about Heavenly Mother reflects speculative and sometimes uncorrelated theology about her roles and responsibilities in the universe. While many images demonstrate an emphasis on ideas of her maternity, a large portion instead explores her power and authority. The collective body of art about Heavenly Mother inherently retains an

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9. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 319; Blaire Ostler, “Heavenly Mother: The Mother of All Women,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 171–81.

10. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 340.

11. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 320.

12. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 331.



interest in gender but also brings to the fore race, body type, symbols and types of power, responsibilities, and other intersections of identity. An exploration of the divine feminine need not come at the expense of gender minorities and other marginalized populations, and this particular moment in history offers an opportunity for radical creativity in artistic conceptions of Heavenly Mother. A multiplicity of the divine feminine can simultaneously give seekers the liberating theology they need while also celebrating the diversity of the human experience. It offers an opportunity for even greater “imaginative theology,” a term scholar Barbara Newman uses to describe the process of using art and literature to deepen perceptions of the divine.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, this paper presents a comparative historical context of the two divine feminine figures of Heavenly Mother and Mary as an explanation for why the diversity of art depicting Heavenly Mother exists. Heavenly Mother artwork echoes many of the artistic tropes of the Virgin, but the similarities have deeper significance. Both traditions provide a varied multiplicity of images of the divine feminine that exceed one limited category. Early art representing Mary was unauthorized by the upper echelons of Christian leadership, just as art representing Heavenly Mother has been largely created by those marginalized within the LDS Church today. The glorification of Mary and Heavenly Mother are both propelled primarily by women within their religious traditions: women with faith but no institutional power.

Mormonism is a vernacular religion, or a “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.”<sup>14</sup> Vernacular religion offers an opportunity for believers to use their art, poetry, and literature to engage in their faith. In the case of Heavenly

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13. Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 298.

14. Leonard Norman Primiano, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 44.

Mother art, this presents the potential for a conceptual framework of deity capacious enough for the diversity of God's children.

### Maternal Deity

Nineteenth-century Mormonism embraced the doctrine of Heavenly Mother and produced the Heavenly Mother poetry of Eliza R. Snow and W. W. Phelps. Speech about Heavenly Mother continued into the early twentieth century. Statements such as the First Presidency's 1909 declaration that "the universal Father and Mother" are "literally" the parents of all humankind were not uncommon at the time.<sup>15</sup> Yet by the mid-twentieth century, when Mormon artists first began creating portraits of God the Father and Jesus Christ, mentions of Heavenly Mother had become rare. Between 1930 and 1970, LDS general conference addresses included only one reference to a "Mother in Heaven."<sup>16</sup> While no official explanation for the Church's shift away from Heavenly Mother exists, many scholars attribute it to the Church leadership's desire to make the faith more mainstream and accepted within American Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

Although many signs point to the current leadership's continued interest in conforming to Christian orthodoxy, recent leaders have apparently decided that Heavenly Mother was one doctrine worth rehabilitating from the unconventional period of early Mormonism.

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15. "The Origin of Man," *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1, Nov. 1909, 78. Quoted in David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings About Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 72.

16. Charlotte Shurtz, "Heavenly Mother in the Vernacular Religion of Latter-Day Saint Women," *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 37.

17. Susanna Morrill, "Mormon Women's Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).

Between 2010 and 2019, general conference talks referenced Heavenly Mother fifty-seven times,<sup>18</sup> a notable change from the period from 1930 to 1970. Simultaneous to this renewed discussion at the highest levels of Mormonism, the general membership of the Church has also increasingly become interested in Heavenly Mother. Clearly, while the Heavenly Mother doctrine remains somewhat undefined, her place in modern Mormonism is increasingly visible. Art has been a key element of the expression of this interest. Poetry brought her into the consciousness of the nineteenth-century Mormons, and now poets and artists have led the way for twenty-first-century Mormons. This period of transitional theology has led to a burst of creativity and a diversity of depictions of her.

One dominant trend in the new art about Heavenly Mother has been to emphasize maternal roles and imagery. Perhaps the most well-known image reflecting this domesticated theology is Utah artist Caitlin Connolly's *In Their Image* (fig. 1). Originally created as the cover for the children's book *Our Heavenly Family, Our Earthly Families*,<sup>19</sup> Connolly's piece encapsulates the modern Mormon inclination to see eternity as a more celestial variant of today's nuclear families. Composed somewhat like a family photograph, Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother stand together affectionately, sharing a moment of intimacy while surveying their children. As intended, the viewer makes a direct connection between the parents they typically see in a Mormon church pew and our heavenly parents.

Like *In Their Image*, contemporary Utah artist Amber Eldredge's painting *Heavenly Parents, Heavenly Child* (fig. 2) builds a composition of a mother, father, and child. In this case, only one child is shown—with an individual halo, suggesting baby Jesus—but the surrounding

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18. LDS General Conference Corpus, available at <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>, quoted in Shurtz, "Heavenly Mother," 38.

19. McArthur Krishna and Bethany Brady Spalding, *Our Heavenly Family, Our Earthly Families* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016).

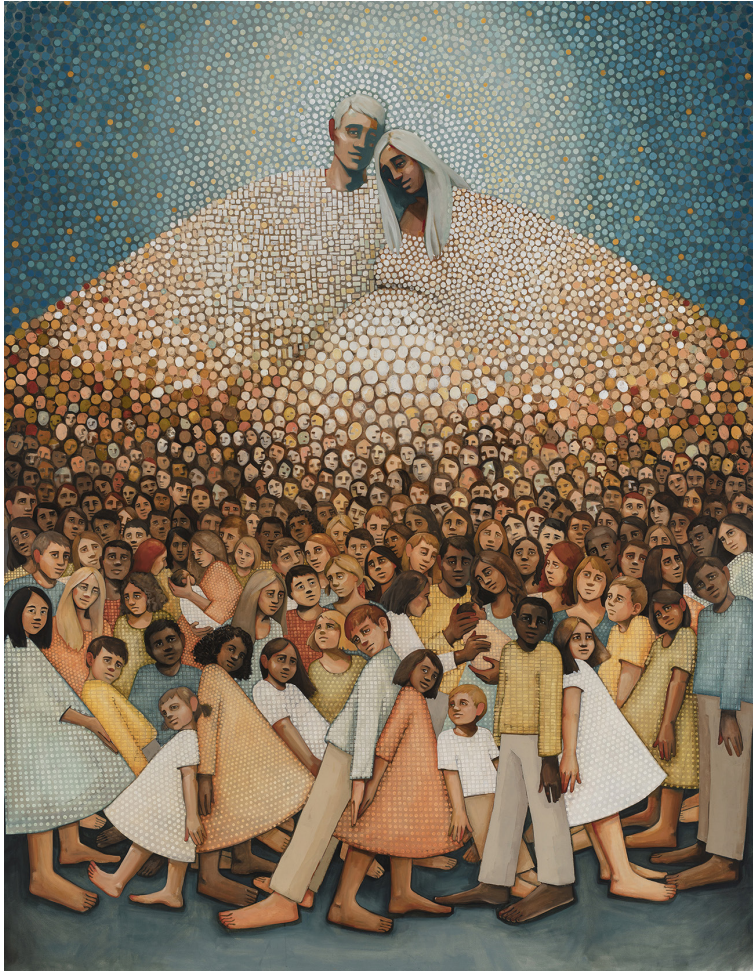


Figure 1: "In Their Image," 130" × 103" , by Caitlin Connolly, 2017

field of tulips suggest multitudes. This image draws on the iconography of the Holy Family, with Mary and Joseph standing and looking down on an infant Jesus, surrounded by divine light. Eldredge specifically describes her version of Heavenly Mother as a template for earthly mothers: "Perhaps our Mother sang, as she rocked us back and forth. They breathed in our pureness and whispered in our ear: 'You have so



Figure 2: "Heavenly Parents, Heavenly Child," 16" x 20", 2019, acrylic and ink, by Amber Eldredge, 2019

many beautiful things to do on Earth, my child."<sup>20</sup> This image expresses God as an ideal mother, making snuggling and singing to an infant a divine act.

Modern Mormons have an affinity for images of God as part of a nuclear family. There is something surprising about this for those

20. Amber Eldredge (@thecoloramber), Instagram, Nov. 4, 2019.

familiar with Mormon history, especially its earlier embrace of polygamy and open kinship practices. As scholar Samuel Brown has written, Joseph Smith's "Mormon heaven was emphatically not the Victorian hearth of the increasingly popular domestic heaven."<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Mormons of today seem to imagine heaven as a shinier version of their current wards: a collection of families, with heavenly parents teaching, playing, and working with their endless spirit children. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido note that some Mormon scholars "lament that Latter-day Saints usually acknowledge [Heavenly Mother's] existence only, without delving further into her character or roles, or portray her as merely a silent, Victorian-type housewife valued only for her ability to reproduce."<sup>22</sup> They continue: "Perhaps the most accepted and easily understood role of Heavenly Mother is her role as procreator and parent."<sup>23</sup>

These domestic depictions of the divine feminine are not unique to Mormonism. As noted previously, the history of art portraying a mother and child is widespread in Christian and non-Christian contexts. European Catholic artists "derived a great deal of pleasure from placing Mary within domestic settings."<sup>24</sup> So, too, do Mormon artists today find comfort and inspiration in deifying motherhood. For many, pairing deity with images of home life feels like the sanctuary they need in a dark world. This may be a similar desire to that of mainstream Christianity described by medieval art historian Miri Rubin as "yearnings for Mary echo that loss, the nostalgia for the sounds of childhood, the warmth of kindred bodies, for the incomparable acceptance of the

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21. Samuel Brown, "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (2011): 26.

22. Paulsen and Pulido, "A Mother There," 75.

23. Paulsen and Pulido, "A Mother There," 76.

24. Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 358.

maternal embrace.”<sup>25</sup> The divine feminine as a perfect, divine parent reflects an idealized, impossible version of family life, but one that people around the world have clung to for millennia.

Christian artists have historically signaled deity through giving God the tokens and items of local political power.<sup>26</sup> What are the signs of power for modern Mormons? In a religion dominated by teachings about the heteronormative family, it makes sense that divinity would be denoted through parenthood. Thus, images of deity as parents do not only reflect how our faith interprets the role and purpose of God—they also signal to the viewer God’s power and nobility.

### Cosmic Creator

The “cosmic creator” category of LDS art includes images in which the divine feminine is situated as an author and manager of the universe. These paintings frequently include stars or other astronomical signs that point to her power. Within this category are images that partner Heavenly Mother with Heavenly Father as well as those in which she stands alone, a goddess in her own right. The Mormon art depicting Heavenly Mother as a cosmic creator draws on works depicting the assumption of Virgin Mary. These works portray Mary as “a partner of Christ,” working in tandem with him throughout his ministry. She is “an agent” unto herself, important not just for her maternal role but for her spiritual power.<sup>27</sup>

Utah artist J. Kirk Richards’s painting *God Made Two Great Lights* (fig. 3) from his series *After Our Likeness* is an example of the

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25. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 363.

26. “Thus, Italian painters gave God a papal robe and hat; Germans offered the imperial robes of an emperor; while the French God had an exalted kingly crown.” Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages*, translated by E. J. Millington (London: Henry G. Bohn), 224.

27. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 379.



Figure 3: "God Made Two Great Lights," 10" x 20", oil on panel, by J. Kirk Richards, 2017

astronomical setting for Heavenly Mother. This series of more than a dozen paintings follows the first two chapters of the book of Genesis and features multiple images of heavenly parents creating the world together. The two gods work in partnership, blowing life into their creations and rejoicing at what they have made. While each figure is clearly identifiable as male or female, their roles are not gendered in any way.





Figure 4: "Equal in Might and Glory," 30" x 30", acrylic and gold foil on canvas, by Heather Ruttan, 2019

Although no stars or planets appear in Canadian artist Heather Ruttan's *Equal in Might and Glory* (fig. 4), I place her image in this loose category as well. This illustration is significant in the way it demonstrates Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother as precisely equal: they are the same height, wear the same clothing, and each takes up exactly half of the image. This piece also deserves attention for depicting heavenly parents as a mixed-race couple, taking one step in filling a yawning void in Mormon images of deity.

Of paintings of Heavenly Mother featured alone and as a creator, Santa Clara Pueblo Indian artist Kwani Povi Winder's *Welcome Home*



Figure 5: "Welcome Home," 16" × 14", oil and metal leaf on linen panel, by Kwani Povi Winder, 2019

(fig. 5) stands out as particularly compelling. Like other Christian artists, Winder depicts deity with the tokens of power belonging to her own culture: Heavenly Mother, modeled after the artist's mother, wears the robe, headdress, and jewelry of a Pueblo Indian. The angles, circles, and swirls of her halo are a mix of Pueblo and LDS temple symbolism.<sup>28</sup>

28. Kwani Povi Winder, discussion with author, Oct. 1, 2021.

In doing so, Winder not only questions the typical Mormon assumptions about the race and gender of God but also pushes back on traditional notions of what signifies power. Rather than a priestly hat or kingly robe, objects associated with the most authoritative figures in certain societies, she uses items belonging to a group of people who have been disenfranchised and systematically marginalized. The effect of reclaiming these symbols is to insist on power that defies patriarchal limitations and sources in favor of the power of Indigenous ancestry and female family connections.

This kind of respect for a divine feminine as creator and guide is also found within Mormon teachings of Heavenly Mother. *The Women of Mormondom*, edited by Eliza R. Snow, “affirms that the ‘eternal Mother [is] the partner with the Father in the creation of worlds.’”<sup>29</sup> Charlotte Shurtz has found that modern Mormon women hold similar beliefs today; her interviews with Mormon women about Heavenly Mother revealed an almost universal belief that Heavenly Mother helped create the world.<sup>30</sup>

### Ineffable Divinity

Despite Mormonism’s traditional reliance on realistic illustration, a growing number of artists are exploring Heavenly Mother through non-representational art that uses symbols to convey a concept or entity. Perhaps drawing on the long-standing struggle to adequately depict deity in a single human figure, these artists’ use of shapes and symbols invoke a limitless divinity. They offer a potential future in which God transcends the social constructs that typically undergird Mormon artistic renderings of the divine.

London-based American artist Lisa DeLong’s *The Key of Knowledge* (fig. 6) is one of the most extraordinary examples of this type

29. Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), quoted in Paulsen and Pulido, “A Mother There,” 80.

30. Shurtz, “Heavenly Mother,” 41–42.

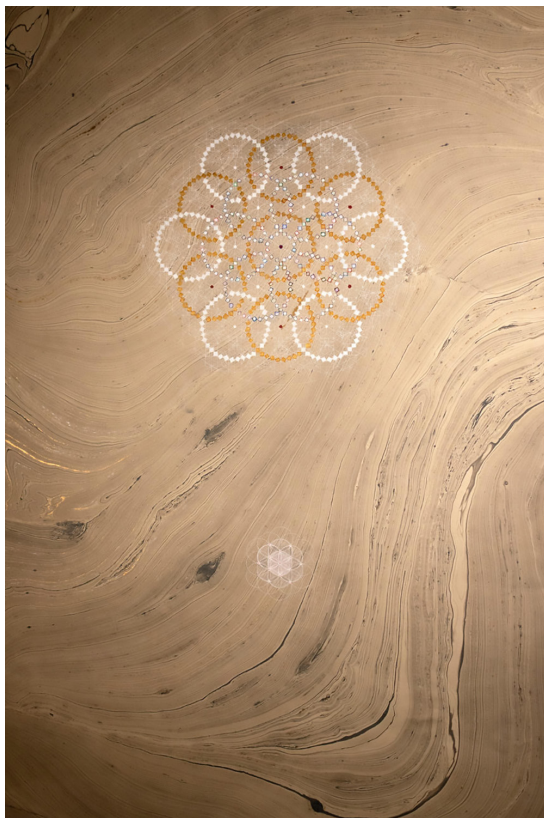


Figure 6: "The Key of Knowledge," 22" × 33", gold leaf, watercolor, gouache, and ink on handmade marbled paper, by Lisa DeLong, 2019

of religious art. DeLong's art, which exclusively uses geometric shapes and patterns, is more reminiscent of traditional Islamic art than European Christian art. The repeating and interlocking circles, set against a swirl of motion that mimics the wood grain of a tree, subtly references traditional symbols of the female divine without settling on one way of depicting her.<sup>31</sup> The viewer can interpret the image in any way she

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31. The tree is an ancient symbol of the goddess Asherah, as described by Daniel Peterson in "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–26 and 80–81, and by Fiona Givens in "'The Perfect Union of Man and Woman': Reclamation and Collaboration in Joseph Smith's Theology Making," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 1–26.

chooses, which gives space to question just how relatable and human an unknowable deity could be.

American software engineer and digital artist Ben Crowder has also done a series of works about heavenly parents that embraces abstraction. In *Their Work and Their Glory* (fig. 7), he references the idea of two separate beings in partnership through an image of two triangles—one with the point up and one with the point down—fitted together to form a parallelogram. Unlike most other Mormon art images, the beings in *Their Work and Their Glory* are un-gendered and unidentifiable. Though together they form a unified shape, they each maintain their own separate individuality.

By producing work in which Heavenly Mother is represented through symbols, artists like Lisa DeLong and Ben Crowder as well as



Figure 7: "Their Work and Their Glory," digital, by Ben Crowder, 2020

Paige Crosland Anderson, McArthur Krishna, Claire Tollstrup, Katrina Berg, and Katie Payne allow the viewer to imagine her with or without social constructions. These are perhaps the most radical works on deity in all of Mormon art and highly unusual in a faith that has traditionally embraced realism and illustration.

### Diversity in Collectivity

Many artists are eagerly constructing an artistic intersectional analysis of Heavenly Mother. Artists such as Melissa Tshikamba, Michelle Franzoni Thorley, J. Kirk Richards, Esther Hi'ilani Candari, Michelle Gessell, Kwani Povi Winder, Amber Lee Weiss, Heather Ruttan, and Arawn Billings have painted Heavenly Mother as Black, Latina, Polynesian, Asian, Native American, and other races and ethnicities.<sup>32</sup> The racial diversity of images of Heavenly Mother is far greater than for Mormon images of Heavenly Father. Without commotion, Mormon artists have started an intersectional feminist theological revolution: in a space where God has consistently been portrayed as a white man, they have offered numerous images of God as a woman of color. Evidence of the institutional Church's growing acceptance of this kind of Heavenly Mother art is the decision of Brigham Young University, the LDS Church History Museum, and the Church-owned bookstore Deseret Book to carry *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother*, which includes many racially diverse images of a divine feminine.

Canadian artist Melissa Tshikamba's *Breath of Life* (fig. 8) stands out as an example of the artist's devotion to a Black female goddess, one whose power is intrinsic to life on earth. "Many of my paintings incorporate spiritual symbolism and people of color to give solace to those who don't see themselves reflected in spiritual art," Tshikamba

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32. In addition to gratitude to the artists involved, I would like to recognize McArthur Krishna and Bethany Brady Spalding for commissioning and encouraging some of these images for their book *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother* (Portland, Ore.: D Street Press, 2020).



Figure 8: "Breath of Life," 11" x 15", watercolor ink and gold leaf on paper, by Melissa Tshikamba, 2020

has written.<sup>33</sup> In this painting, the golden halo of divinity is echoed in the gold earring, a reminder of how Heavenly Mother is both universally omniscient and personally known to an individual. Tshikamba explains, "I often depict gold or circles in my artwork, which to me are symbolic of divinity, royalty, and nature."<sup>34</sup> Tshikamba has combined

33. Melissa T. Kamba, Facebook, Feb. 21, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/tshikamba/posts/3535869799819899/>.

34. "Melissa Tshikamba: Feeling God's Love By Looking at a Painting" *Exponent II* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 15–17.

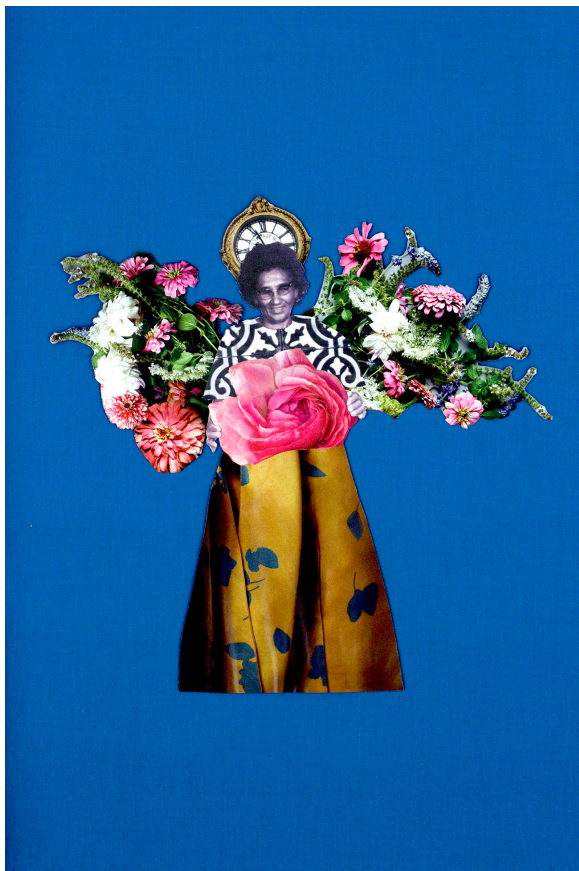


Figure 9: "Romana,"  
9" x 9", hand-cut  
collage, by Amber  
Lee Weiss, 2019

her interest in race and gender to produce a feminine divine that appeals to the intersections of her identity.

In the collage piece *Romana* (fig. 9), Amber Lee Weiss uses her Native American family history as a direct template for a divine mother. Along with wings made of flowers and a halo made from a clock, Weiss gives her Heavenly Mother the face of her own great-grandmother, who, Weiss writes, "was a mother to all."<sup>35</sup> In making this art, Weiss took the doctrine of Heavenly Mother and personalized it to her own family, her ancestry, and her ethnicity.

35. Amber Lee Weiss (@amberbelieves), Instagram, June 14, 2020.



Besides racial and ethnic diversity, artists depicting Heavenly Mother have chosen a variety of ages. Mormon images of God the Father and Jesus typically depict a generational age difference, with both figures between the ages of approximately forty to sixty-five. To my knowledge, there are no Mormon images of Heavenly Father below the age of approximately fifty, as artists have generally accepted the tradition of depicting him in the role of a father to an adult man. In contrast, images of Heavenly Mother are flexible about her age. In *Romana* (fig. 9), the divine feminine appears approximately in her sixties, while Melissa Tshikamba's *Breath of Life* (fig. 8) goddess is likely in her twenties or early thirties. Heather Ruttan has portrayed her multiple times



Figure 10: "Mother,"  
18" x 36", oil on canvas, by  
Jenedy Paige, 2019

as an elderly woman, while Jenedy Paige's interpretation in *Mother* (fig. 10) places her as a very young woman, possibly younger than twenty.

Artistic representations of the divine feminine are also adopting a variety of body types to represent diversity. Some Mormon artists have portrayed Heavenly Mother as strikingly tall and thin, such as in Courtney Vander Veur Matz's *Mother Divine* or Eliza Crofts's *Sophia*. Body type is impossible to analyze in *Romana* (fig. 9) and *Breath of Life* (fig. 8)—the former because the medium of collage obscures the body and the latter because it is a bust. However, the general observable trend is toward a median body type, such as in Cambodian artist Sopheap Nhem's *Heavenly Mother* (fig. 11) or Kwani Povi Winder's *Welcome*



Figure 11: "Heavenly Mother," 34" x 30", oil on canvas, by Sopheap Nhem, 2015

*Home* (fig. 5). Possibly because of the constructed role of motherhood, she is occasionally given a soft postpartum belly and round hips, such as in Jenedy Paige's *Mother* (fig. 10). This body type reinforces her maternal identity.

Only a few artists have ventured images of a fat or plump deity, including Heather Ruttan and Michelle Franzoni Thorley. In her untitled Instagram post from April 27, 2020 (fig. 12), Ruttan overtly ties this divine feminine to the body positivity movement, giving further evidence of the ways in which images of Heavenly Mother empower women. She wrote on the post, "Here is my little attempt to celebrate bodies that change without permission, they are still precious and



Figure 12: "Untitled," digital, by Heather Ruttan, 2020



Figure 13: "Diosa," 26" x 22", oil on canvas, by Michelle Franzoni Thorley, 2019

irreplaceable.”<sup>36</sup> Franzoni Thorley expressed similar thoughts in an explanation of her piece *Diosa* (fig. 13). “The images that existed of her were always of a very slender woman. That’s when I began to think ‘What if she has full round hips and tummy?’ And so you see her here full and round because big bodies are divine bodies too.”<sup>37</sup> This area of body diversity deserves greater exploration from Mormon artists, but again, existing images of Heavenly Mother are more diverse in this category than those of Heavenly Father, who consistently appears tall and fit.

36. Heather Ruttan (@ettakay.art), Instagram, Apr. 27, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_gJKz-hbsO/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_gJKz-hbsO/).

37. Franzoni Thorley (@florafamiliar), Instagram, July 29, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDOvjG9Bczu/>.

Besides the body of the divine feminine, landscape is another way of representing diversity. Mormon artists from around the world have created work on Heavenly Mother, frequently placing her in localized surroundings or with items and symbols familiar to their native culture. Artists such as Sopheap Nhem (Cambodia), Joumana Borderie (Lebanon/France), Richard Lasisi Olagunju (Nigeria), Louise Parker (South Africa), Susana Isabel Silva (Argentina), Haylee Ngaroma Solomon (New Zealand), and Sherron Valeña Crisanto (Philippines/Qatar) have all contributed diverse images to the canon of Heavenly Mother art. The stylistic differences and varied settings offer viewers a way of reimagining deity and breaking down assumptions about the clothing, accessories, and surrounding environment of God. For example, in *Heavenly Mother* (fig. 11), Nhem depicts a medium-sized, middle-aged southeast Asian woman wearing traditional Cambodian clothing, including a golden skirt, embroidered blouse with gold thread, a gold belt, and a pink and gold scarf wrapped around her shoulders. She also wears a traditional Cambodian tiara, signaling royalty or divinity. In comparison, Olagunju's *Goodly Parents* (fig. 14), made of intricate beadwork, includes a border of patterns typically found in West African textiles. Both Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother wear a dashiki, a colorful garment with embroidered collars found across Africa and the African diaspora. Heavenly Mother's hair appears to be in locks or braids, a powerful symbol for Black women claiming power through natural hair. The twelve pieces of hair represent the twelve tribes of Israel, which is unusual and forceful symbolism for a female figure.<sup>38</sup> The geometric shapes of the bodies are reminiscent of ancient carved figures. In this colorful piece, age is obscured, but the bodies of the masculine and feminine are almost identical in size and height, with the divine feminine figure only slightly thinner. Nhem's and Olagunju's versions of Heavenly Mother are radically different in concept, style, and medium. Yet both make bold statements about their ancestral legacy and what is inherently divine.

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38. Richard Olagunju, email discussion with author, Nov. 30, 2021.



Figure 14: "Goodly Parents," 28" x 40", coral beads on wood, by Richard Lasisi Olagunju, 2019

The parameters of gender diversity in depictions of Heavenly Mother art have been more flexible than that of Heavenly Father and Jesus. The male deities are depicted as masculine through bodily representation, including the almost universal use of beards. Historical images of



Figure 15: "Scent of Stardust," 7" × 12" × 1", fabric, polyfill, and acrylic paint, by Annie Poon, 2019

the Virgin Mary likewise emphasized her femininity, with long hair, a graceful body, and intense focus on her breasts.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, images of Heavenly Mother frequently do not overtly signal narrow indicators of gender. Her clothes are often loose-fitting, giving no indication of the contours of her breasts, waist, or hips. This can be seen in images such as

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39. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 211.

*Romana* (fig. 9), *Goodly Parents* (fig. 14), *Equal in Might and Glory* (fig. 4), or Annie Poon's *The Scent of Stardust* (fig. 15). In contrast, *Breath of Life* (fig. 8), *Diosa* (fig. 13), *Mother* (fig. 10), and *Heavenly Mother* (fig. 11) are more overtly feminized with the use of long hair, slender features, and/or clothing that emphasizes the breasts, belly, and/or hips.

Self-identifying queer artists including Eliza Crofts and Charlotte Shurtz have offered their own versions of Heavenly Mother. Shurtz describes Heavenly Mother as a “core doctrine” of LDS theology<sup>40</sup> and has written that because “it is impossible to become like someone we don't know, we must have knowledge of not just God the Father but also God the Mother to gain salvation and exaltation.”<sup>41</sup> Shurtz's depictions of Heavenly Mother do not include any overt signals of a queer Heavenly Mother, but Shurtz intends for them to be understood that way. “Frida's Heavenly Mother” (fig. 16), a collage bust of a middle-aged Black woman with a wreath of flowers and white clothing, is “absolutely” a lesbian goddess, according to Shurtz.<sup>42</sup> Asked if it was important that viewers see “Frida's Heavenly Mother” as queer, Shurtz said, “It matters that we think she could be, that we consider that as a valid option. It's not just straight people or cisgendered people who have divinity within them. It's important that we tell a wide variety of narratives about God . . . because those narratives inform us of who is worthy of love.”<sup>43</sup> Shurtz's artwork is meant to prompt viewers to see a

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40. Charlotte Scholl Shurtz, “Tackling Heavenly Mother Myths: Why She Is a Core Doctrine,” *Seeking Heavenly Mother* (blog), Nov. 4, 2019, <https://seekingheavenlymother.com/blog/charlotte-shurtz-myth-4/>.

41. Charlotte Scholl Shurtz, “Tackling Heavenly Mother Myths: Knowing Her is Essential to Our Salvation and Exaltation,” *Seeking Heavenly Mother* (blog), Sept. 30, 2019, <https://seekingheavenlymother.com/blog/charlotte-shurtz-myth-3/>.

42. Charlotte Scholl Shurtz, discussion with author, Aug. 11, 2021.

43. Shurtz, discussion with author, Aug. 11, 2021.





Figure 16: "Frida's Heavenly Mother," 11" x 16", paper collage, by Charlotte Scholl Shurtz, 2019

queer identity in the divine, which is part of seeing the divine in a queer identity.

These new representations are innovating by adapting Heavenly Mother to twenty-first-century global Mormon contexts. But they also reflect a tension between traditional images that represent her as

a “perfect mother,” accompanied by husband and children, and those that are seeking new images of womanhood. As described earlier, modern LDS artists have depicted her in a wide variety of body types, races, and ages. They have also portrayed her as a goddess in her own right, a cosmic creator, and a co-founder of the world. Some artists have nodded to the ineffability of deity, bucking the Mormon tradition of literalism and perhaps inviting a reconsideration of gender dualism. In 2016, Taylor Petrey wrote, “While LDS tradition has a plurality of male characters to resolve the problem of a singular masculinity through multiplicity, perhaps there is no corresponding plurality for female representation in the case of Heavenly Mother.”<sup>44</sup> In the few years since Petrey’s critique, a new realm of Mormon art has countered this claim by offering images of deity that reveal greater multiplicity in gender performance for the divine feminine than for the divine masculine. Images of Heavenly Mother have brought some mild increased diversity in location and aesthetic to images of Heavenly Father through art that pairs the two figures together and challenges typical stylistic norms. Yet depictions of Heavenly Mother are still far more diverse than images of Heavenly Father with regard to age, race, ethnicity, and body type. One reason for this difference is Mormonism has generally adopted a narrow artistic aesthetic regarding God the Father’s appearance.

At the same time, the artistic stretching to depict the divine feminine has had another effect on LDS art in the representation of divine maleness. For LDS artists today imagining how to depict Heavenly Mother, there is no clear art historical precedent to depict her divinity. Images of Heavenly Mother produced in the last five years frequently include Heavenly Father. Artworks such as *In Their Image* (fig. 1), *God Made Two Great Lights* (fig. 3), and *Equal in Might and Glory* (fig. 4) have made waves within Mormon circles for their depictions of Heavenly Mother. But they also break an important, if unofficial, stricture by showing Heavenly Father outside of the Sacred Grove and without

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44. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 315–41.

Jesus. Artists' work in the genre of Heavenly Mother has not only broadened the Mormon conception of a divine feminine but also prompted more diverse interpretations of the divine masculine.

### Vernacular Religion

As these examples have shown, LDS images of the divine feminine have been freer to invent new ideas by departing from the uniformity of male deities in Christian art history and its LDS branch. How might we explain this? Diversity in Heavenly Mother art is fueled by the unsanctioned nature of the topic as an expression of vernacular religion. This rise in artistic diversity parallels the diverse art representing the Virgin Mary, also a figure of popular religious representation. Miri Rubin's book *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* provides a sweeping study of Mary's emergence as a powerful religious figure from the earliest years of Christianity through the seventeenth century. Rubin describes how early devotees used art, music, and literature to endow Mary with divine power while also adapting her image to local cultures. The theological and artistic evolution of Christianity's most significant feminine figure provides an interesting comparison for understanding the development of art about Mormonism's Heavenly Mother.

For the first thousand years of Christianity, the question of what role Mary ought to play in devotion hung over religious life. Debates about her divinity, her purpose and roles, and her attributes engaged scholars, priests, and lay members. The propriety of venerating a feminine figure was one of the most controversial issues. Mary disrupted traditional male religious power. She was, as Rubin describes, "a mystery of divinity touching earth, an unexpected female intrusion upon the stage of male world power."<sup>45</sup> In the religious world, a powerful divine feminine figure posed a potential threat to the primacy of masculinity.

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45. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 48.

Unlike God the Father, Mary seemed approachable and adaptable to a variety of devotees, from laity to monastics and clergy. These devotees saw her as an advocate before a stern deity. Rubin suggests that “Mary’s power in the lives of many Europeans emerged from familiarity and accessibility, not from rarity and distance.”<sup>46</sup> She could inhabit any role that those searching for a female divine wanted: a perfect virgin, perfect mother, Queen of Heaven, and daily companion all in one figure. People—particularly women—felt that Mary understood them, identified with them, and could offer them solace in a way that was more personable than a distant Father God. “In her was to be found a niche for every type of woman: young maiden, chaste widows, hard-pressed housewife, leisured bookish reader, the shy as well as the outgoing, the tongue-tied and the eloquent. In her figure were already engrained the possibilities of silence as well as song, modesty as well as majesty, innocence as well as wisdom. Each and every Christian could find a place in Mary.”<sup>47</sup> Mary’s ability to adapt to a multiplicity of feminine roles and types made her appealing for a wide variety of faithful women.

Mary’s popularity extended to the art world as well, from high art to folk devotion. The most influential early text of Marian fervor, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*,<sup>48</sup> took the form of a guidebook for religious lay women. Medieval nuns were also devoted to Mary and created dolls, handwork, and paintings to express their faith.<sup>49</sup> As she grew into a global icon, depictions of Mary varied according to the local culture. Images of Mary became part of devotional family life, inspired women religious in convents, and welcomed people to churches and cathedrals. This was truly a broad spectrum of the devoted: men and women, old

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46. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 199.

47. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 215–16.

48. Probably written by Franciscan John of Caulibus, c. 1300.

49. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 261.

and young, educated and unlearned, pious and mildly devoted.<sup>50</sup> Europeans of all sorts depicted her as a reflection of themselves.

Mary images not only echoed the diversity of European life, they also adapted to every new nation where Christianity spread. Missionaries and traders carried her with them to all parts of the globe. People from around the world saw Mary in themselves, and therefore saw themselves in Mary. In Ethiopia, artists sometimes gave Mary “elongated oriental eyes,” while in Macao adherents blended her with the Buddhist following of Guanyin. In Japan her image mixed with that of Kannon, a divine feminine figure forbidden by the feudal military government that ruled from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.<sup>51</sup>

In a broad survey of art history, Mary has been one of the most variable and widely reproduced figures in the history of religious iconography. This should, perhaps, be unsurprising: mother-and-child imagery is one of the most pervasive forms in all of art history. As Rubin notes, “Jesus was a god who had been mothered,” and regions that already had traditions of a female divine in a maternal role easily adapted and adopted Christ and Mary for their own use.<sup>52</sup> But there are other reasons for her popularity. Devotional art of the divine feminine is driven by the desires of the faithful who are outside of traditional patriarchal authority. Mary’s ubiquity and adaptability then went hand in hand, as she came to not only represent a particular biblical character but to provide another path for connecting a whole range of devotees to the divine. The new art portraying Heavenly Mother draws on some of these same themes as an expression of vernacular religion.

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50. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 261.

51. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 357.

52. Rubin, *Mother of God*, 40–42. One excellent example Rubin shares of this pattern is that of Isis, “mother-goddess of procreation, childbirth, and fertility” in ancient Egypt. As Christianity spread through Egypt, traditions about Isis merged with Jewish concepts of wisdom and Christian devotion to a mother God.

## Conclusion

Mormon art has for many decades depicted God the Father and Jesus as white, tall, physically fit, and bearded, with Heavenly Father slightly older or close to the same age as Jesus.<sup>53</sup> The Mormon representation of Heavenly Mother as it has emerged in the last decade has differed greatly from this norm. Instead of a single identifiable image, art about Heavenly Mother has, to a great extent, followed the route of medieval European Christian depictions of Mary: adaptable, localized, imaginative, and fluctuating. This is in part because the Mormon adoption of images of deity in temples and chapels coincided with a shift away from the doctrine of Heavenly Mother, resulting in a lack of an official version of her. It also seems to stem from artists' desires to see her in themselves, a force for expanding the types of images created.

The increase in official and grassroots discussion of Heavenly Mother is welcome to many Mormons, particularly Mormon women. For a group that often feels disenfranchised and powerless, Heavenly Mother offers a hope for relief by providing a template for a future in the eternities. Mormon women of diverse backgrounds and beliefs frequently speak of the importance of Heavenly Mother to their testimonies and sense of self. In a deeply patriarchal world and church, the recognition of a female God opens theological possibilities that otherwise feel unthinkable.

Yet this doctrine also comes with a potential for harm. Criticism of the Heavenly Mother doctrine points out the ways in which she has been used in conjunction with Heavenly Father to promote a heteronormative deity, to the exclusion of queer, trans, childfree, and single people. By reinforcing a strict gender binary, the Heavenly Father/

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53. A good sampling of work by LDS artists depicting God the Father and Jesus Christ together can be found at "Artistic Interpretations of the First Vision," Church History, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/exhibit/first-vision-art?lang=eng>.

Heavenly Mother pairing imagines a deity that makes claim to offering global representation but actually ignores the multiplicity of lived experiences for human genders. As Petrey has argued, “The exclusive focus on sexual difference as the only difference in the divine—and thus the focus on masculine and feminine characters in theology—runs the risk of re-inscribing dualistic, structuralist hierarchies rather than challenging the gender politics of culture. Mormon feminists’ idealization of women and absolutization of sexual difference have yet to confront in theoretical terms the question of an exclusionary logic within the ideal.”<sup>54</sup> This is particularly problematic if Mormons embrace a strict, narrow version of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother that prohibits a wide diversity of interpretations. Petrey continues, “The lack of intersectional analysis in Mormon feminist depictions of Heavenly Mother obscures the realities that human beings are not just sexed, but manifest in different ages, races, and sexualities, as well as class and nationality, all of which are mediated culturally and historically on the body.”<sup>55</sup> Without an investment in theological work that addresses the social constructs that typically limit Mormon discussion of deity, any effort to further elevate the doctrine of Heavenly Mother threatens to comfort and inspire only a limited population. The stricter, narrower, and more stable our collective understanding of deity, the fewer people who can see themselves in God.

Recent art has offered a potential solution to this problem. The vernacular quality to Mormonism presents an opportunity for members of the faith to impact theology through what they create and how they engage. At this moment, a window is open for artists and authors to construct Heavenly Mother in abundant multiplicity. The taboo on discussion about her has begun to lift, though a clear theology and concept about her is not yet in place. Without calcified interpretations

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54. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 326.

55. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 332.

of a divine feminine, artists are interpreting her in a wide diversity of races, ages, genders, nationalities, body types, and roles. These artists have begun to offer a collection of images that simultaneously reflect the diversity of the human experience while preserving her authority and power. This kind of theological work benefits the entire faith community. The more images of deity that emerge in all different kinds of roles and types, the more we can collectively broaden our ideas of who God is and who has the divine within them. It is my personal hope that artists will even more enthusiastically reimagine deity in all kinds of forms, embracing the expansive God Mormonism deserves.

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"Children Raised in the Mother Tree,"  
by Page Turner, 2021

# IN DEFENSE OF HEAVENLY MOTHER: HER CRITICAL IMPORTANCE FOR MORMON CULTURE AND THEOLOGY

Margaret Toscano

## Introduction

Does the existence of the Heavenly Mother in Mormon theology promote heteronormativity that marginalizes gender nonconforming individuals? If so, why does the divine female, but not the divine male, bear the bulk of the blame for this marginalization? Why has her body and not his increasingly become the battleground over the nature and meaning of sex and gender for persons both human and divine in Latter-day Saint discourse and practice?

Though she has achieved acceptance in Mormon theology and culture, Mother in Heaven is still marginalized by the LDS Church. She is mostly absent in church worship and everyday orthodox practice and primarily referenced not as an individual deity but as one of the heavenly parents, a vague designation that subsumes her into a divine patriarchal family, serving as model for the 1995 “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As a result, her nature, dignity, and godhood remain vague in mainstream Mormon discourse because her status is uncertain, her role in creation and redemption is undefined, and because even her weakened standing in Mormon theology has been used by Evangelicals as an argument that Mormons are not fully Christian. In addition, many LDS women, orthodox and feminist alike, have long worried that Heavenly Mother is emblematic of nineteenth-century LDS apostle Orson Pratt’s version of a polygamist godhead consisting

of a Heavenly Father joined to multiple heavenly mothers who are eternally pregnant and, like queen bees, forever reproducing offspring not in a matriarchal hive but in a patriarchal kingdom. In their 2020 article, “‘Mother in Heaven’: A Feminist Perspective,” which is a response to the LDS Gospel Topics essay on this subject, Caroline Kline and Rachel Hunt Steenblik point to hopeful, recent developments that work toward “dismantling cultural silence,” “legitimizing as authoritative church doctrine” positive statements about the divine female, and using capital letters and the singular in the printed term “Heavenly Mother.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the authors argue that the Church’s short essay does not go far enough to establish Heavenly Mother’s godhood or her nature and standing in LDS practice and theology.

Recently, scholars with progressive views have also questioned depictions and possibly the value of Mother in Heaven, arguing that she promotes heteronormative sexuality that privileges just one image of “woman.” In “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” Taylor G. Petrey criticizes certain Mormon scholars (namely, Janice Allred, Valerie Hudson Cassler, and me): “Mormon feminists writing about Heavenly Mother have been complicit in heteronormative narratives that universalize a subset of women as the hypostasis of ‘woman.’”<sup>2</sup> Petrey’s concern has become the center of LGBTQ gender critique in current LDS theological discussions where the Mother God, rather than her male counterpart, is seen as the culpable party. This new liberal critique accepts as normative the LDS Church’s simplistic view of Heavenly Mother as supportive wife of a presiding patriarchal Heavenly Father, as a female figure whose presence reinforces the structure of the conservative nuclear family that the LDS Church now projects into the

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1. Caroline Kline and Rachel Hunt Steenblik, “‘Mother in Heaven’: A Feminist Perspective,” in *The LDS Gospel Topics Series: A Scholarly Engagement*, edited by Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020), 321.

2. Taylor G. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (2016): 16.

eternities. Consequently, Mother in Heaven has become a stumbling block for many people.

In this essay, I will interrogate the views and arguments surrounding Heavenly Mother advocated in Mormon discourse on both the right and the left. I do not have space to answer and explore all the questions raised above. Instead, I will focus on the place where mainstream and liberal discourses converge, namely on Heavenly Mother's role as the wife of the Father God and the mother of his children. I will challenge both current Church teachings as well as Petrey's simplified summary of my past work. I have explored multiple nuanced images and figures that represent the female divine, such as a trinity of Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit who parallel the male godhead in form and function and who "have been intimately involved in our creation, redemption, and spiritual well-being" from the beginning.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I will highlight Mary, Wisdom, and the Holy Ghost or Comforter as central manifestations of God the Mother who reveal her divine wisdom, justice, mercy, and love, not merely her subordinate role in the patriarchal family unit. Multiple presentations of the Mother God rooted in Mormon texts challenge the view that she merely reinforces one kind of essentialized woman or mother. On the contrary, her many roles present a polymorphous divinity who makes room for gender nonconforming people.

I understand the desire of some to eliminate, as much as possible, an embodied, gendered God with physical characteristics such as skin color or sex on grounds that those who share those specifics with God are privileged over those who do not. A God beyond human attributes resolves such problems, but a totally other God introduces difficulties too. It echoes the ancient prescriptions of many early Christian fathers,

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3. Margaret Merrill Toscano, "Put on Your Strength O Daughters of Zion: Claiming Priesthood and Knowing the Mother," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 427, where I focus on Eve, Mary, the Holy Spirit, Sophia, Zion, and the Bride.

who did not want to limit the divine in any way and taught that God was totally other, totally transcendent, totally beyond human attributes. Such teachings took hold as orthodox and resulted in the denigration of the physical realm, of the earth, of the human body—especially the female body of Eve, the original sinner, and of womankind in general. But they failed to erase the maleness of the God of Spirit. The disembodied God of Western philosophical theology has always disempowered women.<sup>4</sup>

The Mormon doctrine of God as an embodied, gendered, glorified, anthropomorphic personage was intended to correct the orthodox view. Joseph Smith's theology puts the physical creation on an equal footing with the spiritual. It presents body and spirit, matter and mind as inextricably connected and equally necessary for a fullness of joy (D&C 93:33). Physicality has always been central to Mormon belief. Its authoritative texts, sacred ordinances, and practices are too committed to embodiment to allow for the elimination of God's resurrected, material male body, which is now a permanent fixture of the Mormon worldview. This means that if the spiritual realm, like the physical realm, is a venue for bodies, heaven must necessarily be a place for all the permutations and varieties of bodies that can exist along the gender spectrum to empower all.

Though an idealistic theology that posits a God beyond male and female may seek to avoid the complex problems of gender and sexuality, a practical and effective theology will confront and deal with the complexities of physicality and not sidestep them in the hope that some vague notion of a hereafter will eventually release us from the problems that burden us in the here and now. Mormon theologians must wrestle with the reality of physicalism while actively promoting equality, spirituality, and diversity. For this reason, Mormonism should not abandon or marginalize the embodied Heavenly Mother as the coequal

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4. See Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 31.

counterpart of the embodied Heavenly Father. To do so at this stage of Mormon history in the hope of promoting the laudable goal of gender equality and diversity would not only exchange the problems of Mormonism's concept of divine physicality for the old orthodox problems of divine immateriality, it would also intensify the deep psychological hunger for a divine female in LDS culture by erasing Heavenly Mother before she has been allowed to become fully visible.<sup>5</sup>

In his 1967 pioneering book *The Hebrew Goddess*, Jewish scholar Raphael Patai notes that no matter how often male religious leaders tried to remove goddess figures to establish strict monotheism, divine female images would always reemerge in new identities. He traces various incarnations of the female divine in ancient Hebrew culture, such as Asherah and the Shekinah, and suggests that the female divinity meets basic human impulses that include biological motherhood and other deeper psychological and social necessities.<sup>6</sup> It is no wonder that many Mormons on a private level seek to know, understand, and picture the Mother God, especially in visual art and poetry.<sup>7</sup>

While mostly absent in mainstream LDS worship and practice, Heavenly Mother is very much alive in the everyday lives of thousands of Church members. Peggy Fletcher Stack's 2021 Mother's Day article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported: "There is a tidal wave of interest in this divine feminine among Latter-day Saints, observers say. It has become almost a movement." But Stack also wrote that the increased talk is

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5. See Kline and Hunt Steenblik for a discussion of this need, 310–13.

6. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 23–25.

7. Many new poetry books about Heavenly Mother have emerged recently: Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent, 2017); *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry*, edited by Tyler Chadwick, Dayna Patterson, and Martin Pulido (El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2018), with works from 1844 to 2017; and Carol Lynn Pearson, *Finding Mother God: Poems to Heal the World* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2020).

“where the debates and divisions begin. She remains a God of mystery. Some believers want to keep her that way. Others crave more answers. Meanwhile, LGBTQ and single members ask: Where do we fit?”<sup>8</sup> Thus, popular Mormon culture reflects the same questions posed by scholars. How can Heavenly Mother fulfill important emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs in Mormonism while also meeting the current changing expectations about sex and gender? In response to this question, I argue that an embodied, gendered female deity can be an indispensable figure and source of hope, comfort, and liberation for all the oppressed, the vulnerable, and the powerless—whether they face discrimination for their race, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation, their transgender or nonbinary status, their status as immigrants, or their impoverished or homeless condition. But Mormon theology and practice also requires Heavenly Mother to be more than a symbol since the embodiment of the divine is a central doctrinal tenet. She must stand in time and eternity as a coequal of Heavenly Father; she must be seen as a real personage who acts as the Other to the male God, breaking out of monotheism or even dualism into a rich, wide spectrum of divine possibilities and characteristics. The goal of this essay is the near-impossible task of validating the embodied Mother God while also suggesting that she contains attributes that move godhood beyond gender.

### Roadmap of this Essay

Mormon authoritative texts pointing to Heavenly Mother do not focus on her mothering role in a traditional patriarchal family but on divine motherhood as emblematic of her role in the godly work of salvation. To demonstrate this, I will analyze several presentations of the divine

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8. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Latter-day Saints are talking more about Heavenly Mother, and that’s where the debates and divisions begin,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2021/05/08/latter-day-saints-are/>. Stack also highlights visual art about the Mormon Mother God in her article.

female. I begin with Mary's crucial appearance in Nephi's vision in the Book of Mormon, where she is revealed as the divine embodiment of God's love that must be physically enacted in the material realm to have salvific force. Mary's femaleness is not tangential but central to her mission, for without the feminine face and body of God, the divine male dominates as a monolithic picture and presence. I next address the deity called Wisdom, Hokmah in Proverbs and Sophia in Hellenistic and early Christian texts. She demonstrates that the female God encompasses all attributes necessary for full divine perfection in the godhead. Finally, I will turn to the identity of the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants and other Mormon scriptures. As Holy Ghost, God the Mother has a place in the Godhead, where she participates in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, the glory or power of God that centers in both the Father and Mother, embraces the various potentials for life and gender, and expands the meaning of male and female. I will show that the Mormon godhead is comprised of glorified deities embodied in spirit, flesh, and bone, paradoxically encompassing gendered personhood as well as the divine power that reaches beyond male and female.

### Mary: Mother God, Tree of Life, and Divine Love in the Book of Mormon

To understand the centrality of Heavenly Mother in Mormon theology, the tree of life vision in the Book of Mormon is a crucial starting point because it appears early in the foundational sacred text of the Mormon Restoration. In this vision, Nephi sees Mary equated with God's love and the tree of life, a token of the ancient goddess.<sup>9</sup> LDS scholar Daniel Peterson has made popular the idea that the tree corresponds to a female deity whom he identifies as Asherah from the Old Testament and whom

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9. I first connected Mary with the tree of life and Heavenly Mother in my 1992 chapter "Put On Your Strength," 429.



he links to Wisdom in Proverbs.<sup>10</sup> While Peterson acknowledges that Mary is also linked with the tree, still he effectively displaces Mary as a central figure in the vision by stating that it is only when Nephi sees her with a child and then connects her with the ancient goddess Asherah that the meaning of the tree becomes clear. Asherah becomes the focus rather than Mary, who is simply a mortal mother.<sup>11</sup> The LDS Church and its members are, no doubt, reluctant to validate an elevated status for the Virgin Mary because of her place in Catholicism; however, their willingness to accept Asherah evidences their desire for finding a name and place for Heavenly Mother in the Bible. Nevertheless, she appears in the Book of Mormon in the figure of Mary as the “mother of God,” as seen with the Madonna and Child image that serves to explicate the tree, its fruit, and the love of God. I am not arguing that Mary is the Heavenly Mother, but rather that she reveals Heavenly Mother’s love and compassion in Nephi’s vision. Just as Mary carries Jesus in her arms, likewise God the Mother bears our burdens to bring about our eternal lives, showing the importance of the Mother’s work for the salvation of her children. Mary is indispensable to the mission of Jesus as a mediator between heaven and earth in Nephi’s vision.

After Nephi views the tree his father saw, he asks to know its meaning; the Spirit then shows him “a virgin, and she was exceeding fair and white” (1 Ne. 11:8–13). Mary is the answer to his question; she is the meaning of the tree. It is unfortunate that she is described with the racially charged words “white” and “whiteness,” but these descriptors can be read to refer not to Mary’s skin but to her unearthly, awe-inspiring divinity and beauty, which are manifest in divine glory presented as an intense white light consisting of all colors, including dark hues. It cannot be denied that the Book of Mormon contains many racist verses

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10. Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25.

11. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” 18, 22. Peterson concludes that Asherah’s connection with the tree “suggests that the Book of Mormon is, indeed, an ancient historical record in the Semitic tradition,” 25.

ascribed to its various narrators, who appear to see white skin as a sign of God's favor, thereby confusing the whiteness of glory with the whiteness of skin. In this vision, whiteness must be decontaminated from racist implications and equated with divine love and Mary's divine role.

Nephi understands that the fruit-bearing tree of life and Mary are mutually symbolic of each other. This is significant because a tree is a crucial symbol of the mother goddess in the iconic depictions of many ancient Mediterranean cultures and in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Proverbs links the Old Testament goddess, Lady Wisdom, to this image: "She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is everyone that retaineth her" (Prov. 3:18). Because the tree is Mary in the Book of Mormon and Wisdom in Proverbs, the tree links both to goddess figures, thus importing the ancient divine female into scriptural texts and traditions, joining together the old and new covenants, which is a central goal of the Book of Mormon. It is significant that Mary appears twice in Nephi's vision: first alone, then again with an infant in her arms. Her first appearance alone and in the exceeding whiteness of divine glory reveals her as a goddess before she is revealed as a mother. This means that Mary is not divine because she birthed Jesus. Rather, she birthed Jesus because she was divine. Her divinity preceded the conception of Jesus in her womb.

While Nephi beholds the vision, the angel asks him a seemingly random question: "Knowest thou the condescension of God?" Nephi answers: "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things." The angel then says: "Behold, the virgin which thou seest is the mother of God after the manner of the flesh" (1 Ne. 11:16–18).<sup>13</sup> Though the connection between the angel's question about the "condescension of God" seems unrelated to the vision of

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12. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Viking, 1991), 496–506. Peterson notes this too.

13. For Book of Mormon citations from 1 Nephi, I'm referring to *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, edited by Royal Skousen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), available at <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/content/book-mormon-earliest-text>. Elsewhere I use the standard LDS version.

Mary, she in fact is the answer to the angel's question because she, as the mother of the condescending God, is herself a condescending deity; and as the fruit-bearing tree, she is the embodiment of the love of God.

I am using *The Earliest Text* version of the Book of Mormon because most scholars acknowledge it as closest to the original manuscripts.<sup>14</sup> In this version, Jesus is called "God himself" and the "everlasting Father." The current LDS published scriptural text of the Book of Mormon changes most of the original references to Jesus as Father: "eternal Father" becomes "Son of the eternal Father," etc. While these changes reflect mainstream LDS belief, the earlier versions suggest other possible interpretations not just of Jesus but of the status of Mary within the Mormon tradition. Mary as "the mother of God," rather than the mother of the Son of God, elevates her position and emphasizes that, as the mother of the incarnated "everlasting Father," she herself is not merely a subordinate human vessel but a goddess, a mother God, of whom the tree of life is symbolic. Mary, then, is envisioned as the mother of the new creation, just as Eve is the mother of the old creation.

In Nephi's vision, the Virgin is carried away by the spirit, then returns "bearing a child in her arms" (1 Ne. 11:19–20). In this foundational text, the LDS Church is presented with the iconic Madonna and Child image famous throughout Christian art. The angel proclaims to Nephi: "Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father." Then he asks, "Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?" Nephi answers, "Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things." The angel adds that it is "most joyous to the soul" (1 Ne. 11:21–23). Then the term "condescension of God" is employed by the angel one more time (1 Ne. 11:26), after which Nephi sees the ministry and death of Jesus:

And the Lamb of God went forth and was baptized of him [John]; and after that he was baptized, I beheld the heavens open, and the Holy

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14. Skousen, ed., *The Earliest Text*.

Ghost came down out of the heaven and abode upon him in the form of the dove. (1 Ne. 11:27)

Verses 16 and 26 of 1 Nephi 11 contain the only two occurrences in the Mormon canon of the phrase “condescension of God.” In current English, “condescend” negatively connotes the patronizing act of arrogantly looking down on another. In this vision, however, “condescension” is invoked closer to its Latin root to mean “descend” or “come down with.” Nephi perceives that the love of God is the “condescension of God,” the coming of God to us because we could not ascend to God. This vision is corroborated by the following revelatory language from the Doctrine and Covenants: “He [Jesus Christ] that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in and through all things, the light of truth” (88:6). By descending below all things, Christ suffers with mortals to understand our plight, to forgive our sins, and to remedy our mortality. This condescension symbolized in Nephi’s vision by the tree of life and its fruit applies both to the Virgin Mary and Jesus, each of whom condescends into mortality to redeem us. Even for those who are hesitant to accept Mary as a premortal goddess, she is nevertheless the representative or embodiment of the ancient Mother Goddess as symbolized by the tree.

Nephi’s vision presents the female deity in three figures: as tree of life reaching to heaven and rooted to the earth; as Mary, first alone as virgin and then as mother bearing Jesus in her arms; and finally, as dove, representing the Holy Ghost descending on Jesus at his baptism. Mary, at the center of the narrative, links the tree with the dove. The reference to the dove’s appearance to declare Jesus’ divinity is recorded by all the Gospel writers and is not merely a peripheral or fanciful description. It is essential to the presence of a female deity in Christianity because the dove is an ancient sign of the Mother Goddess, as many scholars document.<sup>15</sup> A long tradition connecting the divine female with the

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15. Baring and Cashford, 42–43, 595, 630.

Holy Spirit can also be traced from the ancient Hebrew Shekinah to certain Christian Gnostic texts, to the writings of medieval mystics, to the works of contemporary Mormon scholars like Janice Allred.<sup>16</sup> Even for those who reject the view of Jesus as Eternal Father and Holy Ghost as Mother, it should be obvious that in Nephi's vision, the tree is Mary and its fruit is the incarnated Jesus. These visionary images serve the same sacral functions as do the birth symbols of water, blood, and flesh that are instantiated in Mary's body. Thus, Mary's womb is as much a site of redemption as the empty tomb.

All these images of love and life are made concrete in the vision's revelation of the Madonna and Child, which also suggests the Pietà, Mary embracing the dead Jesus, an image that links death and rebirth. With Jesus in her arms, Mary connects heaven and earth. She is a human embracing divinity and a deity embracing humanity. She appears in the vision first as a woman alone, a virgin. Her virginity is stressed not as moral rectitude but as signifier of power. The word "virgin" or "maiden" in ancient texts commonly referred to an unmarried woman but, significantly, could refer to an independent woman whose status is not dependent on a husband or father.<sup>17</sup> If Mary's role as mother was of sole importance, she would not appear first as a lone woman. Because she does, this signifies that she alone in her own right, not as wife or daughter of a male, bears the love of God. In the vision, she returns as a mother, but not in a patriarchal framework. Rather, she is a single mother, a singular Mother, the symbol of the cosmic creative feminine,

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16. Janice Allred, *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 54–60. See Fiona Givens, "Feminism and Heavenly Mother," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, edited by Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (New York: Routledge, 2020), 553–68. Givens raises the possibility of Heavenly Mother as Holy Ghost but does not cite similar explorations of other Mormon feminists.

17. Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1997), 10–12.

whose motherhood, though secondary to her identity, is paradoxically essential to the revelation of God's love as real and relational, not merely abstract.

The theological implications of the Mormon canon insist that divine love must be embodied in physical personages who live among us. God's love must be present and active, not remote and passive. It must be manifest concretely in bearing the burdens of others, in embracing the outcast, in mourning with the grief-stricken, in attending to the needy, in acknowledging others' desires by seeking their happiness and esteeming them as equals in dignity and worth (Mosiah 4:26, 18:8–9). This love, embodied in the Mary of Nephi's vision, is what the Virgin Mary has signified in Catholic tradition for hundreds of years. Some liberal Catholic theologians have tried to remove Mary entirely from Catholic worship to promote a genderless, inclusive God. But, as scholar Charlene Spretnak observes, this effort has neither been embraced by most Catholics nor has it led to the elevation or greater inclusion of women or of marginalized groups. Most Catholics continue to feel a powerful and compelling need for Mary because she is perceived as actively dispensing the nurturing power of God that daily sustains them from birth to death.<sup>18</sup> Many LDS feel the same need for the Mormon Heavenly Mother, as demonstrated by the recent popular movement noted by Stack in the *Salt Lake Tribune*.

### Lady Wisdom: Hokmah and Sophia

In Old and New Testament traditions and in other Jewish and Christian texts, the Mother God appears as Wisdom, Hokmah in Hebrew and Sophia in Greek. Many Mormons now accept the goddess Asherah as a legitimate manifestation of the Heavenly Mother in the Old

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18. Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

Testament.<sup>19</sup> But equally important is Lady Wisdom in the book of Proverbs because she expands the picture of the female God from a fertility or mother goddess to a god with an ethically principled core. Wisdom is the foundation for all other divine attributes because it moderates, mediates, and balances all other powers and engenders the gift of discernment. Many scholars have documented the widespread worship of Asherah in ancient Israelite folk practice and her place as the wife or consort of Yahweh, where her name is linked with him in inscriptions.<sup>20</sup> However, Hokmah or Wisdom appears not as God's wife but as a deity of equal status in her own right. She lived with God from the beginning in an independent life of her own. Her divine status is revealed in the authoritative manner she addresses humanity in Proverbs, where she issues commandments and speaks in the first person to Israel: "Now therefore harken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways" (Prov. 8:32). She does not act or speak as God's subordinate but as God's coequal in power and dominion. She addresses all, not just the rich and powerful; for she stands at the crossroads at the entrance of the city, ready to bless any who will heed her (Prov. 8:1–3). In her hands are eternal life, honor, peace, riches, power, and justice for all her children.<sup>21</sup> She declares: "For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord" (Prov. 8:35). The image of Lady Wisdom resists essentialization because it connects a distinctly female deity with

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19. See Kevin L. Barney, "How to Worship Our Mother in Heaven (Without Getting Excommunicated)," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 121–46. Fiona Givens stresses the importance of both Asherah and Wisdom in Givens, "Feminism and Heavenly Mother," 562–64.

20. Patai, *Hebrew Goddess*, 39; William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 162–67; Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord, Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 118–26.

21. For a list of forty-five divine qualities and names for the Mother God that can be gleaned from scriptural texts, see Janice Allred, "The One Who Never Left Us," *Sunstone* 166 (Apr. 2012): 69.

divine attributes rather than with the female reproductive body, thus empowering both women and gender nonconforming people.

Hokmah becomes Sophia in the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible read by Greek-speaking Jews from the second century BCE. Both are feminine nouns for the abstract concept of wisdom and can be interpreted restrictively as personifications or attributes of the Hebrew God, Yahweh, or the Christian or Gnostic male God rather than as the names of a separate and independent female deity. But, as scholars have pointed out, there are rich traditions in both Jewish and Christian non-canonical texts that depict Wisdom as a goddess and connect her with the Holy Spirit, the dove, and the bride of God.<sup>22</sup> Equating the Mother God with wisdom does not eliminate it as an attribute of the male God but extends it beyond traditional rational restrictions into the realm of the intuitive. In their monumental study of the Western history of the Goddess, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford emphasize the important correspondence between the goddess Sophia and the Black Madonna in late medieval tradition: “Black is the colour that is associated with Wisdom, as the dark phase of the lunar cycle, where light gestates in the womb, is transformed and brought forth anew to illuminate the soul on its journey toward divination.”<sup>23</sup> The Mother God as Wisdom reveals the fullness of her godhood, which encompasses all divine characteristics necessary for harmonizing and dispensing mercy and justice on earth to all people, regardless of personal bodily and sexual identities.

### The Mother God: Her Place in the Godhead

Since Mormon tradition has commonly presented the Holy Ghost as a male personage of spirit who is one of the three male supreme beings, how can the Mother be understood by Mormons to be part of the Godhead or as an equal God who participates in the creation of the world

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22. Patai, 97–99, 277, 325–27; Baring and Cashford, 470–78, 609–58.

23. Baring and Cashford, 647.



and the redemption of her children? Is it legitimate to connect her with the Holy Ghost, as some Mormon feminists have argued? The answer to both questions is yes for two principal reasons.

First and astoundingly, none of the references to the Holy Ghost in the Mormon canon (not including the Bible) identify the third person of the Godhead as male. Most of these references are either anonymous or neutral. Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 states that the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit without mentioning any gender: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us.” In verse 23, the Holy Ghost is referred to as “it”: “A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him.” A careful study of all these scriptures reveals that out of 156 occurrences, three are neutral, using the pronoun “it” (D&C 130:23, Alma 34:38, and Moroni 2:2). In the remaining 153 instances, the pronouns are indefinite: “who,” “which,” and “that,” used with phrases such as “by the power of,” “the gift of,” “moved by,” “given by,” “baptism of,” and “full of.” While not conclusive, the absence of the male pronoun in these verses opens a canonical place in Mormonism for Heavenly Mother as Holy Ghost. Thus, she can be imaged as an actual personage who dispenses the power of God to her children in their mortal journey toward a fullness of glory. In stark contrast to Mormon scripture, current LDS discourse insists on identifying the Holy Ghost and Holy Spirit with male pronouns as occurs on the official Church web site: “The Holy Ghost is the third member of the Godhead. He is a personage of spirit, without a body of flesh and bones. He is often referred to as the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord, or the Comforter.”<sup>24</sup> The Church presents a male Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, while

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24. “Holy Ghost,” Gospel Topics, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/holy-ghost?lang=eng>.

Mormon scriptures leave open the identification of the Holy Ghost, thus creating a possible place in the Godhead for Heavenly Mother.

Second, although the current dominant LDS perception of the Godhead envisions the Holy Ghost as male, there are other, older traditions, some based in scripture, that depict the Spirit as female, which can create at least a linguistic space for the female in the Godhead. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition in the West has mostly identified the Holy Spirit as male since antiquity, though there have been ongoing debates both because the grammatical gender of the word “Spirit” is varied in biblical languages (where all nouns show gender that is not necessarily connected with sexed persons) and also because the noun “Spirit” does not have the strong masculine connotation associated with “Father” and “Son.” In Hebrew, the word for spirit is the feminine *ruach*, which has influenced some; but Jewish scholar Raphael Patai relies on the Talmudic and Midrashic term *shekhina* to show how this created a feminine personification of God’s Spirit for the Hebrews.<sup>25</sup> The Greek word for Spirit, *pneuma*, is neuter, and the Latin word, *spiritus*, is masculine. The Latin biblical translator and theologian Jerome (c. 342–420 CE) argued that the three different biblical language genders for “spirit” meant that God transcends all categories of sexuality.<sup>26</sup> Still, Jerome, like other early Christian fathers, preferred the pronoun “he” for the “Spirit,” which corresponds with his Latin Vulgate Bible translation and the patristic development of trinitarian theologies where the one God is manifest as three male personages. This has always been the trend from the early Christian fathers to contemporary Christian theologians: they claim God and the Holy Spirit are beyond gender and therefore can be described as feminine; still, they tend to use the male pronoun for the Holy Spirit. In his *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy*

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25. Patai, 96–111.

26. Jerome, *Comm. in Isalam* 11 (PL 24.19b); quoted in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing), 86.

*Spirit*, Protestant theologian Clark H. Pinnock gives strong reasons why the Spirit can be called “she,” but still he decides to use the masculine pronoun in his book because “using the feminine pronoun exclusively could create more problems than it solves.”<sup>27</sup> The “problems” seem to be that the feminine pronoun would contradict patriarchal perspectives and structures.

Fortunately, from ancient to modern times, a strong countertradition has viewed the Holy Ghost, symbolized by the dove, as a female who is “routinely associated with maternity . . . inspiring, helping, supporting, enveloping, and bringing to birth.”<sup>28</sup> Though many feminist theologians resist such essentialist representations, they still acknowledge the importance of a female Holy Ghost to create a place for the feminine in the Godhead, as seen in Hebrew, Syriac, Gnostic, and mystical texts. In the 1970s, scholars like Elaine Pagels began to excavate ancient Gnostic texts that image the Holy Spirit as a female deity: the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, where Jesus refers to “my Mother, the Spirit”; the *Gospel of Philip*, where the Holy Ghost is called the “Mother of many”; and the *Apocryphon of John*, which refers to the mother as Spirit and includes her in the place of the Holy Ghost in the grouping Father, Mother, and Son.<sup>29</sup>

### Holy Ghost and Holy Spirit

The anonymous or neutral references to the Holy Ghost in Mormon scripture and the ancient tradition of the feminine Spirit open a legitimate place for seeing the Holy Ghost as Heavenly Mother, or at least a

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27. Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Gove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 17.

28. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2018), 141.

29. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, Vintage Books, 1979), 52. More modern translations complicate the picture: Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

Mormon female deity. Notwithstanding, she has been excluded from the Mormon Godhead in LDS mainstream discourse, a rejection reinforced by the conflation of the terms Holy Ghost and Holy Spirit, which overlap but are also distinct in scripture. Showing the difference between the two is important for my argument because it creates a path for both the inclusion in the Godhead of a divine female personage and also for seeing the Spirit as a source for multi-gendered generative power.

The conflation problem begins with the biblical terms for the Holy Ghost and Holy Spirit since the King James Version of the Bible, used by LDS readers, does not distinguish “ghost” from “spirit.” Those terms were synonyms in the seventeenth-century English into which that version of the Bible was translated. The current LDS Church likewise equates Holy Ghost with Holy Spirit, despite scriptural texts that sometimes distinguish the two. While the Holy Ghost is a person who is sometimes referred to as the Spirit, the term “Spirit” is also used, somewhat confusingly, to refer not to a personage but to God’s divine power that flows throughout creation—a power more accurately referred to as the “glory of God” (D&C 93:6, 36). Multiple scriptures reveal that this underlying and uniting cosmic power is not the Holy Ghost but the essence of God’s divine nature, variously referred to in the Doctrine and Covenants as fullness (93:4), the Spirit of truth (93:9), truth and light (93:28), intelligence (93:29), rest (84:24), eternal life (88:4), light of Christ (88:7), the power of God (88:13), and, yes, as Spirit (93:23).

These are all terms for divine consciousness, the mind of God, the non-gendered spirit, the fullness of which centers in divine personages. Mormon doctrine pictures the Godhead as comprised of fully divinized, resurrected beings of flesh and glory, for “the elements are the tabernacle of God” (D&C 93:35), in which dwells the fullness of the divine mind that permeates and gives unity and life to all (93:7–11). Within this field, each soul retains its independence to act in its own embodied sphere, which bestows upon it individuality and uniqueness (93:29–31). The bodies of deities in this infinite sea of energy constitute

points in which their attributes and powers focus, magnify, and emanate as light and truth that mortals can experience as divine love. Doctrine and Covenants section 88 explains that this glory is not only the light of Christ but the light that “is in the sun . . . And the power thereof by which it was made,” in the moon, in the stars, and in the earth, “which light proceeded forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things” (D&C 88:7–13) and issues forth from the “presence of God,” who sits upon “his throne” (which I interpret as “their throne”). Mormon theology presents the cosmos as the living extension of God the Father and, by implication, God the Mother, whose truth and light animate all things. This doctrine further implies that the cosmos is not a lifeless machine but a living system replete with living creatures of many varieties.

LDS tradition rightly asserts that the Holy Ghost has a personal function apart from the glory or Spirit of God. The Church distinguishes them by presenting the Spirit as a power available in some measure to non-Mormons through the “influence” of the Holy Ghost, while the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost is a special gift vouchsafed to baptized and confirmed members of the LDS Church who take upon themselves God’s name and covenant to do God’s will.<sup>30</sup> While this distinction is scripturally valid, it does not explicate the glory of God or its theological significance as a matrix of potentials and as a fundamental life-giving feature of the divine nature that connects the Godhead to all creation at every point and at all times.

### The Comforter as Advocate for Social Justice

Mormon scripture also equates the Holy Ghost with the Comforter: “this is my gospel—repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh the

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30. The Church website explains these two functions: “Holy Ghost,” Gospel Topics, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/holy-ghost?lang=eng>.

baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, even the Comforter, which showeth all things, and teacheth the peaceable things of the kingdom” (D&C 39:6). The title “Comforter” appears only once in the Book of Mormon (Moroni 8:26), once in the Pearl of Great Price (Moses 6: 61), and four times in the Gospel of John (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). Surprisingly, the term occurs twenty-two times in the Doctrine and Covenants, signaling its importance in Joseph Smith’s theology. Though the Greek noun for Comforter, *paraclete*, is clearly masculine, no gender is applied to this term in any Restoration scripture, except Doctrine and Covenants 88:3, where the “other Comforter” or “Holy Spirit of promise” is referred to as “it.” As with “Holy Ghost,” the term “Comforter” is scripturally referred to by the anonymous pronouns “which” and “that,” thus leaving a space for the Heavenly Mother as both Comforter and Holy Ghost.

As Comforter, God the Mother bestows the baptism of fire that follows the baptism of water (D&C 33:11; 39:6). She is the first Comforter who bears witness to the mission and godhood of Jesus Christ, as occurred at his baptism when she descended “like a dove” (Matt. 3:16–17, etc.). Jesus is the second Comforter (John 14:18, 21, 23) who brings the personal confirmation of salvation and eternal life to individuals (D&C 88:3–4; 130:3). As she bears witness of his work, so he bears witness of hers, lifting her veil for those who have eyes to see her glory. Though the Greek *paraclete* does not appear in Mormon scripture, it can serve as a gloss on the Comforter’s role as teaching “the peaceable things of the kingdom, including truth, mercy, justice, judgment, and wisdom” (Moses 6:61). *Paraclete* is a compound of two Greek roots: *para* (by one’s side) and *kalere* (to call or summon for help). The Greek verb from this root can also mean to exhort, cheer, encourage, or comfort. The Greek noun *paraclete* is usually translated “advocate” or “counsel for the defense” or “one who pleads for the welfare of others” (evoking the role of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs as divine judge or defender), thus highlighting the Mother’s role as bringer of solace, encouragement, hope, refreshment, consolation, and as dispenser of both chastisement and forgiveness, as well as judgment on those who harm her little ones.

She is the defender of the powerless oppressed. She is the judge of the powerful oppressor. She is the champion of social justice.

The Comforter role of Heavenly Mother is not limited to the Saints of the Church, for she bears witness to truth, filling with love and light her children everywhere, of every faith, and even of no faith (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:17; 1 Ne. 14:14). Her larger mission as teacher of the “peaceable things of the kingdom” points to the egalitarian society portrayed in the Book of Mormon after Christ’s appearance—a society in which peace and prosperity were achieved by the voluntary rejection of social and class distinctions (4 Ne. 1:3). The Book of Mormon promotes these aspirations, asserting that the Lord “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 he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Ne. 26:33). Other related Mormon scriptures encourage equal treatment of old and young, of disciples and non-disciples (Gal. 3:28; Alma 1:30). It is no stretch to add to this list those who identify as LGBTQ. For the scripture warns that it is a lie to say we love God, whom we have not seen, if we withhold love from those whom we have seen (1 John 4:20).

### Necessity for an Embodied Goddess of Compassion

Re-envisioning the Godhead to include Heavenly Mother emphasizes the need for an embodied, compassionate Goddess. But why? Isn’t compassion a non-gendered divine attribute? Yes, of course. But in Christianity, all the divine attributes are centered in the person of Jesus. His incarnation and resurrection as a male God who experienced the full weight of the mortal plight calls us to connect with him as one who understands our suffering, our frustrations, our discouragement, and even our despair as mortals. “O God, why has thou forsaken me?” cried Jesus from the cross (Matt. 27:46). We know that he even understands the agony of existential crises. Compassion is weak in the abstract. But embodied, it is empowered and actualized to make differences in real

time in the real world. Compassion is made concrete when real persons bear our burdens, lament our griefs, lift our arms, and strengthen our knees.

The divinities of Mormon scripture are embodied to assume and embrace human afflictions, whether physical, mental, spiritual, or relational. These deities descend to be with us, as Nephi sees in vision. For Mormons, God is not just above us; God is with us, participating in the messiness of human experience, of mortal exile. The Mormon Godhead do not merely understand our suffering, they share it. This must be true for both male and female deities, for the Father who becomes Son in the person of Jesus and for the Mother who becomes Daughter in the person of Mary or Eve. It is only God with us in flesh, as Son or Daughter, who experiences an infinitely diminished life in order to lead us to a more abundant life. Mormonism presents a divine Other who is not wholly other. Mormon deities experience with their creations both mirth and mourning. They not only empathize with mortal joy and grief and participate in them; they are also changed by them. An embodied female God allows us to see not only the divine in women's bodies but that she, too, is Immanuel, God with us. Over the past forty years, I have collected women's (and men's) visions of Heavenly Mother and have noted the extraordinary way these concrete experiences validate both individual self-worth and a sense of personal care from the Mother God.<sup>31</sup> In such experiences, her love is not merely an emotion; it is a revelation, a personal awakening to her understanding of the messiness of life, of its rejections, losses, and failures, as well as its joys and fulfillment. And with this understanding come healing and personal transformation.

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31. Margaret M. Toscano, "Movement from the Margins: Contemporary Mormon Women's Visions of the Mother God," in *Spirit, Faith, and Church: Women's Experiences in the English-Speaking World, 17th–21st Centuries*, edited by Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Claire Sorin (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 207–26.



## Motherhood and Gender Fluidity

Motherhood is a double bind for Heavenly Mother, just as it is for women. Emphasis on motherhood tends to equate women with their reproductive function alone while diminishing women unable or unwilling to be mothers. For this reason, I refer to her not only as Mother God but as an empowered divine female and Goddess. Mormon feminists have sometimes downplayed the mothering aspects of Heavenly Mother to avoid imprisoning her and Mormon women in an immortal, patriarchal harem as eternal producers of offspring. On the other hand, denial of motherhood reduces female power and import. These tensions forefront an important reason the Mother God's body is a point of controversy in Mormon feminist discourse.

This conflict does not infect the fatherhood of God, which rather makes him more approachable and reliable because his fatherhood is accepted as compatible with his divine powers and roles. Consequently, fatherhood is perceived to expand men's roles and to enhance a Mormon man's priesthood opportunities. On the other hand, though praised, motherhood has done nothing to reverse the exclusion of Mormon women from those same priestly functions. Meanwhile, what endears Jesus to many people are his mothering attributes: compassion, mercy, love, and kindness. This is not to say these qualities are essentially or exclusively feminine or motherly. But biblical texts depict them as feminine, associating them with God the Father and Jesus through such images as God giving birth, God nursing, God's breasts (*shaddai* in Hebrew), God as midwife, God as female pelican, God as mother bear, God as homemaker, God as helper like Eve (*ezer* in Hebrew), God as baker woman, God as mother eagle, God as mother hen.<sup>32</sup>

Just as everyone has a father, everyone has a mother, whether the offspring is straight, gay, transgender, or nonbinary. And queer people

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32. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

of all identities are also biological parents. Even when offspring are produced with the aid of modern technology, egg and sperm are needed to create life, even with reliance on surrogate mothers or when genetic materials are combined during in vitro fertilization. Of course, mothering is more than a biological function. It involves the long job of raising and supporting a child, which continues until death, and a person of any gender can fulfill this vital role. But the fact that, biologically, woman is needed to create an embryo is crucial. Many Greek myths tell stories of male gods seeking to usurp the generative process to eliminate the pesky tribe of women, usually with disastrous results. The similar goal of diminishing the Mother God, or at least her mothering function, is likewise ill-conceived and will likely fail to root out heteronormativity, sexism, prejudice against nonbinary and gender nonconforming people, or the emotional need for a Heavenly Mother who is as powerful as Heavenly Father and equally worshipped with him.

In defending the Mormon concept of an embodied and distinctly separate Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father, it may appear I am promoting a binary view of the cosmos that essentializes men and women and that marginalizes those who do not identify as one or the other. In my view, polarity is not incompatible with diversity. In Mormonism, it is possible to believe in embodied Mother and Father Gods of equal status while promoting free choice and fluidity of sex, gender, and sexuality for them and their children.

The binaries of the divine male and female are problematic only if they are viewed as fixed, unchanging, and exclusive. But this is not what is presented in Mormon theology, which teaches that our heavenly parents are creators, particularly of spirit children from uncreated intelligences. Joseph Smith revealed that individuals are coeternal with God. We existed for eternity as intelligences, as undeveloped potential souls, as sparks of light and truth that comprise the infinite glory of God. We existed as potentials that may be released into independent spheres where we can act for ourselves. The Mormon Gods are like

two points that form a line, points that have the power to create other points, a plane, a space, or other dimensions in which an abundance of possibilities and forms may emerge and flourish. Because Heavenly Father and Mother are fertile producers of life, they neither essentialize male or female nor inhibit nor prohibit fluidity or free choice. In each act of creation, these deities alter the matrix of potentials and change themselves. This is the Mormon doctrine of eternal progression. Continuing creation increases diversity by expanding the spectrum of possibilities defined between the poles of the divine male and female.

This concept of binaries is nuanced in the Book of Mormon, where the prophet Lehi observes: “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things.” Note that the opposition here is claimed to be “in” not “to” all things. This suggests that each “thing” is a compound like yin and yang. By combining the binary in one body, the nonbinary dominates to become a whole. The passage further observes that “all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead” (2 Ne. 2:11). This means there is male in every female, female in every male, light in darkness, darkness in light, matter in energy, and energy in matter. These concepts include metaphysical, spiritual, and physical dimensions. It is impossible to separate interior from exterior, consciousness from unconsciousness, matter from energy, light from darkness, pleasure from pain, male from female without eliminating existence itself, without killing the body, whether it be a human body or the cosmos. However, there are layers between interior and exterior, between consciousness and unconsciousness. There are degrees between matter and energy, light and darkness. Likewise, there is a spectrum of possibilities between male and female. There are as many ways of enacting and performing gender as there are people. If male and female are analogized as midnight and noon on a spectrum of night and day, there would be an endless variety of light and shadow between the poles, but where light and dark would remain distinguishable, separate physical realities.

## Gender Fluidity and Critique in Mormonism

Though most Mormons undoubtedly view their personhood as essential and eternal, there is nothing in Mormon theology that precludes the notion that we may yet experience transformations of many kinds. We may even experience change from female to male and back again, or to some other gender. The Mormon doctrine of eternal progression implies movement, not stasis. It teaches that we are eternal beings, that our intelligences are uncreated and coeternal with God, that we existed before this life and will live hereafter—although we know very little about the premortal and postmortal worlds. It is possible within a Mormon framework to accept sex differences as biological realities while favoring fluid categories and porous boundaries, rejecting simple dichotomies, and moving to multiple gender identities. To be limited here or in the hereafter by rigid gender, sex, race, or class roles is not required by Mormon scripture, regardless of the current patriarchal aspirations and policies of the LDS Church.

Recent gender critiques by LDS scholars have done little to damage Mormon patriarchy, but they have undermined Mormon feminism. Many left-leaning women feel hesitant to promote Heavenly Mother for fear of creating a picture of God that leaves no place where LGBTQ people can identify with the divine image. Taylor Petrey's work over the last decade has made an important contribution toward demonstrating how Mormon doctrine can include diverse sexuality both morally and cosmologically, at least as it applies to queer identities, same-sex relationships, and love among male gods. I agree with his fine arguments for same-sex love and sealings. But it is telling that in his 2016 "Rethinking Mormonism's Heavenly Mother," Petrey does not come up with new ways of reimagining the Mother God or seeing her in multiple ways.

In arguing for a polymorphous view of God, Petrey focuses on males and cites his own 2011 article "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," where he shows the possibilities for same-sex or non-heterosexual couplings in the biblical and temple stories of the

creation. But he does so by diminishing female figures in traditional fashion and leaves no space for Heavenly Mother as creator. He states that the “creation of the earth, organization of the elements, and even the creation of the living bodies of Adam and Eve all occur without the presence of female figures.”<sup>33</sup> Petrey also invokes an old theological argument where the male God employs language to bring forth the physical universe and, like an artist, molds Adam out of the dust of the earth. In Petrey’s reading, God then penetrates Adam, another male, to bring forth woman. He argues that only males are necessary because creation and salvation are “male-only priesthood activities.”

Petrey emphasizes the love of males in the Godhead without acknowledging Eve or Mary as potential divine or even powerful figures, and he fails to show the sacrality of female-to-female love. He may simply be describing what he sees as possible within these sacred texts, for he admits this “comes at the expense of females” and that we “may need to rethink women’s independent status with respect to priesthood.”<sup>34</sup> But Petrey does not acknowledge those of us who have attempted to rethink the priesthood and the female divine in new ways; he reduces our complex arguments simply to promoting heteronormativity and essentialist views of “woman.” In “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” Petrey again privileges the male Godhead, asserting they show how “heterosexual pairing is not required for love that constitutes divinity.” While I agree that love is beyond gender or heterosexual coupling, Petrey fails to show how Heavenly Mother by herself could manifest a divine love for her children as she works toward their salvation. Divine love embraces all other loves.

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33. Taylor G. Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 111.

34. Petrey, 111–12.

## Conclusion

Does the very existence of Heavenly Mother simply promote heteronormativity that marginalizes gender nonconforming individuals? The answer is “no” if God and Goddess are understood as connected in the mystical union known as the *hieros gamos*, the ancient sacred marriage of heaven and earth, matter and spirit, being and non-being.<sup>35</sup> But the answer is “yes” if we imagine the heavenly parents coupled in a patriarchal marriage idealized in the proclamation on the family or the homey illustrations in Church manuals and on the Church website. God the Male and God the Female are not the celestial version of Ward and June Cleaver, or of President Nelson and his current wife Wendy. They are male and female manifestations of the supreme mystery of the Supreme Being—the “We Are” extension of the “I Am,” who are both one and many. God the Mother and God the Father are coequal creator and redeemer Gods who participate in a glory-filled pleroma of divine principles and divinities with many shapes and aspects, reflecting the wide variety of human genders and sexualities.

It is ironic that many people seem to think that heteronormativity is not an issue if Mormons stick to the traditional all-male Godhead, supposedly on the assumption that the embodied male gods are sexually neutral without a female presence. But divine male bodies are still preferred, which have supported heteronormative patriarchal structures for human societies in the past. If the Mother God is eliminated, what remains is a Godhead of males that continues to justify the subordination of women. If a female deity is presented only as the sustaining partner of a presiding male divinity, the result is a suffocating patriarchy. If females in heaven are valued only for their reproductive functions, then heaven becomes a reductive type of materiality. If divine embodiment is eliminated, then the material is rendered inferior to

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35. Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 89–97.

the spiritual or is subordinated to insubstantial ideas and forms, which has justified the exploitation of the planet, the environment, and living creatures with ruinous results.

When I wrote the book *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* between 1984 and 1990 with my husband Paul, my goal was to create a legitimate place for female power in the highly patriarchal texts and culture of Mormonism. I saw unique potential for this because of Mormonism's open theology, its concept of a plurality of gods and worlds, and its doctrine of eternal progression. Through my study of Joseph Smith and other religions both old and new, I became convinced that female priesthood and female deities were indispensable to religious equality for women here and in eternity. The Heavenly Mother in *Strangers* is not a domesticated mother or wife but a fierce and powerful goddess with various faces and representations in a heterodox Godhead. I wanted her to stand as a reproach to an all-male Godhead, to act as an Other to traditional views of God. In the more than thirty years since the publication of that book, I have worked to expand images and roles for the divine female. In my oft-presented and ever-evolving slide show entitled "Images of the Female Body—Human and Divine," I explore sixteen major metaphors or instantiations of the Goddess, including non-anthropomorphic ones.<sup>36</sup> The over three hundred images in that presentation demonstrate, more than words can say, diverse representations: old and young, large and slender, appealing and frightening, feminine and androgynous, of various races and genders, which value nonconforming identities.<sup>37</sup> I have desired to create diverse pictures of our Divine Mother who, in all her manifestations,

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36. A version of this presentation appeared in *The Mormon Women's Forum: An LDS Feminist Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Dec. 1994): 1–24.

37. I agree with Blaire Ostler that images of Heavenly Mother should include "all those that choose the label 'woman.'" Blaire Ostler, "Heavenly Mother: The Mother of All Women," in *Continuing Revelation: Essays on Doctrine*, edited by Bryan Buchanan (Salt Lake City, Signature Books, 2021), 145.

is so awe-inspiring and beautiful that we feel her power and love on a deeply spiritual level and long for her, just as many do for Jesus Christ.

There is more work to be done to expand our pictures of God within Mormon theology. Accepting Joseph Smith's teaching that the Godhead is not simply a male social trinity but a council of Gods has the potential for envisioning divinities with multiple sex and gender identities, as well as representing theologically the paradoxical relationships of polarity and multiplicity. Think how pictures of God would expand if female deities were added to the temple ceremony, if Elohim included male and female actors of all races. A plurality of Gods could include eternally sealed gay, trans, nonbinary, and androgynous divinities.<sup>38</sup> The Mormon doctrine of eternal lives, worlds, and experiences is ripe to embrace a vast range of possibilities. Representations of divinities could present masculine depictions of Heavenly Mother and feminine depictions of Heavenly Father. There is no mandate nor justification to depict any of the Gods as white, including the Mother. First Vision pictures could show dark-complected Father and Son encircled by brightness to fortify that it is the light, not their pigmentation, that is white. While such plurality may seem pagan and disturbing to mainstream Mormons and Christians, it is consonant with the Christian objective of theosis: "it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Perhaps we will be like them: multiple, not single.

Marginalizing God the Mother does not solve the problems raised by Mormonism's doctrine of divine and human embodiment. It merely

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38. Since the publication of *Strangers*, Paul and I have both argued for a Mormon theology that values non-heterosexual identities and parenthood. Margaret Toscano, "Heavenly Motherhood: Silences, Disturbances, and Consolations," *Sunstone* 166 (Mar. 2012): 76; Paul Toscano, "Homosexual Spirituality and the Redemption of Pleasure: An Epistle of Paul to the Mormons, Parts 1 & 2," *Sunstone* 165 (Jan. 2012).



diminishes femaleness as a reflection of divinity. We do not need fewer images to understand God; we need more. Critics of Heavenly Mother have not fully grasped the negative consequences of moving toward a God beyond gender. Margaret Barker, in her remarkable and popular book *The Mother of the Lord: The Lady in the Temple*, emphasizes the cost of this approach as it occurred in the ancient Jewish and Christian cultures. Barker argues that king Josiah of the Hebrew Bible eliminated the female God from the temple and from temple worship to purify religious practice and eliminate idolatry.<sup>39</sup> This seemingly worthy goal damaged women for centuries and never created a safe place for those not conforming to gender norms. Rather than erasing her, Mormons should reinstate the Divine Lady in the temple and in LDS doxy and praxis to enhance religious life for all its adherents. Her ample bosom and her outstretched arms are wide enough to receive all her children.

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39. Barker, 329–75.

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# A QUEER HEAVENLY FAMILY: EXPANDING GODHOOD BEYOND A HETEROSEXUAL, CISGENDER COUPLE

Charlotte Scholl Shurtz

Although the concept of Heavenly Mother is empowering for many women, the focus on God as a cisgender, heterosexual couple also limits who can see their own divinity reflected in the stories told about God. First, with Heavenly Mother as the only female divinity, divine expression of womanhood is restricted to motherhood. This excludes many women, including women struggling with infertility, women who do not wish to become mothers, and transgender women who experience motherhood differently than fertile, cisgender women. Second, the focus on Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother's male-female relationship emphasizes heterosexuality to the point of heteronormativity. Third, the emphasis on gender and sex binaries in the Heavenly Mother/Heavenly Father pairing enshrines cisnormativity<sup>1</sup> as divine and excludes identities that do not fit neatly into these binaries. Together, heteronormativity and cisnormativity exclude LGBTQ+

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1. Cisnormativity is "an ideology that assumes and requires all people to be sorted into only male-man and female-woman categories despite the existence of many other options in the empirical world throughout recorded history." J. E. Sumerau, Lain A. B. Mathers, and Ryan T. Cragun, "Incorporating Transgender Experience Toward a More Inclusive Gender Lens in the Sociology of Religion," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 79, no. 4 (2018): 5.

people<sup>2</sup> from narratives of godhood. Both the exclusion of women and LGBTQ+ people are serious issues for a theology that claims to be broad and expansive enough to include all of God's diverse children. Some theologians tackle the first problem by adding additional female divinities (like Eve and Mary) to offer divine examples for multiple forms of womanhood, but this approach continues to enshrine cis-normativity. Others try to address the second and third problems by focusing on erasing differences between male and female, such as by creating a genderless god. Still, the creation of a genderless god erases gendered experiences, whether the gendered experiences are those of a transgender or cisgender individual. Claiming that a genderless god is inclusive is parallel to claiming that "colorblindness" solves racial issues. Refusing to acknowledge diversity doesn't mean it doesn't exist or impact people's lives; it simply excludes anything beyond the cultural default from conversation. Both approaches have value, but neither one can solve these issues on its own. Additional embodied female deities are not necessarily queer-inclusive, while a genderless god lacks the intimate understanding of menstruation, childbirth, miscarriage, and more that many women find comforting in an embodied Heavenly Mother. Inclusivity requires acknowledging and celebrating diversity. Whether a single god or a group of additional embodied deities, conceptions of God must be gender-inclusive or gender-encompassing in a theology that includes all God's diverse children.

In an attempt to combine these two approaches, I follow religious scholar Caroline Kline's suggested approach of adding nuance to the Heavenly Father/Heavenly Mother pairing by "bringing forward and

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2. LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender and sexual identities not listed, including nonbinary, gender-fluid, intersex, asexual, and pansexual. Throughout this paper, I will use LGBTQ+ and the word "queer" interchangeably.

theologically developing other divine groupings and formations,”<sup>3</sup> including a spectrum of genders and sexualities. Given the Mormon belief in apotheosis, there is space within our theology for an extended heavenly family that includes LGBTQ+ gods and a broader representation of womanhood. However, intellectual conversations about theological theories do not easily become part of lived religion. Theological storytelling translates abstract theological theories into concrete, easily visualized examples that can be internalized as beliefs. In order to make this theory accessible and to provide an example of how including LGBTQ+ gods might change our concept of godhood, I offer a short theological story reimagining a queer-inclusive extended heavenly family. Although they may not be the gods most Latter-day Saints are familiar with, these additional figures and groupings are part of our greater heavenly family. Understanding queer stories of godhood expands limited or narrow concepts of divinity to include all of humanity.

To be clear, through theological storytelling I seek to find clarity regarding previous, imperfect, and exclusionary constructions of deity, not to create new doctrine from scratch. Teachings of Church leaders are filtered through their personal biases and historical context. Consequently, these teachings are not, and cannot be, objective. In that sense, all the truths that Mormonism claims to teach of God are constructed through and limited by human perception. The process of questioning and exploring alters the limits human biases place on understanding the nature of God, allowing perspectives to shift and uncover previously unseen truths.

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3. Caroline Kline, “A Multiplicity of Theological Groupings and Identities—Without Giving Up on Heavenly Mother,” *By Common Consent* (blog), Sept. 2, 2016, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2016/09/02/a-multiplicity-of-theological-groupings-and-identities-without-giving-up-on-heavenly-mother/>.

## Who is Heavenly Mother?

The doctrine of Heavenly Mother is rooted in the literal interpretations of scripture describing God as a Father and theistic anthropomorphism by leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If we are children of God the Father, early Church members reasoned, then there must also be a God the Mother. Joseph Smith taught Zina Diantha Huntington Young<sup>4</sup> and Eliza R. Snow that they had a Mother in Heaven.<sup>5</sup> Other Church leaders have since also taught of the existence of Heavenly Mother, including in official documents such as the 1909 First Presidency statement<sup>6</sup> and the 1995 “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”<sup>7</sup>

Unlike the traditional Christian interpretation of gendered terminology relating to God as metaphorical, Mormons interpret gendered pronouns very literally. Brigham Young taught that all humans were “created . . . in the image of our father and our mother, the image of our God” and indicated that this was consistent with the biblical account of both “male and female” being made in the image of God.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Adam was created in the image of Heavenly Father; Eve was created in the image of Heavenly Mother. Additionally, both heavenly parents have “[bodies] of flesh and bone as tangible as man’s.”<sup>9</sup> According to

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4. Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward, *Four Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 107.

5. Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 100.

6. First Presidency of the Church, “The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1 (1909): 78, available at <https://archive.org/details/improvementera1301unse/page/75>.

7. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.

8. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, edited by John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 51.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 130:22.

Mormon understanding, this means that “God the Father is a male with a male’s body and God the Mother is a female with a female body.”<sup>10</sup> Because “all men and women are in the similitude of” gendered and embodied heavenly parents, Church leaders assume that human bodies are similarly gendered in a binary manner.<sup>11</sup>

Although some Church leaders consider “God” to include both heavenly parents, in practice the word “God” is often understood to refer to God the Father and is accompanied by masculine pronouns.<sup>12</sup> For example, the four 2020 general conference talks that mentioned heavenly parents only used that phrase once while using “God,” “Lord,” or “Heavenly Father,” and masculine pronouns throughout the rest of the talk.<sup>13</sup> More often, Heavenly Mother is not named but is implicitly

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10. Kelli D. Potter, “A Transfeminist Critique of Mormon Theologies of Gender,” *The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion: New Perspectives on Disability, Gender, Race, and Animals*, edited by Blake Hereth and Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2019), 316.

11. First Presidency, “The Origin of Man,” 78.

12. Erastus Snow, Mar. 3, 1878, *Journal of Discourses* 19:269–70; Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 51.

13. For the four examples mentioning “heavenly parents” in 2020, see the following speeches:

Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan,” Apr. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/5loaks?lang=eng>;

Jean B. Bingham, “United in Accomplishing God’s Work,” Apr. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/34bingham?lang=eng>;

Dallin H. Oaks, “Be of Good Cheer,” Oct. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/36oaks?lang=eng>;

Michelle D. Craig, “Eyes to See,” Oct. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/14craig?lang=eng>.

included in a conversation focused on God the Father with the phrase “heavenly parents.”<sup>14</sup>

Whether explicitly included in conversations about God or included in the term “heavenly parents,” the focus tends to be on Heavenly Mother’s roles as wife or mother, how Heavenly Mother is the ideal every woman should strive to become, and how Heavenly Mother can be used to enforce complementary gender roles.

Heavenly Mother is the wife of Heavenly Father and nurturing mother of all humanity. President Boyd K. Packer taught that before birth, each human “lived in a premortal existence as individual spirit children of heavenly parents” and suggested that “in the development of our characters our Heavenly Mother was perhaps particularly nurturing.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Susa Young Gates taught that “our great heavenly Mother was the greater molder” of Abraham and that she has played similarly nurturing roles since, providing “careful training” and “watchful care” to every human.<sup>16</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball taught that Heavenly Mother is “the ultimate in maternal modesty,” then asked, “knowing how profoundly our mortal mothers have shaped us here, do we suppose her influence on us as individuals to be less?”<sup>17</sup>

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14. In all the general conference talks from 2000 to 2020, there were 12,444 mentions of “God,” 2,407 mentions of “Heavenly Father,” eighty-three mentions of “heavenly parents,” three mentions of “Mother in Heaven,” and none of “Heavenly Mother.” Mark Davies, “Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 2000–2020,” LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

15. Boyd K. Packer, “Counsel to Young Men,” Apr. 2009, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2009/04/counsel-to-young-men?lang=eng>.

16. Susa Young Gates, “The Editor’s Department,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 2, no. 10 (1891): 475.

17. Spencer W. Kimball, “The True Way of Life and Salvation,” Apr. 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/04/the-true-way-of-life-and-salvation?lang=eng>.

Heavenly Mother is the “eternal prototype” of womanhood, the ideal that every Mormon woman is expected to become.<sup>18</sup> President Russell M. Nelson taught that “as begotten children of heavenly parents” humans are “endowed with the potential to become like them, just as mortal children may become like their mortal parents.”<sup>19</sup> Women are taught that they specifically have the potential to develop the traits and attributes of Heavenly Mother. For example, Vaughn J. Featherstone explained that “women are endowed with special traits and attributes that come trailing down through eternity from a divine mother. Young women have special God-given feelings about charity, love, and obedience.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Glenn L. Pace told women that when they stood before Heavenly Mother they would “see standing directly in front of you your divine nature and destiny.”<sup>21</sup> Note that these teachings also exclude men and nonbinary people from being nurturing or inheriting attributes from Heavenly Mother.

Church leaders have also repeatedly taught that Heavenly Mother’s gendered roles and attributes are complementary to Heavenly Father’s and that humans are expected to perform similarly complementary gender roles. According to several Church leaders, neither Heavenly Father nor Heavenly Mother could be complete or could become a

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18. “Our Mother in Heaven,” *Millennial Star* 72, no. 39, Sept. 29, 1910, 619–20. As the editor of *Millennial Star* at the time, this unsigned article has traditionally been attributed to Rudger Clawson.

19. Russell M. Nelson, “Perfection Pending,” Oct. 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/perfection-pending?lang=eng>.

20. Vaughn J. Featherstone, “A Champion of Youth,” Oct. 1987, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1987/10/a-champion-of-youth?lang=eng>.

21. Kimball, “The True Way of Life and Salvation.”



god on their own.<sup>22</sup> The 1916 First Presidency declaration “The Father and Son” taught that it was only together that heavenly parents could have children or attain exaltation.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Richard G. Scott taught, “In the Lord’s plan, it takes two—a man and a woman—to form a whole.” Whether Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father or a mortal couple, “husband and wife are not two identical halves, but a wondrous, divinely determined combination of complementary capacities and characteristics.”<sup>24</sup> Just as Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother could not become gods alone, human males “may never hope to reach the high destiny marked out for him by the Savior in these encouraging words: ‘Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,’ without woman by his side; for ‘neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.’”<sup>25</sup> According to David A. Bednar, the complementary gendered roles and responsibilities “of both males and females were needed to implement the plan of happiness. Alone, neither the man nor the woman could fulfill the purposes of his or her creation.”<sup>26</sup> Performing separate and complementary gender roles is seen as a way for humans to imitate Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father.

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22. Eldred G. Smith, “Exaltation,” in *Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year 1963–64*, (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1964), 6; James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 442–43; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 516–17.

23. “The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,” *Improvement Era* 19, no. 10 (1916): 942.

24. Richard G. Scott, “The Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness,” Oct. 1996, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1996/10/the-joy-of-living-the-great-plan-of-happiness?lang=eng>.

25. “Our Mother in Heaven,” 619–20.

26. David A. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” *Ensign*, June 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/06/marriage-is-essential-to-his-eternal-plan?lang=eng>.

## How do teachings about Heavenly Mother harm women and LGBTQ+ members?

There exist three major weaknesses in the current theological conception of Heavenly Mother. First, Heavenly Mother, a singular being representing the potential of all her daughters, reinforces stereotypes of motherhood as the only path to divine womanhood. Second, focusing on Heavenly Mother in the context of her marital relationship with Heavenly Father enforces binaries that exclude non-heterosexual relationships from potential godhood. Third, because narratives about Heavenly Mother's and Heavenly Father's gendered embodiment promotes cisnormativity, transgender, nonbinary, and intersex individuals are excluded from potential godhood.

In Heavenly Mother, women are given one example of female divinity. The writings and speeches of official Church leaders portray Heavenly Mother as a pedestalized, silent, childbearing partner to Heavenly Father and nurturing mother to all humanity. This framework has troubling implications for women who do not wish to or cannot have children. As Blaire Ostler observes, "The inherent nature of Heavenly Mother implies all women would desire eternal motherhood. In this sense, motherhood becomes the gatekeeper of a woman's godly potential."<sup>27</sup> Because narratives about Heavenly Mother equate motherhood with womanhood and female godhood, the only avenue toward divinity for women is through motherhood. In contrast, men have God the Father and Jesus, giving them two examples of male divinity, Father and Son. But women have only Heavenly Mother, a God described and named in terms of motherhood. Within this theological conception of womanhood, women who are not mothers are excluded from seeing themselves in God.

Pairing Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father as a husband and wife who could only become gods as a couple suggests that heterosexuality

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27. Blaire Ostler, "Heavenly Mother: The Mother of All Women," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 171.

is essential to godhood. This view of heterosexuality is based on 1 Corinthians 11:11, which states “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord,” and teachings of Church authorities. Extrapolating from his belief that God is Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother together, Erastus Snow taught, “There can be no God except he is composed of the man and woman united, and there is not in all the eternities that exist, or ever will be a God in any other way. We may never hope to attain unto the eternal power and the Godhead upon any other principle . . . [than] this Godhead composing two parts, male and female.”<sup>28</sup> This teaching was later affirmed by other Church authorities, including Hugh B. Brown, James E. Talmage, Melvin J. Ballard, and Bruce R. McConkie.<sup>29</sup> If Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother became gods in part through a heterosexual relationship, can non-heterosexual individuals also become gods? Because focusing on Heavenly Mother in the context of a male-female partnership shifts narratives about God from that of an individual to that of a heterosexual couple, this narrative enforces beliefs that heterosexuality is a prerequisite of godhood. Consequently, Heavenly Mother’s heterosexual relationship is used to exclude non-heterosexual individuals and couples from potential godhood.

The narrative of Heavenly Mother’s and Heavenly Father’s gendered embodiment is used to promote cisnormativity through a process called “cisgendering reality.” This cisgendering of reality, in turn, excludes non-cisgender individuals from potential godhood. The term “cisgendering reality” is defined as “the process whereby religious leaders and members socially construct and maintain cisnormative interpretations of the world through their ongoing teachings, rituals, and other faith-related activities,” such as by erasing, marking, or punishing transgender

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28. Erastus Snow, Mar. 3, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 19:269–70.

29. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 79–80.

existence.<sup>30</sup> Most contemporary religious cosmologies and theologies, including Mormonism, are “devoid of and ignore transgender existence. Rather than describing our world, they breathe life into an imagined world entirely composed of cisgender people” even though transgender people exist in Mormonism and have existed throughout human history.<sup>31</sup> They are similarly devoid of nonbinary, intersex, and gender-fluid individuals. By ignoring gender variance to create and enforce a binary male/female view of God and God’s children, religious narratives cisgender reality and “provide the symbolic material necessary” to judge “what is and is not acceptable to God.”<sup>32</sup>

Cisgendering reality within Mormonism is specifically associated with narratives asserting that only male and female beings exist, that God created men and women to occupy distinctly separate and complementary roles and responsibilities, and that any empirical realities that do not match these storylines should be rejected. The Church teaches that, as the literal, embodied spirit children of gendered and embodied heavenly parents, humanity consists of people who are either a “male with a male body” or a “female with a female body.” But this ignores the existence and experiences of intersex, nonbinary, gender-fluid, and transgender individuals throughout history. If all humans are made in the image of God, that includes intersex, nonbinary, gender-fluid, and transgender humans. Individuals are also expected to perform complementary gender roles based on their gender as assigned at birth—women are expected to become mothers (like Heavenly Mother) while men are expected to “preside, provide [for], and protect” their family.<sup>33</sup> When Heavenly Mother is added to discussions of Heavenly

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30. J. E. Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A. B. Mathers, “Contemporary Religion and the Cisgendering of Reality,” *Social Currents* 3, no. 3 (2016): 296.

31. Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers, “Cisgendering of Reality,” 295.

32. Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers, “Cisgendering of Reality,” 300, 305.

33. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”

Father in order to “emphasize male and female distinctions without any mention of other potentially moral options and define gender variance of any kind as an assault on the sanctity of God’s plans,” the result is the cisgendering of reality through the rejection of the empirical evidence and the lived experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals.<sup>34</sup> As philosophy professor Kelli D. Potter points out, the “idea of a natural or inherent binary sexual difference in LDS discourse makes a legible ‘sex’ the prerequisite to personhood,” meaning that non-cisgender individuals are “illegible as children of God [with] divine potentials.”<sup>35</sup> Using Heavenly Mother’s embodiment to cisgender reality withholds the potential of godhood from transgender, nonbinary, intersex, and gender-fluid individuals.

Mary Daly, a feminist philosopher and theologian, once said, “If God is male, then male is God.”<sup>36</sup> I would argue that it is also true that if God is heterosexual, then heterosexual is God, and if God is cisgender, then cisgender is God. The current conception of the feminine divine as a single being who is revered in the context of her relationships as part of a cisgender, heterosexual couple excludes the LGBTQ+ community from godhood unless they eternally perform a cisgender, heterosexual relationship.

### How have other scholars approached these issues?

Many Mormon studies scholars and theologians have sought to address these three major weaknesses in the current theological conception of Heavenly Mother. Their approaches include exploring non-biological reproduction and multiplicity of passageways, reintroducing kinship sealings, and adding additional female divine beings to our doctrinal

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34. Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers, “Cisgendering of Reality,” 300.

35. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 323.

36. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

pantheon. Scholars outside of Mormonism have also developed theology that expands godhood by feminizing the Holy Spirit or queering the Godhead.

Taylor Petrey criticizes feminist theological writings about Heavenly Mother in “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother” because they promote gender essentialism, reduce all women to one female god, reinforce binaries, and idealize heterosexuality.<sup>37</sup> Petrey argues that expanding the pantheon of female deities cannot solve the problems he outlined because additional female figures only continue to reinforce gender binaries. Instead, he suggests multiplicity to create passageways between male and female in order to expand the concept of God beyond binaries and examines the gender transgressiveness of Jesus.<sup>38</sup> While I agree with Petrey that the concept of God should extend beyond binaries, I also recognize that some women benefit from worshipping a God who intimately understands biological processes like menstruation, miscarriage, pregnancy, and menopause. Embodied representation of diverse identities and experiences is essential to developing an inclusive theology.

In response to Taylor Petrey’s article, religious studies professor Caroline Kline observes, “How deity is constructed has implications for our own eternal futures. If God is a married heterosexual couple, then how can we create theological space for LGBTQ people in heaven? How can we find theological room for LGBTQ people to form eternal partnerships with those of their choice and act as partnered Gods to enable new generations of humans to grow and progress and reach their eternal destinies?”<sup>39</sup> I would add, if God is cisgender, how can we create theological space for transgender, intersex, and nonbinary

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37. Taylor G. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (2016): 315–41.

38. Taylor G. Petrey, “Rethinking Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother,” 315–41.

39. Kline, “A Multiplicity of Theological Groupings and Identities.”

people in heaven? How can we embrace their existence and celebrate it as sacred and divine? Noting the importance of an embodied female God to many women, Kline suggests that perhaps future theological work will “retain Heavenly Mother as equal to Heavenly Father, but nuance this male/female pairing by bringing forward and theologically developing other divine groupings and formations.”<sup>40</sup>

Multiple scholars have explored other divine, feminine groupings or formations. However, these additional female deities reinforce traditional beliefs about gender and sexuality that effectively exclude the LGBTQ+ community from godhood unless they perform cisgender heterosexuality. To expand the Mormon concept of female divinity beyond Heavenly Mother, Margaret Toscano has suggested a female trinity of Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit, as well as a variety of female divine figures including the Bride, Zion, Eve, and Sophia.<sup>41</sup> Other non-Mormon scholars, including Margaret Barker, have also explored the Holy Ghost as feminine.<sup>42</sup> Although these theological writings do not limit divinity to a heterosexual couple, they don’t explicitly expand the concept of God to include queer individuals or relationships. These additional female divinities are either unembodied (like Zion and the Holy Spirit) or are based on biblical characters like Eve and Mary, but, because of the ongoing cisgendering of reality, they are assumed to be cisgender, meaning that they do not make divinity more inclusive for nonbinary, intersex, transgender, and gender-fluid individuals. In order to be queer-inclusive, additional embodied deities must be explicitly non-cisgender or non-heterosexual.

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40. Kline, “A Multiplicity of Theological Groupings and Identities.”

41. Margaret Merrill Toscano, “Put on Your Strength O Daughters of Zion: Claiming Priesthood and Knowing the Mother,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 427–35.

42. Margaret Barker, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? (Job 28.12),” MargaretBarker.com, 2001, [http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/Where shallWisdombeFound.pdf](http://www.margaretbarker.com/Papers/Where%20shallWisdombeFound.pdf).

Scholars outside of Mormon studies have explored expanding divinity through queering the Godhead. For example, Nancy Wilson and Robert Williams write of Jesus as a gay man.<sup>43</sup> In *Indecent Theology*, Marcella Althaus-Reid imagines Christ as a young lesbian, a transgender person, and as a lover kissing and cuddling Lazarus after raising him from the dead.<sup>44</sup> Kittredge Cherry's *Jesus In Love* tells the story of a bisexual, transgender Jesus who is in relationships with both the apostle John and Mary Magdalene.<sup>45</sup> Gavin D'Costa, Marcella Althaus-Reid, and Patrick Cheng also explore the Trinity as a polyamorous grouping.<sup>46</sup> Each of these writers creatively and effectively expands divinity to include queerness in non-Mormon theology.

Nevertheless, there is space within Mormon history and theology to include LGBTQ+ identities. Historically, Mormon teachings about gender and sexuality have actually been fluid rather than fixed.<sup>47</sup> Past teachings about gender include that each individual chose their gender before birth, that gender would be eliminated after death,<sup>48</sup> and that each person's gender was assigned by God.<sup>49</sup> According to contemporary teachings, gender is "an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose."<sup>50</sup> Exactly what

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43. Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 21, 81.

44. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 116, 122.

45. Kittredge Cherry, *Jesus In Love* (Berkeley, Calif.: AndroGyne Press, 2006).

46. Cheng, *Radical Love*, 57–59.

47. For an in-depth exploration of the fluidity of gender and sexuality in modern Mormonism, see Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

48. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 214.

49. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 43.

50. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World."



constitutes gender remains unclear, however, as gender sometimes appears to refer to biological sex, prescribed gender roles, or gender expression throughout Church documents. The meaning of the “eternal” nature of gender is similarly vague. According to Blaire Ostler, “Eternal does not mean static or unchanging. Eternal means ‘existing forever’ or perhaps ‘endless time’ and to exist in Mormon theology is to be in a constant state of change or evolution. Some might even call it eternal progression.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, the teaching that gender is eternal does not mean that gender is static. Kelli D. Potter similarly argues that “the Mormon emphasis on divine and human embodiment can be quite affirming” for nonbinary transgender individuals because “being male and female is a matter of degree” and sex and gender can be “subject to constant change due to the impermanent nature of embodiment.”<sup>52</sup> Given the multiple meanings of both “gender” and “eternal” within Mormon theology, it is possible to understand gender as both nonbinary and changeable.

Past teachings about relationships and sexuality have undergone similar shifts, including banning then permitting interracial marriage,<sup>53</sup> limiting the purpose of sex to procreation then expanding it to include pleasure and emotional bonding of spouses,<sup>54</sup> determining what sexual practices were acceptable in marriage,<sup>55</sup> and declaring polygamist marriage a requirement for the highest degree of heaven.<sup>56</sup> As Kelli D. Potter

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51. Blaire Ostler, “Gender is Eternal,” *Rational Faiths* (blog), Mar. 20, 2018, <https://rationalfaiths.com/gender-is-eternal/>.

52. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 322.

53. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 20, 27, 48.

54. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 130–32.

55. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 213–14.

56. Note that though Official Declaration 1 states that the Church is “not teaching polygamy or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice,” polygamy has not fully been disavowed. Though polygamy is not practiced on earth, eternal polygamy is still practiced in the sense that a man

notes, “Orthodox Mormons are not *forced* by their theology to reject gays and trans folk; instead they are *forcing* their theology to reject queer and trans folk.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, though queer people and relationships may not be explicitly welcomed today, the historical fluidity of teachings about gender and sexuality leaves room for continued exploration in Mormon theology.

One future shift the Church could make to be more inclusive is broadening who and what relationships can be sealed in the temple. In “Queer Polygamy,” Blaire Ostler offers a way to include all—straight or not, cisgender or not, monogamous or not—in godhood through a model of queer polygamy. Building on her research of early adoptive sealings and Joseph Smith’s sealings to already married women, Ostler argues that sealings could be offered for relationships of kinship, friendship, or love. This model of queer polygamy can include sealings for an infinite number of marital, sexual, romantic, and platonic relationships. Importantly, Ostler points out that “the family is far more than just one mom and dad. It is siblings, cousins, spouses, aunts, uncles, friends, grandparents, and the generations of persons who came here before you or me.”<sup>58</sup> Family is not just a cisgender, heterosexual couple. I see no reason why our heavenly family would not be just as expansive and inclusive.

In “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” Taylor Petrey points out areas where our theology may already have space for the queer community, including in the abstractedness of celestial reproduction compared to biological reproduction, the historical practice

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may be sealed to and expect to eternally be with multiple wives. For example, Russell M. Nelson is sealed to both Dantzel (deceased) and Wendy (his living wife). Blaire Ostler, “Queer Polygamy,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 33; Doctrine and Covenants, Official Declaration 1.

57. Potter, “Transfeminist Critique,” 320.

58. Ostler, “Queer Polygamy,” 42.

of sealings as kinship, and the complexity of eternal gender.<sup>59</sup> According to Petrey, “contemporary Mormon discourse distinguishes between homosexual desires and sexual practices, permitting the former but rejecting the latter.”<sup>60</sup> As a result, homosexual relationships are excluded as a legitimate dimension of Mormon LGBTQ+ experience. Since heterosexuality is already idealized within Mormonism as an eternal male-female relationship, Petrey defines homosexuality in terms of relationships rather than only desires and practices to give homosexual and heterosexual relationships equal footing.<sup>61</sup> Petrey suggests the possibility that homosexual relationships may be allowed the same blessings of sealing as heterosexual relationships.

Like Kline and Toscano, I am not ready to erase Heavenly Mother because I see value in imagining an embodied female God who is an equal partner to a male God. Yet, as a queer woman, I also see the need for a more LGBTQ+-inclusive theology that goes beyond the additional female divine figures Toscano writes about. Thus, I follow Kline’s suggestion to theologically develop other divine groupings and formations while focusing on relationships like Petrey.<sup>62</sup> I follow Ostler’s example to imagine a sealed celestial family based on relationships of kinship, friendship, or love—eternal relationships that are not limited to only cisgender, heterosexual couples.

Both gender and sexuality are innate parts of an individual’s identity—what makes them who they are—like their sense of humor,

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59. Taylor G. Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 106–41.

60. Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” 107.

61. Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” 107.

62. I recognize that one can be homosexual without being in a homosexual relationship, just as one can be heterosexual without being in a heterosexual relationship. My focus on relationships is not meant to exclude unpartnered people but to validate queer celestial relationships of kinship, friendship, and love.

creativity, or curiosity. If queer people were to be transfigured, changed from their queer selves to something non-queer after resurrection, we would no longer be ourselves.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, I accept the premise that gender is an essential characteristic of an individual's eternal existence and assume that sexuality is similarly essential. Following Potter's suggestion, I "reject the gender binary and . . . allow that being male and female is a matter of degree with various combinations being possible in a similar way to biological sex."<sup>64</sup> Thus, in this exploration of godhood, I assume that gender and sexuality both exist on spectrums and that an individual's gender and sexuality may be fluid rather than static.

### Theological Background

The theological basis for a diverse, inclusive heavenly family is apotheosis, or the idea that an individual can become a god. Apotheosis has been taught by multiple prophets of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, starting with Joseph Smith and continuing on with modern leaders, though it is now described as exaltation.

Joseph Smith taught on several occasions that as literal children of God each human has the potential to achieve godhood. In 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon experienced a vision depicting the afterlife, including that those who are faithful on earth become "gods, even the

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63. I base this assumption on Alma 34:34, which teaches, "that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world." In other words, we will essentially be the same person after death, including our gender and sexuality. I also recognize the influence of Blaire Ostler's blog post "Celestial Genocide," which states, "Suggesting queer folks will be turned into cisgender, heterosexuals in the next life is the equivalent of the celestial genocide of queer folks."

Blaire Ostler, "Celestial Genocide," *BlaireOstler.com*, Sept. 19, 2020, <http://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2019/9/19/celestial-genocide>.

64. Potter, "Transfeminist Critique," 322.

sons of God” in the afterlife.<sup>65</sup> On April 7, 1844, Joseph Smith taught more about theosis in a funeral sermon (known as the King Follet Sermon) that explained his beliefs on the nature of God and on mankind’s ability to become gods. Of God, Smith said, “He once was a man like one of us and that God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled on an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh and like us.”<sup>66</sup> Later in the sermon, Smith counseled the audience, “You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, according to Joseph Smith, (1) our God was once a mortal living on an earth like we are now, and (2) our God is one of many gods who have lived mortal lives as part of their eternal progression.

Other Mormon prophets have also taught apotheosis. Lorenzo Snow penned the succinct couplet “As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be.”<sup>68</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith more explicitly described the role of the extended heavenly family in apotheosis. God’s father “passed through a period of mortality even as he passed through mortality, and as we all are doing. Our Father in heaven, according to the Prophet, had a Father, and since there has been a condition of this kind through all eternity, each Father had a Father.”<sup>69</sup> Our Heavenly Father has a father, a grandfather, a great-grandfather, and so on, each

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65. Doctrine and Covenants 76:58.

66. Joseph Smith, “King Follet Sermon,” Apr. 7, 1844, in *History of the Church*, 6:311, available at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/further-study-lesson/volume-6-chapter-14/>.

67. Smith, “King Follet Sermon.”

68. Lorenzo Snow, “The Grand Destiny of Man,” *Deseret Evening News* 52, no. 207, Jul. 20, 1901, 22.

69. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Exaltation: Joint Heirs with Jesus Christ,” *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, edited by Bruce R. McConkie, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), 249.

of whom experienced a mortal probation prior to godhood. Presumably, our Heavenly Mother also has family members and progenitors who experienced their own mortal probations before becoming gods.

Modern Church leaders frequently talk about apotheosis in terms of exaltation and ongoing relationships. “Exaltation” refers to a future state in which humans have become like God and live as God does now.<sup>70</sup> A key part of the discussion of exaltation is the continuation of loving and familial relationships. According to Doctrine and Covenants 130, the relationships we have here on earth will continue in heaven, “only they will be coupled with eternal glory.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, relationships will continue after death, but in an improved and glorified way.

This relational focus of exaltation is emphasized in the Gospel Topics essay “Becoming Like God.” The essay states that Church members imagine and desire exaltation “less through images of what they will get and more through the relationships they have now and how those relationships might be purified and elevated.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Dallin H. Oaks described the importance of continuing family relationships as part of apotheosis. “For us, eternal life is not a mystical union with an incomprehensible spirit-god. Eternal life is family life with a loving Father in Heaven and with our progenitors and our posterity.”<sup>73</sup> It is the continuation of our relationship with God and our relationships with those we love that will make exaltation—and thus godhood—joyful.<sup>74</sup>

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70. Fielding Smith, “Exaltation: Joint Heirs with Jesus Christ,” 241.

71. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

72. “Becoming Like God,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/becoming-like-god?lang=eng>.

73. Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” Apr. 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/04/apostasy-and-restoration?lang=eng>.

74. Joy is an important part of Mormon theology and is related to both humans’ purpose on earth and what God desires for their children. Joseph Smith taught, “Happiness is the object and design of our existence.” Similarly, the Book of Mormon teaches that “men [and women and nonbinary people] are that they might have joy” (2 Ne. 2:25). Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 5:134.

To ensure the continuation of relationships past death, Joseph Smith introduced a sealing ritual. The types of relationships that have been eligible for sealing have varied since the introduction of the sealing ceremony. From around 1842 until 1894, men could be adopted through sealing to another man without the need for genetic relationship or legal adoption. The purpose of this adoptive sealing was to connect them with someone (usually an apostle, General Authority, or local Church leader) who was already sealed. This grafted their family line to the family of God.<sup>75</sup> Sometimes these adopted sons even took their adoptive father's last name, though these adoptive sealings were not accompanied by legal adoption.<sup>76</sup> Some women who were already legally married were simultaneously sealed to other men. For example, one-third of the sealings Joseph Smith participated in before his death were polyandrous, i.e., sealings to women who were already married and who continued living with their legal husbands.<sup>77</sup> Today, heterosexual couples may be sealed in temples, and biological or legally adopted children may be sealed to their parents. The sealing ritual has not always been limited to legally married, cisgender and heterosexual couples and their children. Expanding the sealing ritual to include all loving relationships and all family formations is a vital step toward meaningful inclusion of both queer and unmarried members.

Although they may not be permitted by current policies, Blaire Ostler and Taylor Petrey convincingly argue for why queer sealings and queer people fit into the theological frame of Mormonism. Both point out that a primary objection to the possibility that queer relationships can be eternal is the question of procreation. And yet, how can we

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75. Gordon Irving, "The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1974): 3.

76. Irving, "Law of Adoption," 4.

77. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 38.

presume to limit an infinite and powerful God to biological procreation when (with modern technology) we ourselves are no longer limited to biological procreation? Ostler also observes that “the purpose of sealing isn’t to legitimize sexual behavior; the purpose of sealing is to legitimize the eternal and everlasting bonds that people share with one another.”<sup>78</sup> These bonds exist wherever there is love, including in queer relationships. Petrey points out that both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon teach that God does not withhold salvation based on one’s gender, race, or status.<sup>79</sup> Why, then, would a God who “denieth none that come unto him” withhold sealings or exaltation based on an individual’s queerness? If gender and sexuality are essential characteristics of one’s eternal nature, and if God does not deny salvation based on gender, race, status, or sexuality, then queer people will be exalted as queer people.

If we believe God—our heavenly parents—once lived on an earth as we do now, then they are not the only gods. Our heavenly parents also have parents and siblings and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends from their earthly experience who are now gods. Together all these gods form a heavenly family, an extended family of gods. Like humans on our earth, this heavenly family is diverse. There are members of the heavenly family with many different eye colors, skin tones, hair textures, gifts, talents, and abilities. Some members of the heavenly family are queer. The loving relationships members of the heavenly family formed during their mortal experiences have continued but are now “coupled with eternal glory” and godhood.<sup>80</sup> The variety of loving relationships that exist on our earth, including queer relationships, is reflected in the diversity of loving relationships in the

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78. Blaire Ostler, “Queer Polygamy,” 41.

79. See Galatians 3:28 and 2 Nephi 26:33; Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” 129.

80. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.



heavenly family. This heavenly family includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer gods. Thus, the heavenly family is queer, or at the very least includes queerness.

### Theological Storytelling

As important as developing theology on an intellectual level is, it is only the first step of creating a Mormon theology broad and expansive enough to include all of God's children. New theological ideas, like this theory of a queer heavenly family, have little lasting impact without theological storytelling to connect theories and ideas with emotion and belief.

Stories provide a way for theological ideas to connect with emotions and impact what we believe and how we live our lives. As Colleen Mary Carpenter writes, "New 'images' of God that don't fit in the old stories have no anchor, no hold on our hearts. They exist in the rational corner of our minds but not in the worshipping center of our existence, the core of our being where we meet God. That core has been shaped by a lifetime of story, song, and symbol, and if we rationally wish to change it, then we must seek out new stories, new songs, and new symbols."<sup>81</sup> Stories are the bridge between the theological theories of the mind and the beliefs of the soul.

Theological storytelling, or midrash, is a common practice in Jewish rabbinical tradition. Wilda Gafney, a Hebrew Bible scholar and theologian, explains, "Midrash interprets not only the text before the reader, but also the text behind and beyond the text and the text between the lines of the text. In rabbinic thinking, each letter and the spaces between the letters are available for interpretive work."<sup>82</sup> These gaps

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81. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story: Women, Suffering, and Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 3. This author now publishes as Colleen Mary Carpenter.

82. Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 4–5.

in the text or story aren't errors but opportunities for revelatory storytelling. Midrash doesn't overwrite existing scripture; it "reimagine[s] dominant narrational readings while crafting new ones to stand alongside—not replace—former readings."<sup>83</sup> In effect, midrash is part of an ongoing conversation focused on discovering the relationship between God and humans.

Borrowing from the Jewish tradition of midrash, modern theological storytellers like Carpenter, Gafney, and Rachel Held Evans creatively retell biblical stories to explore modern questions and expand understanding of both themselves and God. Through their retellings, they "rethink the religious traditions in which they live, to find glimmers of truth submerged in existing tradition."<sup>84</sup>

The story of godhood as told within the existing tradition of Mormonism is the story of a cisgender, heterosexual couple. In the text behind and between the lines of this story—the spaces between words—are gaps created by the absence of LGBTQ+ people in our theological storytelling. If we are to develop and practice a theology truly broad and expansive enough to include all of God's diverse children, the story of God as a cisgender, heterosexual couple must be accompanied by additional stories—stories of gay and loving gods, of joyful transgender gods, of radical queer acceptance by other members of the heavenly family.

Inspired by the theological storytelling of Carpenter, Gafney, and Evans, I offer the following short but queer-inclusive story of our Heavenly Family.

*The heavenly family is queer. Sure, our heavenly parents are in a heterosexual relationship, but the heavenly family is bigger than just our heavenly parents. It includes parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even close friends.*

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83. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 3.

84. Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story*, 67.

*One of our Heavenly Father's parents is nonbinary. Heavenly Father calls them Zaza, a gender-neutral term of endearment for a parent.*

*Our Heavenly Mother and her brother are both straight, but their older sister (and our Heavenly Mother's best friend) is a lesbian goddess celestially partnered with her transgender<sup>85</sup> wife. They preside as gods over a world they created together.*

*Heavenly Father has an asexual uncle. He was never interested in marriage, but he is sealed to several close friends with whom he collaborates on creation and constantly teases. He always knows how to make you laugh if you're feeling down.*

*And Heavenly Mother's grandfather is gay. Together he and his husband have created some of the most intriguing and beautiful animals known to the extended heavenly family.*

*One of Heavenly Mother's cousins is polyamorous<sup>86</sup> and has three spouses. She presides over a world in partnership with her wife and two husbands, all gods together. They like being able to split up responsibilities among four people instead of two.*

*Of course, these are only a few members of the heavenly family. Our heavenly family is so large it would take me more than a day and a night to tell you about each member. But most importantly, no matter the differences in whom they love and choose to lead a celestial life with,*

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85. Transgender people identify with a different gender than was assigned to them at birth. In this example, this goddess was incorrectly assigned a non-female gender at her mortal birth, but her eternal gender is female. She is also a lesbian because she is a woman and is attracted to other women.

86. Polyamory is the practice or ability to have more than one loving sexual relationship at a time, with the consent of all involved. Though there is some debate about whether polyamory belongs under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, I include it in this theological story because of both its similarities and differences to the polygamist history of Mormonism. Both traditional Mormon polygamy and contemporary polyamory include multiple sexual partners, though Mormon polygamy only allows a man to have multiple female wives while polyamory allows individuals of any gender to have multiple partners of any gender. Polyamory is also distinct from Mormon polygamy because of the focus on the consent of all parties involved. In contrast, Doctrine and Covenants 130 provides a loophole that means the consent of prior wives is not required in Mormon polygamy.

*all members of the heavenly family—queer or not—are welcomed and celebrated at heavenly family reunions.*

I do not offer this as a definitive theological story but as an example of how our concept of godhood might change as we add divine LGBTQ+ groupings and pairings to our existing theological story. Perhaps there are glimmers of truth in this story, too.

### Why does heavenly queerness matter?

Stories of godhood don't matter because they change the nature of God. They matter because they change our understanding of what divinity looks like, of where there is potential for godhood. They shift how we think about who God is and who can become God. By expanding our concept of godhood, this theological story of a queer heavenly family replaces exclusion with hope and offers a way to see godliness in all humanity, including the LGBTQ+ community.

Theological storytelling of a queer heavenly family offers hope instead of exclusion. If the only story of godhood is that of a cisgender, heterosexual couple, then most LGBTQ+ members are excluded from achieving godhood unless they choose to eternally perform a cisgender, heterosexual relationship. Within Mormon theology, if one is excluded from hope of godhood, one is also excluded from being with loved ones after this life (and, consequently, joy). When the story of godhood includes a multitude of different groupings and pairings in a queer heavenly family, then that story offers hope of godhood and eternal, loving relationships to all.

The story of a queer-inclusive heavenly family offers a way to see godliness in all humanity. The prophet Joseph Smith taught, "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."<sup>87</sup> If I, a queer woman, only know the story of God as a cisgender, heterosexual individual or couple, how can I see godliness

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87. Smith, "King Follet Sermon."

in myself? If a straight, cisgender person only knows the story of God as a cisgender, heterosexual individual or couple, how can they see godliness in their transgender friend, their gay neighbor, their nonbinary child? We are all created in God's image. Recognizing our divinity leads to greater respect, compassion, and affirmation of ourselves and one another and offers everyone hope for godhood and joy. Without a diverse heavenly family, anyone may struggle to see godliness in themselves or in their earthly family or friends. With a theological story of a queer Heavenly Family, potential for godhood expands to include all of humanity.

### Conclusion

As Blaire Ostler observes in "Heavenly Mother: The Mother of All Women," if all human beings have "the potential to be a God in Mormon theology, Godly esthetics should reflect the image of all Their children."<sup>88</sup> Through apotheosis and the possibilities of queer sealings (as established by Blaire Ostler), we can imagine a beautifully diverse and inclusive heavenly family. By expanding our concept of godhood and telling new stories of a queer heavenly family, we offer a theology of hope rather than exclusion to LGBTQ+ members.

Although my primary purpose in imagining this heavenly family is to theologize an LGBTQ+-inclusive godhood, this concept of an extended heavenly family also benefits straight, cisgender women and, indeed, anyone who is unable to or uninterested in eternally performing a traditional form of male/female gender roles in a heterosexual relationship. It offers many examples of divinity that are independent of complementary male/female gender roles. The theological story I write is both limited and inspired by my own experiences as a queer Mormon woman. I hope others will create their own theological stories of additional pairings and groupings based on their individual identities and

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88. Ostler, "Heavenly Mother," 181.

experiences. Just as knowledge of their potential for godhood “transforms the way Latter-day Saints see . . . [cisgender, heterosexual] human beings,” perhaps theological storytelling of a queer-inclusive heavenly family will transform the way Latter-day Saints see LGBTQ+ human beings.<sup>89</sup>

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89. “Becoming Like God.”

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"Carry Those Who Can No Longer Stand Strong,"  
by Page Turner, 2021

# I AM A CHILD OF GODS

Blaire Ostler

*“Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them.”*

—D&C 132:20

The doctrine of Heavenly Mother is cherished among Latter-day Saints.<sup>1</sup> She is birthed from necessity in a physicalist theology. Though she has feminist roots, her theology in Mormonism is laced with latent gender essentialist and complementarian theories. Both have been used in modern Mormonism to exclude the LGBTQ+ community from Mormonism. The assertion that God is composed of one fertile, cis-gender, heterosexual couple, namely Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father, is a narrow interpretation of the broadness of Mormon theology. Though gender essentialist interpretations of Heavenly Mother are queer-exclusionary, her presence in Mormon theology opens the door to a robust polytheism that includes an entire community of gods, diverse in gender, race, ability, and desires. In this paper, I argue that if we are all made in the image of God, God is significantly larger than a fertile, cisgender, heterosexual female and male coupling. Through deification, we all have the potential to become gods. In Mormonism, our theology cannot be fully understood unless it is developed within the bounds of the concrete, material, physical, and practical experiences of our human experience. Theosis, or the process of becoming

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1. “Mother in Heaven,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/mother-in-heaven?lang=eng>.



gods, implies a polytheism filled with generational gods as diverse as all humanity.

### Early Gods

The doctrine of Heavenly Mother can be traced back to many early Saints, including Eliza R. Snow, W. W. Phelps, Edward Tullidge, Orson Pratt, and Erastus Snow. The earliest references to Heavenly Mother in Mormon theology were found in poetry and theologically committed to physicalism, also called “materialism.” In Mormonism, heavenly beings and families are material like our earthly bodies and families. Not only that, our earthly existence functions as a pattern for a heavenly existence.

One of the earliest and most popular affirmations of Heavenly Mother comes from Eliza R. Snow, polygamous wife to both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Her status in the patriarchal order of the Church gave her significant credibility in her poetry and theology. For many, Eliza R. Snow’s poem “Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother” is the most notable beginning of Heavenly Mother in Latter-day Saint worship. Today, Latter-day Saints now sing Snow’s poem in a hymn called “O My Father.” In this poem, Snow potently infuses theology with “reason”: “Truth is reason; truth eternal tells me I have a mother there.” In the first and second verses, she writes about her premortal existence and her longing to return to an “exalted sphere.” In the third verse, she “reasons” that heavenly families must be patterned after earthly families, which include mothers and fathers. She asks, “In the heav’ns are parents single?” To this she replies that the thought of a single parent “makes reason stare!” This seems to defy all reason to Snow. Single parents existed in Snow’s social world, so the allusion to needing both a mother and a father is likely a biological one. The thought of a single Heavenly Father asexually creating all these spirit children is so strange that the “truth” of her “reason” is that we must have “a mother there.” Lastly, the final verse concludes with her

desire to meet both her Father and Mother after her earthly probation is over.<sup>2</sup> Snow's poem is a testament to Mormonism's commitment to physicalism. In Mormon theology, the earth and heavens are physical or supervene on the physical. In this case, if it takes a fertile cisgender man and woman to make children on earth, it stands to reason, in Snow's mind, that it takes a fertile cisgender man and woman to make children in the heavens.

Edward W. Tullidge, literary critic, newspaper editor, historian, and influential Latter-day Saint, also wrote about the union of man and woman as a necessary component of celestial glory. In his poem titled "Marriage," he uses Heavenly Mother to promote complementarian themes and views on gender differences. In short, men and women, in Tullidge's view, are complements and are perfected through one another. In the first verse of his poem, he uses couplings and pairs to demonstrate that it is by design that man and woman are created for one another. He muses that, when unionized, "two lives, two natures, and two kindred souls" are completed. When separated, they are only parts, "not two perfect wholes" but only incomplete halves to a whole. For Tullidge, "sexes reach their culminating point" when they merge as one. In the second verse, he explicitly states that sexes will never end and asks rhetorically, "Himself sexless and non-mated God? A 'perfect' man and yet himself no man?" Here, Tullidge is suggesting that a perfected god cannot be a sexless god. According to Tullidge, sex is a material reality on earth and will continue into heavenly realities: as he writes in the poem, God's "works on earth" are patterned on "things above." This is another demonstration of the early Saints' commitment to physicalism. Finally, in the last verse of the poem, Tullidge concludes with a reference to theosis. In wedlock, couples become like the "first holy pair" and may become "parents of a race as great."<sup>3</sup> In summary, Tullidge's poem

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2. "O My Father," *Hymns*, no. 292.

3. Edward W. Tullidge, "Marriage," *Millennial Star* 19, no. 41 (1857): 656.

“Marriage” demonstrates that earthly realities and lived experiences of Latter-day Saints are seen as a pattern for heavenly imaginings.

In both Eliza R. Snow’s and Edward W. Tullidge’s creative works, the doctrine of Heavenly Mother appears to be rooted in the idea that “[God’s] works on earth, but pattern things above.” For Snow, the thought of having a mother on earth and no Mother in the heavens made reason “stare” due to her physicalist views. Tullidge’s praise of the “universe” and “great nature” is another manifestation of physicalism in Mormon theology. God, the heavens, and celestial glory are not a metaphysical paradise beyond the scope of our reality. Again, physicalism is a very important philosophy embraced by early Saints that led them to believe that God must be composed of a fertile, cisgender man and woman.

The completeness of God through the union of man and woman was a common teaching in this period. For instance, in 1853 Orson Pratt affirmed, “No man can be ‘in the Lord,’ in the full sense of this passage, that is, he cannot enter into all the fullness of his glory, ‘without the woman.’ And no woman can be ‘in the Lord,’ or in the enjoyment of a fullness, ‘without the man.’”<sup>4</sup> A couple decades later in 1878, Elder Erastus Snow avowed, “If I believe anything God has ever said about himself . . . I must believe that deity consist of man and woman.”<sup>5</sup> David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido argue that Erastus Snow’s God is not a “hermaphrodite,” but a God composed of male and female through marriage. In a footnote they argue, “The passage reads much clearer within Mormon discourse and Snow’s own declarations if read from a perspective describing social unity in marriage.”<sup>6</sup> Again, even our contemporary interpretations of early Mormonism are committed to physicalist interpretations of our theology.

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4. Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” *The Seer* 1, Apr. 1853, 59.

5. Erastus Snow, Mar. 3, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 19:269–70.

6. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97.

These sentiments would persist throughout Mormonism in the following years. In the Mormon imagination, Heavenly Mother is a practical necessity and could not be erased even though some began to question her status as a deity. In 1895, George Q. Cannon contended that “there is too much of this inclination to deify ‘our mother in heaven.’ Our Father in heaven should be the object of worship. He will not have any divided worship.”<sup>7</sup> Here we can see that though Heavenly Mother is an essential part of Mormon theology, her robust and equitable inclusion in worship is at times repressed by patriarchal authority. This continued all the way to the late twentieth century. In a general conference talk by President Gordon B. Hinckley in October 1991, he affirmed the doctrine of Heavenly Mother but simultaneously excluded her from explicit worship through prayer. In his words,

Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. That doctrine rests well with me. However, in light of the instruction we have received from the Lord Himself, I regard it as inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our Mother in Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

For Hinckley, Heavenly Mother is a matter of “logic and reason,” just as Snow suggested in her poem written over a century ago. Throughout Mormon history, there seems to be a persistence among patriarchs to keep Heavenly Mother under control as a necessary but hidden cog in a physicalist theology.

### Feminist Gods

All along the way, Mormon feminists have championed the inclusion of Heavenly Mother in Mormon discourse. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a robust history or analysis of Mormon feminism, it

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7. George Q. Cannon, “Topics of the Times: The Worship of Female Deities,” *Juvenile Instructor* 30, May 5, 1895, 314–17.

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” Oct. 1991, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1991/10/daughters-of-god?lang=eng>.

is worth noting that Mormon history is deeply influenced by Mormon feminists both past and present.<sup>9</sup> Mormon feminists have been both friend and foe in the development of a gender-expansive theology. While non-queer feminist interpretations of Heavenly Mother broaden the story of God to include cisgender, heterosexual women, they often also promote gender essentialist interpretations of godhood. Mormon feminists have written poems, articles, essays, and even entire books on Heavenly Mother that further the goals of monogamous, cisgender, heterosexual women but fail to include or comprehend the needs of queer women, and often women of color. At best, non-queer feminist works have attempted to be queer inclusive with sincere intentions but with little understanding of how to actually do it. At worst, feminist works have weaponized Heavenly Mother against the queer community, furthering our exclusion from church pews, temple worship, and ultimately celestial glory with our families.<sup>10</sup>

Non-queer feminists might more thoroughly follow their own physicalist philosophy to more inclusive vistas. In the history of Mormon theology about her, Heavenly Mother generally isn't queer-inclusive, not because feminist theology is wrong but because it is incomplete. It's no wonder why some critics suggest that the inclusion of queer genders and relationships in Mormon theology could destroy the very foundation of the Church when the ultimate archetype of God in Mormon culture is shaped by gender essentialist, binary, ableist, monogamist, and complementarian biases.

Monogamy is one way that some Mormon feminists have constricted the possibilities of a theology of Heavenly Mother. For instance, Carol Lynn Pearson's *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy* advocates for a

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9. Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds., *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

10. Valerie Hudson, "Women in the Church—A Conversation with Valerie Hudson," *Faith Matters* (podcast), Dec. 29, 2019, <https://faithmatters.org/women-in-the-church-a-conversation-with-valerie-hudson/>.

single Heavenly Father and a single Heavenly Mother in an eternal pairing.<sup>11</sup> In this monogamous, cisnormative, heteronormative relationship, she strangulates theological veins that could lead to the inclusion of a multiplicity of diverse gods, including queer genders, queer pairings, and queer groupings.<sup>12</sup> The potential of polygamy could be an opportunity for lesbian, bisexual, trans, infertile, asexual, non-monogamous, and intersex Heavenly Mothers.<sup>13</sup>

Gender essentialism is another limitation that Mormon feminists have placed on teachings about Heavenly Mother. As pointed out by religion scholar Taylor Petrey, many feminist theologians fail to see how their theological ambitions lack queer representations, just as the patriarchs fail to include women.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Toscano wrote in response to Petrey's criticism: "If there is one regret I have about *Strangers in Paradox* that I wrote with my husband Paul, it is that we didn't make homosexuality visual and theologically viable in Mormonism."<sup>15</sup> While this sentiment is appreciated and represents an improvement on the standard feminist rhetoric in the Church, it suggests a limited focus on

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11. Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Pivot Point Books, 2016).

12. Blaire Ostler, "Queer Polygamy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 33–43.

13. I want to make clear that no one should enter a marriage, polygamous or monogamous, if it is not their desire. Asking women who desire monogamy to practice polygamy for all eternity is just as oppressive as asking homosexual people to practice heterosexuality for all eternity. However, if fear of polygamy causes someone to oppress those who are different from them, they have now become the oppressor they so desperately tried to liberate themselves from.

14. Taylor Petrey, "Rethinking Mormonism's Heavenly Mother," *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (2016): 16.

15. Margaret Toscano, "How Bodies Matter: A Response to 'Rethinking Mormonism's Heavenly Mother,'" *By Common Consent* (blog), Aug. 30, 2016, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2016/08/30/how-bodies-matter-a-response-to-rethinking-mormonisms-heavenly-mother/>.

homosexuality rather than a more capacious vision of how to include queer women and people in Mormon feminist theology. Mormon feminists should consider how to better include intersex, nonbinary, and trans women in their ambitions. Queerness is more than homosexuality.

Queer Mormon women are women. Feminist and queer approaches should work together to accomplish shared goals of inclusion. These tensions about which women are included in feminism is a long-standing one. Sojourner Truth confronted the hypocrisy of white feminism as far back as the 1850s in her unforgettable speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”<sup>16</sup> These criticisms have been echoed by many women of color throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>17</sup> To advocate for some women and not all women hardly seems like a feminism worth championing and does not embody the notion that “all are alike unto God.”<sup>18</sup>

People are very good at fashioning God in their own image. This observation is not intended as a slight, nor is it intended to discourage anyone from equitable representation in godhood. My observation that we fashion gods in our image is not an affront but an invitation for LGBTQ+ Saints, Saints of color, single Saints, infertile Saints, and disabled Saints to tell the story of God too. We are all made in the image of God and thus, as believers of Mormon theology, are called to champion the creation of gods as diverse as ourselves.

### Queer Gods

God is “they” in Mormonism.<sup>19</sup> Many Mormon feminists, Church leaders, and scholars of religion alike have insisted that God is plural—not

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16. Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I A Woman?,” speech, Women’s Rights Convention, May 29, 1851, Akron, Ohio, available at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>.

17. bell hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

18. 2 Nephi 26:33.

19. Genesis 3:22; Doctrine and Covenants 132:20.

simply “he” or “she” but “they.”<sup>20</sup> Even modern prophets have referenced Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father as “them.” Dallin H. Oaks is just one example of this when he wrote in an *Ensign* article, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.”<sup>21</sup> Though God and heavenly parents have both worn “they” pronouns, the preceding analysis has shown that it is more often than not used to represent a fertile, cisgender, heterosexual, male and female pairing.

While many agree that God is “they,” few consider the ramifications of a “they” God beyond cisnormative, heteronormative, and mononormative assumptions. As previously discussed, many early Mormons considered God to be “they” by earthly reproductive default. For many feminists, God is “they” because women lack divine representation. Yet, for many queer Latter-day Saints, God is “they” because God is a community composed of diverse genders, orientations, abilities, races, bodies, and families. God is “they” because if we are all made in the image of God, “they” is the only pronoun we have in English to adequately signify the plurality and diversity that exists within our heavenly family.<sup>22</sup> God is “they” because God is a community as diverse as our earthly existence, with a diversity of Heavenly Mothers.

Under the umbrella of “God” there are many possible parental formations and familial dynamics, as exemplified in our earthly life. The union of man and woman does not need to mandate heteronormative ideas concerning reproduction, sex, or marriage. It mandates the possibility of multi-gender alliances, partnerships, and cooperation, just like here on earth. Keep in mind that Zion was called Zion because the people were of one heart and one mind.<sup>23</sup> The intimacy of being joined

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20. Tyler Chadwick, Dayna Patterson, Martin Pulido, eds., *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Poetry* (El Cerrito, Calif.: Peculiar Pages, 2018), 4.

21. Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” Apr. 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/04/apostasy-and-restoration?lang=eng>.

22. Genesis 1:27; Genesis 3:22.

23. Moses 7:18.



together in heart and mind is not limited to heterosexual relationships between men and women. Zion is bigger. Even families sealed in the temple share more than genetic material.<sup>24</sup>

If life on earth is a pattern for life above, we can see that there are many different family formations on earth right now. Yes, there is the mono-cis-hetero nuclear family model, but there are a lot of other different family groupings too. There are also eternal polygamist groupings. Many Church authorities, from Joseph Smith to President Russell M. Nelson, have been sealed to more than one partner.<sup>25</sup> President Nelson's eternal family includes two wives, two mothers, two lovers. Some families have two moms, be they polygamist or lesbian. Some families have two dads, be they gay or stepfathers. Some families are single-parent families, and some families have no children. Some families have biological children while others have adopted children. Family relationships in mortality are varied, but under cis-hetero supremacist ideas, we are taught that some of these families are less than, imposters, or counterfeit.<sup>26</sup> Yet, once again, Snow and Tullidge set a powerful precedent when it comes to celestial glory. If life on earth is a pattern for life above, life above is just as diverse as the socialities that exist here among us on earth, and that includes queer families and genders.<sup>27</sup>

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24. *General Handbook: Serving in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [July 2021], 38.4.2., "Sealing Children to Parents," [https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title\\_number81](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number81).

25. "Elder Russell M. Nelson Marries Wendy L. Watson," *Newsroom*, Apr. 6, 2006, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/elder-russell-m.-nelson-marries-wendy-l.-watson>.

26. L. Tom Perry, "Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World," Apr. 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-and-family-matter-everywhere-in-the-world?lang=eng>.

27. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

Furthermore, in Genesis 1:27, we are symbiotically created in the image of God, both male and female. People have read this passage of scripture and quickly assumed that this excludes queer, trans, or nonbinary genders, but that hasty reading of scripture is incomplete. In Genesis we also read about how God created night and day—two contrasting polarities separated from one another through lightness and darkness.<sup>28</sup> At first glance it might seem like the division between day and night creates a clear binary. However, in the following sentence, it states that God also created evening and morning.<sup>29</sup> Night and day, both necessary and lovely, are opposites resting at the ends of a broad spectrum. In transition between them is morning and evening. Yes, God created night and day, but God also created dawn and dusk. Dawn and dusk are no less godly than night and day simply because they are transitions. The same is true of humanity. God created man and woman—two lovely binaries made in the image of God. Yet in transition between them are nonbinary bodies and spirits. Though we are rare, we are no less godly. We are the dawn and dusk of humanity. There is a spectrum of transitions between lightness and darkness, day and night, earth and water, man and woman. We are all made in the image of God—intersex, nonbinary, and trans—because God created more than binaries.

Each of us is the coeternal image of God.<sup>30</sup> In a physicalist theology, we are literally made in their likeness. God is a community intimately intertwined with the materiality of every living entity. God is life eternal—wholly, singly, and plurally.<sup>31</sup> Any other reductive, androcentric,

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28. Genesis 1:3–5.

29. Genesis 1:5.

30. Joseph Smith, “King Follet Sermon,” Apr. 7, 1844, in *History of the Church*, 6:311, available at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/further-study-lesson/volume-6-chapter-14/>. “There never was a time when there were not spirits; for they are co-equal [co-eternal] with our Father in heaven.”

31. John 17:3; Doctrine and Covenants 14:7; Moses 1:4; Moses 1:39.

cisnormative, heteronormative, ableist, or white aesthetic of an all-encompassing God would be an incomplete, even harmful, representation of God's plurality. The community that is God is reflected in all life, not just men, women, or even humans. God told Moses, "Behold, I am the Lord God Almighty, and Endless is my name; for I am without beginning of days or end of years; and is not this endless?"<sup>32</sup> It stands to reason that an endless God, at the very least, has the potential to include queer bodies, queer genders, and queer families in our co-eternal nature. We have the potential to be just as diverse and endless as God through theosis.

Theosis, or the process of becoming gods, is at the core of LDS religion. It undergirds all other doctrines and policies of the Church. It does not dishonor God to emulate them. Quite the opposite. Our emulation of God is our highest respect and worship. Again, as stated by Dallin H. Oaks, "Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them."<sup>33</sup> If it does not dishonor the Father for men to emulate him, use his priesthood power, and strive to divinity, then it does not dishonor the Mother that her daughters should emulate her. Likewise, queer folks in no way dishonor God when we emulate and worship them in our works, worship, and theology. Quite the opposite—it's a manifestation of our highest respect, faith, works, and reverence.

### Generational Gods

In Mormonism, gods create gods in worlds without end, and no god exists independent of their community, heritage, or posterity.<sup>34</sup> We are taught this through scriptures, hymns, and temple ritual. Even beyond the Mormon Godhead being composed of three separate beings,

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32. Moses 1:3.

33. Oaks, "Apostasy and Restoration."

34. Moses 1:33.

including a God composed of a full spectrum of genders, marriages, alliances, relationships, and partnerships, Mormon theology can be taken even further.

In Mormonism, God is a community of generational beings. Godhood is not a one-time occurrence. From early Saints to modern prophets, we all have the potential to share in the same glory as our heavenly parents.<sup>35</sup> We do temple work because the hearts of the children turn to their parents.<sup>36</sup> The spirit of Elijah, also defined as the spirit of familial kinship and unity, demands the plurality of gods.<sup>37</sup> Being a child of God isn't just a theoretical or metaphysical proposition but has a material lineage and posterity. In the taxonomy of gods, we are the same species as God.<sup>38</sup> We are all made in the image of God with the potential to join the endless network of gods above and partake of our heavenly inheritance. Our theology is so much grander than a single Heavenly Father or Mother. God is expansive, dynamic, generational, and endless. Yet at the same time God is as familial, personal, and physical as a great-grandparent or great-grandchild.<sup>39</sup>

God wasn't always God but became God.<sup>40</sup> God was once a child of God, too. God also has heavenly parents. Likewise, those heavenly parents have heavenly parents, and those heavenly parents have heavenly parents. Not only that: if our children make it to godhood they

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35. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Elder Holland Arizona April 2016," YouTube, Apr. 30, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4\\_LcENySzQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4_LcENySzQ).

36. Malachi 4:6.

37. Doctrine and Covenants 138:47–48; Doctrine and Covenants 110:13–16.

38. Andrew C. Skinner, *To Become Like God: Witnesses of Our Divine Potential* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 13.

39. Doctrine and Covenants 76:24.

40. Smith, "King Follet Sermon," in *History of the Church*, 6:305, available at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/further-study-lesson/volume-6-chapter-14/>. "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret."

will become gods too, and their children will become gods, and their children's children will become gods. Gods birth gods in an eternal, interconnected round. God is an eternal, never-ending cycle of creation without beginning or end.<sup>41</sup> As Joseph Smith taught, "The intelligence of spirits had no beginning, neither will it have an end."<sup>42</sup> If our prophets, scriptures, and rituals are to be taken seriously, God is not just God, but Gods—communally, generationally, and endlessly.<sup>43</sup>

Mormon theology leads to the inclusion of innumerable, diverse, generational gods reflected in our earthly experience. This concept is beautifully and artistically iterated in the hymn "If You Could High to Kolob," with text written by W. W. Phelps. In this iconic hymn, philosophy and poetry articulate the doctrine of generational gods. According to this hymn, no one knows where gods begin, nor if they will end.

If you could hie to Kolob  
 In the twinkling of an eye,  
 And then continue onward  
 With that same speed to fly,  
 Do you think that you could ever,  
 Through all eternity,  
 Find out the generation  
 Where Gods began to be?  
 Or see the grand beginning,  
 Where space did not extend?  
 Or view the last creation,  
 Where Gods and matter end?  
 Methinks the Spirit whispers,  
 "No man has found 'pure space,'  
 Nor seen the outside curtains,  
 Where nothing has a place."<sup>44</sup>

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41. Hebrews 7:3.

42. Smith, "King Follet Sermon."

43. Psalm 82:6; John 10:34–35; Acts 17:29.

44. "If You Could Hie to Kolob," *Hymns*, no. 284.

Phelps's poetry echoes the teachings of Joseph Smith. He taught, "If [we] do not comprehend the character of God [we] do not comprehend ourselves."<sup>45</sup> Joseph Smith is inviting us to understand that God is so much more than our limited perceptions, not just of gender, orientation, or anatomical differences, but of space, time, and eternity. The image of God includes the whole of humanity. Not just one Heavenly Mother, but many diverse, unique, and exquisite Heavenly Mothers. Not just one Heavenly Father, but many diverse, unique, and exquisite Heavenly Fathers. Not just one pairing of heavenly parents, but many diverse pairings, even groupings, of heavenly parents—polygamous or otherwise.

### Joyful Gods

God is so benevolent and grand that we all could have a place in the community of gods if it is the desire of our hearts.<sup>46</sup> We are taught in Doctrine and Covenants that we are not meant to passively wait for godhood to come to us. Mormonism is a religion of praxis—a religion of doing. Faith without works is dead.<sup>47</sup> To become gods requires us to bring to pass righteousness of our own free will without idly being told what to do and to be anxiously engaged in good causes.<sup>48</sup> Godhood is a fruition of our desires and efforts. As taught by Jeffrey R. Holland, if we want to become gods, we must do godly things with our godly desires.

We're the church that says we're gods and goddesses in embryo. We're the Church that says we're kings and queens. We're priests and priestesses. People accuse us of heresy. They say we're absolutely heretical, non-Christians because we happen to believe what all the prophets taught and that is that we are children of God, joint heirs with Christ.

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45. Smith, "King Follet Sermon."

46. Psalm 37:4; Psalm 20:4.

47. James 2:20.

48. Doctrine and Covenants 58:26–27; 2 Nephi 26:33.

We just happen to take the scriptures literally that kids grow up to be like their parents. But how does that happen? How does godliness happen? Do we just pop up? Are we just going to pop up out of the grave? Hallelujah, it's resurrection morning! Give me a universe or two. Bring me some worlds to run! . . . I don't think so. That doesn't sound like line upon line or precept upon precept to me. How do you become godly? You do godly things. That's how you become godly. And you practice and you practice and you practice.<sup>49</sup>

Now is not the time to “procrastinate the day of our salvation.”<sup>50</sup> Now is not the time to idly “dream of our mansions above.”<sup>51</sup> This is not the time to revel in smug complacency about a completed Restoration.<sup>52</sup> The Restoration is still happening.<sup>53</sup> Godhood is still and always will be in a creative and formative process. There is no end to “restoration” in a theology that believes in eternal progression. There is no end to an endless God. The inclusion and creation of queer gods beyond a single paring of fertile, cisgender, heterosexual Gods called “Heavenly Mother” and “Heavenly Father” depends on us when we are both the creator and inheritors of godhood.

In Doctrine and Covenants we are taught that the same sociality that exists here will exist in the next life, only it will be coupled with eternal glory.<sup>54</sup> Our relationships are so important that Joseph Smith declared “friendship” to be “one of the grand fundamental principles of ‘Mormonism.’” He also commented that, “Friendship is like Brother Turley in his blacksmith shop welding iron to iron; it unites the human

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49. Holland, “Elder Holland Arizona April 2016.”

50. Alma 34:35.

51. “Have I Done Any Good?,” *Hymns*, no. 223.

52. Hebrews 6:12.

53. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Are You Sleeping Through the Restoration?,” Apr. 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/are-you-sleeping-through-the-restoration?lang=eng>.

54. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

family with its happy influence.”<sup>55</sup> Smith knew the value of friendship. When he was isolated from friends he said, “Those who have not been enclosed in the walls of prison can have but little idea how sweet the voice of a friend is.”<sup>56</sup> As he was escorted to his death at Carthage, he said, “If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself.”<sup>57</sup> Godhood is not simply about couples being sealed, it’s also about friendship. The friendships, relationships, and sociality of what we have here on earth is only a taste of things to come. What we learn here from Joseph Smith is that the community of gods should be linked together on the bonds of friendship for our enjoyment, happiness, and joy.

Sadly, at present, LGBTQ+ Latter-day Saints are not included fully in the bonds of celestial friendship.<sup>58</sup> Queer Saints are abused, excluded, rejected, isolated, ridiculed, and persecuted. We have been taught implicitly and explicitly to hate ourselves, our bodies, our genders, and our orientations.<sup>59</sup> From reparative therapy to folk doctrines of transfiguring queer bodies into straight bodies, fellow Saints work toward our extinction.<sup>60</sup> At best, we are placated by false platitudes of love by those who know little of our world.<sup>61</sup> At worst, fellow Saints advocate

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55. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:517.

56. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:293.

57. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:549.

58. *General Handbook*, 38.6.15, 38.6.16, 38.6.23.

59. Andrew E. Evans, “Rise and shout, the Cougars are out,” *Outsports*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.outsports.com/2017/6/8/15746614/byu-gay-mormon-therapy>.

60. Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2021).

61. Blaire Ostler, “More Than a Statistic,” *Queer Mormon Transhumanist* (blog), Sept. 10, 2018, <http://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2018/9/10/more-than-a-statistic>.



for our celestial genocide.<sup>62</sup> It wasn't that long ago that Spencer W. Kimball was lamenting the fact the homosexuals could not receive the death penalty.<sup>63</sup> The sociality that exists within the Church does not bring us a fullness of joy and happiness and it is not because LGBTQ+ Saints are unworthy of happiness.

The book of Job shows us that not all suffering is a product of sin. Even God's most "perfect and upright" children suffer at the hands of other.<sup>64</sup> Even though he suffered greatly, "Job sinned not."<sup>65</sup> As was the belief of the time, Job's friends insisted that he must have sinned and brought this suffering upon himself.<sup>66</sup> However, Job rejected this assessment of his suffering and stood firm in his beliefs that unhappiness is not always caused by sin.<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, the suffering of queer Saints is not a product of sinful gender identities, expressions, pronouns, surgeries, or relationships. Queer suffering stems from being greeted with prejudice, fear, misunderstanding, falsehoods, skepticism, violence, and ignorance from what feels like every possible vantage point. If ever there were a group of people in need of a friendship, it is queer Latter-day Saints. The sociality that exists among the Saints today is not glorified and will not be glorified until it includes us as equitable members of the community of gods.

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62. Blaire Ostler, "Celestial Genocide," *Queer Mormon Transhumanist* (blog), Sept. 19, 2019, <http://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2019/9/19/celestial-genocide>.

63. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 79.

64. Job 1:1.

65. Job 1:22.

66. Job 36:1–12.

67. Job 31.

## Conclusion

Though the Mormon understanding of Heavenly Mother is carving a path to a more inclusive physicalist theology, she is not the only godly archetype in our repertoire. God certainly includes visions of a fertile, cisgender, heterosexual Heavenly Mother, but God also includes so much more. LGBTQ+ theologians, like myself, argue that deification includes us too. We are all made in the image of God, which includes queer, intersex, trans, and nonbinary bodies.<sup>68</sup> Deification includes diverse marriages, children, relationships, families, and socialities, even if queer sealings are delayed by prejudice set against the fulfillment of joy. We belong, if nowhere else, among the gods.

We are not just children of God. We are children of gods in an endlessly creative, dynamic community of diverse deities reflected in our earthly existence. The sociality here is that of the gods. Under this more robust vision of God, cherished hymns like “I Am a Child of God” could be enhanced by using more inclusive terminology. Surely, I am a child of gods.

I am a child of Gods,  
And they have sent me here,  
Have given me an earthly home  
With parents kind and dear.

I am a child of Gods,  
And so my needs are great;  
Help me to understand their words  
Before it grows too late.

I am a child of Gods.  
Rich blessings are in store;  
If I but learn to do their will,  
I'll live with them once more.

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68. 2 Nephi 26:33.

I am a child of Gods.  
Their promises are sure;  
Celestial glory shall be mine  
If I can but endure.

Lead me, guide me, walk beside me,  
Help me find the way.  
Teach me all that I must do  
To live with them someday.<sup>69</sup>

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69. Revised version of “I Am a Child of God,” *Hymns*, no. 301.

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# “O MY MOTHER”: MORMON FUNDAMENTALIST MOTHERS IN HEAVEN AND WOMEN’S AUTHORITY

Cristina Rosetti

The doctrine of Heavenly Mother has long been invoked by Mormon women and Mormon feminists to posit an expanded view of gender in Mormon cosmology and offer women a tangible representation of their eternal future. At the same time, the lack of worship or veneration of a divine feminine in Mormonism raises the question of whether the doctrine has the potential to influence the temporal state of Mormon women. Historically missing from the literature and theological critiques is the inclusion of Mormon groups where this is already happening. Mormon communities outside of the LDS Church *have* given Heavenly Mother a place in their meetinghouses, a priesthood role in temple liturgy, and considered the tangible outcomes of her cosmological significance in late-night conversations around the dinner table once the children are asleep and the dishes are clean. This article explores the theology of Heavenly Mother in Mormon fundamentalisms and the way it influences access to religious authority.

In 2018, I sat in a meeting of the Apostolic United Brethren (AUB) at the Rulon C. Allred building in Bluffdale, Utah and opened the hymnbook to Hymn no. 3, “O My Father.”<sup>1</sup> As I prepared to sing the

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1. Eliza R. Snow, “My Father in Heaven,” *Times and Seasons* 6, Nov. 1845, 1039. For a discussion of this poem and hymn, see Jill Mulvay Derr, “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996–97): 84–126.

hymn that became both a foundational theological text and a staple in LDS meetinghouses across the nation, I looked to the previous page and saw Hymn no. 4, “O My Mother.” The hymn, attributed to Eliza R. Snow, moves beyond LDS speculation of a Heavenly Mother and offers women an avenue for seeing themselves in Mormon cosmology.<sup>2</sup> Their exaltation is not invisible, it is tangible and reflected in the voices of women who sing the hymn at their Sunday afternoon meetings.

O my Mother, my heart longest  
To again be by Thy side,  
In the Home I once called heaven  
In Thy Mansion up on high.  
How you gave me words of counsel  
Guides to aid my straying feet.  
How you taught me by true example  
All of Father’s laws to keep.

This hymn is not the only place where Heavenly Mother is invoked in the fundamentalist movement. Since their earliest publications, fundamentalists spoke highly of Heavenly Mother, even hypothesizing a “Trinity of Mothers” and referencing the “Goddess of this world.”<sup>3</sup> For many fundamentalists, Heavenly Mother is not absent; they know they have “Mothers there,” as Snow wrote with assurance. As a perceived continuation of early Mormonism, the fundamentalist movement relied on the work of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Eliza R. Snow and Edward W. Tullidge to posit a Heavenly Mother with divine authority as an integral part of Mormon cosmology.

At the same time, the doctrine that potentially affords women eternal representation is complicated by its entanglement with plural marriage, something both LDS and non-LDS feminist theologians have

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2. The hymn was written by William C. Harrison and originally published as “Companion Poem to Eliza R. Snow’s ‘Invocation’” in the March 1, 1892 issue of the *Juvenile Instructor*, edited by George Q. Cannon.

3. Joseph W. Musser, “Comments on Conference Topics,” *Truth*, May 1938.

long deemed oppressive. The possibility of increased access to religious authority does not overshadow the numerous traumatic experiences of women within fundamentalism nor the documented abuse in these communities. Mormon groups that developed from Alma Dayer LeBaron's ordination claim, referenced throughout this article, are fraught with cases of incest and underage marriage. The accounts of women's access to a divine feminine stand alongside abusive experiences. An acknowledgment of Heavenly Mother and women's priesthood in Mormon fundamentalism does not negate or diminish the harm caused to many women and children of the tradition.

### Mother(s) There

Three decades after the publication of "O My Father," Eliza R. Snow published another poem with additional insight into the divine feminine and the earth's Heavenly Mother. In her 1877, "The Ultimatum of Human Life," Snow penned:

Obedience will the same bright garland weave,  
 As it has done for your great Mother, Eve,  
 For all her daughters on the earth, who will  
 All my requirements sacredly fulfill.  
 And what to Eve, though in her mortal life,  
 She'd been the first, the tenth, or fiftieth wife?  
 What did *she care*, when in her lowest state,  
 Whether by fools, consider'd small, or great?  
 'Twas all the same with her—she prov'd her worth—  
 She's now the Goddess and the Queen of Earth.<sup>4</sup>

For Snow, a plural wife, the doctrine of Heavenly Mother was part and parcel of Smith's cosmology that fashioned a "material heaven, comprising eternal sealed relationships between believers, both male and

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4. Eliza R. Snow, "The Ultimatum of Human Life," in *Poems, Religious, Historical and Political* (Salt Lake City: The Latter-day Saints Printing and Publishing Establishment, 1877), 8–9.

female.”<sup>5</sup> The doctrine of exaltation was dependent on an intricate connection between the entire human family, of which women were a significant part.

While there are no firsthand sources from Smith that directly reference women’s exaltation or Heavenly Mother, historian Jonathan Stapley notes that the assumption of women’s participation was prevalent to the women who were among Smith’s close associates.<sup>6</sup> As part of the construction of the Mormon heaven, Smith initiated complex sealings that sought to bind the entirety of humanity. Through temple sealings, Smith constructed a way to “[bridge] the gap that divided Mormons from each other in the cosmological priesthood network.”<sup>7</sup> Part of this sealing network were the institutions of both adoption and polygamy. By the time Snow penned “O My Father,” she was aware of the polygamous sealings that were part of the kinship bonds of heaven. Three years prior, on June 29, 1842, Snow married Smith as a plural wife. As such, her beloved hymn included the assumption of plural marriage. When she wrote her assurance of a Mother in Heaven, which she testified as evident based on both reasonable and eternal truth, she likely assumed there was more than one.<sup>8</sup>

Women’s exaltation, like men’s exaltation, is tied to the bonds forged over temple altars: their marriages and children. For this reason, Mormon cosmology is based on a required gender reciprocity. Men and women are, as scholar Amy Hoyt has written, “interdependent and must rely on each other for exaltation, although they may be individually saved.”<sup>9</sup> This is echoed by theologian Blaire Ostler, who emphatically

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5. Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11.

6. Jonathan A. Stapley, “Brigham Young’s Garden Cosmology,” *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 1 (Jan. 2021): 68–86.

7. Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 20.

8. “O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292.

9. Amy Hoyt, “Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women,” *Feminist Theology* 16, no. 1 (2007): 97.

argued, "His godhood is dependent on Her, just as Hers is dependent on Him."<sup>10</sup> However, the emphasis on a single exalting union is a recent development. Celestial marriage only became synonymous with eternal marriage, rather than plural marriage, in the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this time, Mormons believed in a theological framework where the exaltation and deification of women was inseparable from plural unions.<sup>12</sup>

Like the rituals necessary for exaltation, the power behind the sealing ritual required a gender reciprocity in the early years of the Church. During the period that Smith revealed the sealing ritual, he further elaborated on the doctrine of priesthood through the temple liturgy. In his work on the early evolution of Mormon priesthood, Jonathan Stapley differentiates between the ecclesiastical priesthood, marked by offices and ordination, and the temple or cosmological priesthood, which was a means of "materializing heaven" and forging eternal bonds.<sup>13</sup> The cosmological priesthood was the force that cemented earthly relationships and solidified the human family through a complicated web of dynastic sealing. For the cosmological priesthood to function, women's participation was not only welcome but vital.<sup>14</sup> Because it was familial in nature, the priesthood in the temple required women's participation.

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10. Blaire Ostler, "Heavenly Mother: The Mother of All Women," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 181.

11. James E. Talmage, "The Story of Mormonism," *Improvement Era* 4, no. 12 (Oct. 1901): 909. For an overview of the shifting view of celestial marriage in Mormon history, see Stephen C. Taysom, "A Uniform and Common Recollection: Joseph Smith's Legacy, Polygamy, and the Creation of Mormon Public Memory, 1852–2002," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 113–44.

12. For notable examples of Heavenly Mother described as a monogamous wife of God in Church history, see David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97.

13. Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 11.

14. Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 26.



In the nineteenth-century Mormon context, the temple liturgy that instructed the initiated in the sacred knowledge of exaltation was intimately tied to polygamy and reserved for participants in the Anointed Quorum.<sup>15</sup> The families forged on altars “had become the lingua franca of an exaltation that was steeply gendered and rooted in polygamy. In this version of plural theology, women are not denied exaltation, by any means,” writes scholar Peter Coviello.<sup>16</sup> Further, “As mothers of children, they become gods in their own right. . . . They may become gods—Mothers in Heaven—but they are gods who obey. They emerge, we might say, as gods in subjection.”<sup>17</sup> Like Mormon men, who understood themselves as “gods in embryo,” women similarly foresaw their future exalted state as one of deity.<sup>18</sup> Within this framework, women’s deification was specifically connected to their status as wives and mothers. This was further promoted by Brigham Young, who centered both plurality of wives and women’s reproduction in his discussions of exaltation.<sup>19</sup>

The connection between plural marriage and exaltation was difficult to untangle as the Church moved away from the practice. This was only further complicated by the continuation of plural temple sealings for divorced Latter-day Saint men and widowers, as well as the continued canonical status of the plural marriage revelation. Given the connection between plural marriage and women’s deification, some LDS women authors focus their attention on “the consequences of a

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15. See David John Buerger, “The Development of the Mormon Temple Endowment Ceremony,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 33–76.

16. Peter Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 126.

17. Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods*, 126.

18. Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods*, 55.

19. Stapley, “Brigham Young’s Garden Cosmology,” 84.

female deity for women," one being eternal polygamy.<sup>20</sup> It is this underlying assumption in Snow's poetry that informed many early views of women's eternal nature as well as the current fundamentalist theology of exaltation. At the same time, while embraced by polygamists across the Restoration, it is the assumed polygamous heaven of the nineteenth century that lends to concern among Latter-day Saint women who fear an eternal state unlike the monogamous one they know on earth. Carol Lynn Pearson's *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* documented this sentiment through research among LDS women who remain concerned about the potential for plural marriages.<sup>21</sup> In addition to hesitancy about their own eternal state, some Mormon women claim that the LDS Church's silence on Heavenly Mother is connected to the anxiety-riddled question: Is there more than one?<sup>22</sup>

For members of the Mormon fundamentalist movement, this question was never unanswered. Those who attained exaltation were destined to eternal polygamous unions, just as their Heavenly Mothers. While the institutional LDS Church stagnated on doctrinal teaching around Heavenly Mother, the Mormon fundamentalist movement continued to offer insight into the nature of Heavenly Mothers. Drawing on nineteenth-century Mormon doctrine, Lorin C. Woolley's School of the Prophets began teaching about Heavenly Mother in 1932 at a meeting of the members of his Priesthood Council. On March 6, Woolley offered

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20. Danny L. Jorgensen, "The Mormon Gender-Inclusive Image of God," *Journal of Mormon History* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 100.

21. See Carol Lynn Pearson, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Pivot Point Books, 2016).

22. Pearson.

names for the wives of Adam, whom he understood as the Heavenly Father of this world:<sup>23</sup>

Adam probably had three wives on earth before Mary, Mother of Jesus.

Eve—meaning 1st

Phoebe " 2nd

Sarah " 3rd, probably mother of Seth. Joseph of Armenia [Arimathea], proxy husband of Mary had one wife before Mary and four additional after.<sup>24</sup>

Woolley's comment came with little context or extrapolation. However, his prophetic counsel initiated a tradition of naming the women who were deified as Mormonism's Heavenly Mothers. Reference to the first people, Adam and Eve, as well as Phoebe and Sarah, gave early leaders an opportunity to explain the path toward women's theosis, the ability for human beings to become gods, and the place of gendered faith in the process.

Six years after Woolley's first reference to the divine feminine, Joseph W. Musser expanded the doctrine and gave increased import to the women of the Creation narrative. In his 1938 Mother's Day editorial, he again drew on Eliza R. Snow and the "great and glorious truths pertaining to women's true position in the creations of the Gods" found in her poems.<sup>25</sup> He wrote, "A Goddess came down from her mansions of glory to bring the spirits of her children down after her, in their myriads of branches and their hundreds of generations!"<sup>26</sup> "The celestial Masonry of Womanhood! The other half of the grand patriarchal economy of heavens and earth!" he declared of the elevated state his

23. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:46.

24. Joseph W. Musser, *Book of Remembrances*, transcribed and edited by Bryan Buchanan, 7. As described in the *Book of Remembrances*, Woolley further speculated that the wives of Jesus were "Martha (Industry), Mary (of god), Phoebe, Sarah (Sacrifice), Rebecca (given of God), Josephine (Daughter of Joseph), Mary Magdalen, and Mary, Martha's sister."

25. Musser, *Book of Remembrances*.

26. Joseph W. Musser, "Mother's Day," *Truth*, May 1938.

cosmology supposedly afforded women in plural unions.<sup>27</sup> Women were not only eternal spouses, they were part of the cosmological structure powered by priesthood authority.

In addition to the literal exalted state of women, Musser spoke of the metaphorical feminine that permeates Mormon theology and existed prior to Adam and Eve's descent to a telestial state.<sup>28</sup> According to his theology, the order of the cosmos was not only formed through patriarchal priesthood, but the birthing of the cosmological order necessitated womanhood and matriarchal power. Referring to Edward W. Tullidge's nineteenth-century speculation on the nature of God, he asserted that before the temporal existence of our earth's god, womanhood was manifest in the eternal structure of the "Trinity of Mothers—Eve the Mother of the world; Sarah the Mother of the covenant; Zion the Mother of celestial sons and daughters—the Mother of the new creation of Messiah's reign, which shall give to earth the crown of her glory and the cup of joy after all her ages of travail."<sup>29</sup> This trinitarian image of divine womanhood spoke to the theological place of the feminine not only embodied in women but inherent to the eternal worlds of Mormon cosmology, even before the creation of their temporal counterparts.

### Becoming Queens and Priestesses

Women's representation in the fundamentalist cosmos has the potential to afford women an avenue toward temporal authority. The exalted familial bond that exists as God in Mormonism allows for an interpretation of God's power, or priesthood, as embodied in both men and women. Heavenly Mother not only represents women's eternal future but the necessity of women's priesthood to elevate her to godliness. As with their LDS sisters, motherhood is elevated and often equated with

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27. Musser, "Mother's Day."

28. Musser, "Mother's Day."

29. Musser, "Mother's Day." See Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormonism* (New York, 1877).

priesthood. Blaire Ostler notes the conundrum this presents: “Motherhood is of such importance for Latter-day Saint women that it is often compared to a man’s priesthood ordination—not in his participation in parenthood as a father, but in his divine right to act in the name of God through priesthood authority.”<sup>30</sup> Within the LDS Church, where priesthood is not offered to women at this time, women’s authority remains located in the reproductive sphere. Unlike with LDS women, early differentiations between an ecclesiastical and cosmological priesthood allows some fundamentalist women a recognized authority in some religious spaces. This is most often attained through the Second Anointing, but also in independent ordinations to various offices. With this in mind, one of the overarching questions is the extent to which cosmological parity translates into the elevated temporal status of women, a question long raised by the Mormon feminist movement.

In the nineteenth century, women who practiced polygamy diminished their marital desires in the present life for a reward in the next life. Women could be gods, but only in relation to men. “The revelation on plural marriage promised women greater celestial glory in exchange for consenting to the practice, and anecdotal evidence agrees that at least some (and perhaps most) of the women were motivated by otherworldly promises for them and their families,” notes historian Danny L. Jorgensen on the conundrum of Mormon deity.<sup>31</sup> Despite the authority afforded to women who elevated their social position through marriage and family life, it remained the case that women’s divinity was centrally located in the polygamous family. Peter Coviello has written that “the Heavenly Mother discourse, though valuable inasmuch as it counteracts the marginlessness of the identification between authority and masculinity, does very little to unwrite the confining of femininity, and especially feminine divinity, to the sphere of reproduction.”<sup>32</sup>

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30. Ostler, “Heavenly Mother,” 175.

31. Jorgensen, “Mormon Gender-Inclusive Image of God,” 118–19.

32. Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods*, 269n57.

While women did not hold priesthood offices and were not ordained in early Mormonism, they were a vital component to the manifestation of God's power on earth. The power that forged the cosmos was shared and manifest in the temple liturgy. This included being raised to the status of queen and priestess in the "fulness of the priesthood."<sup>33</sup> Lucy Kmitzsch found her place within the fundamentalist movement shortly after her excommunication from the LDS Church in 1934. She and her sisters all married prominent members of the community, including Joseph Musser, Lorin C. Woolley, and J. Leslie Broadbent. In reminiscences of Lucy Kmitzsch's life by her husband, she is referred to one of the best women in Zion *and* at performing ordinances.<sup>34</sup> The 1940 ordinance referenced by Musser resembled his diary entry for November 30, 1899, when he received his Second Anointing in the Logan Temple with his first wife.<sup>35</sup> For that reason, some assume that he both passed his priesthood authority to those outside the institutional Church and offered women the authority that stems from this ordinance. While this ordinance is no longer readily available to men and women in the LDS Church, this ceremony remains the avenue that many Mormon fundamentalist women are made sure of their exaltation and sealed into eternity as queens and priestesses.

In 2017, I witnessed the potential for cosmological motherhood to translate into priesthood at the semi-annual Solemn Assembly of the Righteous Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. During a women's meeting, the general Relief Society president, a convert to the group from the LDS Church, stood to share a talk on the perseverance of the Saints and the place of women as central to building the faith in Zion. After her talk, I spoke with a member of the

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33. Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods*, 17.

34. "Journal, July 28, 1940," Joseph White Musser Journals, 1929–1944, file no. 17. Photocopy in author's possession.

35. "Journal, May 1904," Joseph White Musser Journals, 1895–1911, MS 1862, Journal 2, p. 104, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City.

Apostleship about her comments. To my admiration of her eloquence and contribution, he simply replied, “Of course it was powerful. She has priesthood.” Like Kmitzsch, the continuation for the Second Anointing afforded the Relief Society president an authoritative position within her religious community, much like her own eternal Mothers. Within this ritual, women symbolically perform the biblical event when Mary anointed and blessed Jesus through a foot washing in preparation for his death and exaltation. Like Mary, interpreted as a wife of Jesus, Mormon women who participate in this ceremony prepare their husbands for exaltation and thus ensure their own eternal status.

Save for a couple of exceptions, fundamentalist groups do not offer priesthood ordination to women independent of the Second Anointing, an ordinance connected to marriage. However, for those that do, women share in the priesthood of their eternal Mother in their temporal lives. Some of the earliest examples of this occurred under the hand of Ross Wesley LeBaron, one of three successors to Alma Dayer LeBaron’s priesthood claim from Benjamin F. Johnson. During LeBaron ordinations to the patriarchal priesthood, women were ordained alongside their husbands in a joint ordinance symbolizing the gendered nature of the cosmos and the eternal state of all exalted people. In one ordination record, two serve as representative examples:

“William Edward Aldrich summer 1982 (and then his wife, Gloria, was ordained as Matriarch)

Thomas Arthur Green 19 Feb 1985 (and then Tom ordained his wife, Beth, as Matriarch).”<sup>36</sup>

One of the men ordained by LeBaron in November 1978, Fred C. Collier, continued this tradition among the women in his own Mormon community, even affording women “all the keys of the priesthood.”<sup>37</sup> For Collier’s group, this takes the form of full ordination to the

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36. “Men who have been ordained by Ross W. LeBaron,” 1958–1995. Copy in author’s possession.

37. “Ordinations and Confirmations at Hanna,” Apr. 3, 1992. Copy in author’s possession.

priesthood. Jacob Vidrine, a historian of LeBaron priesthood, explains, "Fred teaches that women can perform all ordinances for other women, but says that sacrificial ordinances/the sacrament are male priesthood responsibilities properly performed by men, but that ordained women did have authority to perform them also."<sup>38</sup> The authority to perform ordinances extends to women's authority to baptize, confirm, bless, and ordain others to priesthood offices.<sup>39</sup>

In a 2014 photograph of one such ordination, a young woman wearing a black blouse sits in a folding chair in a living room. She is surrounded by five women with their right hands placed on her head and their left hands on the right shoulder of the woman beside them. The woman receiving the ordinance was ordained to the office of elderess on that day, by ordained high priestesses. This image speaks to the broader tradition within the group. A 1992 ordination record exemplifies the practice. In the minutes of the proceedings, the officiant laid his hands on the woman's head and declared:

[name redacted], through the authority of the High Priesthood of the Holy Order of God, we lay our hands upon your head and ordain you to the office of High Priestess and confer upon you all those keys and all those rights and privileges of this office. We ordain you and we confer upon you the High Priestesshood after the Holy Order of God. We do this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.<sup>40</sup>

The record for this ordination reflects two women ordained to the office of high priestesshood, the same office assumed by the exalted women in their cosmology. Within the context of this branch of Mormonism, "all the keys" included the power to seal families for eternity. In addition, there is one case of a woman ordained to the office of presiding matriarch.

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38. Jacob Vidrine, interview by Cristina Rosetti, June 25, 2021.

39. Even in groups where priesthood ordination is not conferred upon women, blessings remain a central part of fundamentalist women's experience. This is especially true of Confinement Blessings before birth.

40. "1992 Collier Ordination Record." Copy in author's possession.



In their own literature, fundamentalist Mormons explain the priesthood of women extending back to the early days of the Restoration and the role of their eternal Mother, Eve. Along the same theological lines of Adam's exaltation as an example to all men, it is Eve's position that became embodied by all women, including Emma Smith, the wife of the first Mormon prophet: "It was the Prophet's mission to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth—it was a family kingdom. Its powers were vested in the King and Queen, the anointed husband and wife. In this order the parents literally stand as God and Goddess to their own family kingdom. The Prophet Joseph had chosen for his Queen the elect lady Emma—just as Joseph stood as Adam, Emma stood as Eve. She was the first woman received into the Holy Order and the first woman to be ordained to the fullness of the Melchizedek Priesthood."<sup>41</sup>

As a religious tradition that argues for its place as an authentic expression of nineteenth-century Mormonism, the continued ordination of women is not seen as a deviation from Restoration history but a continuation. For this Mormon group in particular, women's ordination does not come with limitation. On the contrary, their writing on the restoration of matriarchal priesthood argues that "had Emma been worthy to receive it, she would have presided over the kingdom as presiding Matriarch, High Priestess, Queen, Goddess and Eve. Even Brigham Young would have been subject to her—she would have been his Mother, Queen and Goddess!"<sup>42</sup> It is precisely because of Heavenly Mother that Mormon women across the Restoration can see themselves as active participants in the cosmological priesthood with their male priesthood counterparts. Whether this will translate into ecclesiastical priesthood in the future remains to be seen.<sup>43</sup>

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41. William B. Harwell, "The Matriarchal Priestesshood and Emma's Right to Succession As Presiding High Priestess and Queen," in *Doctrine of the Priesthood* 8, no. 3 (Mar. 1991): 12–13.

42. Harwell, "Matriarchal Priestesshood," 13.

43. There are currently no women leading Mormon groups. The only woman to lead a Latter-day Saint denomination, Church of Christ, was Pauline Hancock,

## Conclusion

Speculation on the place of Heavenly Mother began soon after the introduction of the temple liturgy. Eliza R. Snow took Joseph Smith's teachings on embodied gods and exaltation and traced them to their logical conclusion, a Mother in Heaven. Since Snow penned her famous poetry on gendered deity, the doctrine of Heavenly Mother has expanded among Mormon women as a way to make sense of their eternity. At the same time, Mormon feminists have looked to the history of priesthood and Heavenly Mother as entry points to understand women's authority in the Church. However, the authority of women in the temple and the theology of Heavenly Mother was historically tied to relationship. Women could exercise priesthood and become gods, but only within the bonds of marriage, specifically polygamous marriage.

As the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints moved away from the plural marriage revelation, a marital system that created the cosmological backdrop for the doctrine of Heavenly Mothers, the status of the divine feminine became increasingly distant from the lived experience of LDS women. Ecclesiastical changes altered women's place within the cosmos. However, for women involved in the fundamentalist movement, where the ambiguity over eternal polygamy is absent, the doctrinal continuity afforded women more space to institutionally discuss the place of women in the afterlife. The cosmological priesthood associated with their theological view of Heavenly Mother remains an avenue for women's authority.

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who broke from Community of Christ. See Jason R. Smith, "Pauline Hancock and Her 'Basement Church,'" *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 185–93.

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*The Perfect Crown for a Queen,*  
by Page Turner, 2020

## GUIDES TO HEAVENLY MOTHER

McArthur Krishna and  
Bethany Brady Spalding

When *Dialogue* asked us to write a personal article about our process of writing *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother* (D Street Press, 2020), we were delighted. The work *Dialogue* does is so important that it was quite a compliment to be included. For this contribution, we decided we would take the opportunity to interview ourselves. We have done lots of podcasts and interviews, but sometimes as an interviewee you just don't get to say everything you wished you would have, or you don't get asked questions you *want* to answer. So, below is our very own self-guided Q&A, for your reading pleasure.

Q: Why did you start writing children's books?

BETHANY: We're fond of this quip from a wise fictional gas-station attendant aptly named Socrates: "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new."<sup>1</sup> McArthur and I get all fired up about so many good things in the gospel, but we are also pretty feisty about wanting change in the Church—first and foremost a wider embrace of Heavenly Mother and a greater recognition of the power and divinity of women (so that we can live up to our theology of the divine partnership of Heavenly Parents). So we had to decide: we could rant and rave about the lack of strong, spiritual women in our church curriculum and conversations, or we could get busy and create stories to help fill that void. And with the inspiration to invest in the rising generation, we knew that children's books were the

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1. Dan Millman, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980; repr. CreateSpace, 2009), 175.

best place to start. So we set out writing in hopes of illuminating and building the next generation of Latter-day Saints to have a fuller sense of feminine divinity.

MCARTHUR: Plus, Bethany and I both have three daughters. We want the world to be a different place for them to grow up in. Look around. Is this a world whose policies, culture, governments, and relationships honor women? (Hint: no.) Meg Conley has recently written about how the pandemic made the lack of respect and support for women's domestic work abundantly clear.<sup>2</sup> Gabrielle Blair's essay on birth control elucidates the gender bigotry enmeshed in the system.<sup>3</sup> Statistics on how much women are paid (or not paid) make the gender pay gap clear. And, frankly, these are just the systems within my own country. Around the world, women face discrimination and are given second-class status. If we want to sway the world, then we need to teach children correct principles.

Q: Wait! You had an *agenda* when writing these books?

MCARTHUR: Um, why, *yes*. An agenda simply means to have an intent or a goal, an "underlying ideological plan."<sup>4</sup> Our plan is that we need our children's books to reflect our doctrine. And, trust us, writing children's books is not lucrative or glamorous enough to spend years of your life doing it for simple kicks. In fact, every year we consider retiring. And then we look at each other and ask, "Is there anything more the world needs from us?"

Now, sometimes people appreciate our agenda and sometimes they don't. That's fine. It actually doesn't matter. Not everyone needs to buy

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2. Meg Conley, "America Doesn't Care about Mothers," *Gen*, Aug. 19, 2020, <https://gen.medium.com/america-doesnt-care-about-mothers-8dfc1113f7bc>.

3. Gabrielle Blair, "Men Cause 100% of Unwanted Pregnancies," *Human Parts*, Sept. 24, 2018, <https://humanparts.medium.com/men-cause-100-of-unwanted-pregnancies-eb0e8288a7e5>.

4. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "agenda (*n.*)," accessed Nov. 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agenda>.

every book. (Though, if they did, then at least the lucrative angle would change.) What matters is that 1) we feel we are using our talents for good in the world and 2) we get enough feedback from others who feel their life has been positively impacted for us to think our efforts were worth it.

Sooooo, so far, we have always felt there was one more . . .

Q: Why did you choose each other as creative partners?

BETHANY: If you were to meet McArthur, you'd quickly want to come up with a reason to dive into a project with her. She's a helluva storyteller, wicked smart, and doesn't take no for an answer (I've nicknamed her the Holy Harasser). Plus, she co-owned a communications company and knows how to get shizam done! McArthur and I had been neighbors in Washington DC, where we both served with the youth in urban wards and came to know how vital role models are. And she just happened to be visiting me in Mumbai, India when my almost-three-year-old daughter, Simone, asked the earnest question "Where are all of the stories of the girls?" after I finished reading her a children's scripture book. So a dose of friendship and fate turned McArthur into my coauthor.

MCARTHUR: Well, I was lucky Bethany called me up. And, after six books, I have to say I couldn't ask for a better partner. I like working with people who are forces of nature—I want to grab onto their tornado whirlwind and go for the wild ride of their vision. And, P.S., it helps if they also happen to have mad editing skills to balance the deluge I drop onto a page.

Q: Why did you decide to write books about Heavenly Mother?

BETHANY: From the get-go, I wanted to write about Heavenly Mother. *Our Girls Who Choose God* series was a great warm-up, getting readers comfortable with matriarchs and prophetesses and women judges and generals. The women from the scriptures and Church history were dynamo, but they were still human. Why not introduce girls to their

ultimate female role model, Heavenly Mother? I have a master's degree in public health and have worked on food security and nutrition programs in many communities in the US and around the world. But in my early thirties, I started to feel *spiritually* malnourished. Everything I worshiped and revered and thought of as sacred was male. Surely, this wasn't a balanced diet that would promote my well-being. And as I became a mother and started having daughters, I felt compelled to come up with new meals, new recipes to nourish my girls' spiritual development. I couldn't just feed them the patriarchy I had grown up on. We needed to whip up a big serving of Heavenly Mother to have a more balanced spiritual feast. My own soul, my girls, and the whole world felt like it was starving for Her.

MCARTHUR: When I was twelve years old, someone explained to me how a traditional marriage and family worked. And I thought, "Why would I possibly sign up for that? To be an inherently, divinely appointed second-class human? And why would I believe in Heavenly Parents who think that?"

Turns out—They don't.

Traditional, for the record, is a terrible term. There is no inherent worth in something existing simply because it already does. Traditions can be beautiful and empowering, and traditions can be false and demeaning. Traditional marriages have included all those aspects. On the negative side, a "traditional" family has included such things as children not speaking until they are spoken to, women manipulating men (as was thoroughly detailed in Helen Andelin's *Fascinating Womanhood* and often taught in Relief Society), corporal punishment, unrighteous dominion, unequal partnership, and more.<sup>5</sup>

Bethany's husband started using a different phrase: a divine marriage. And that's a fabulous term. A divine marriage and family are based on mutual love and support, an understanding that everyone's

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5. Helen B. Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1963).

growth and development are worth investing in, and righteous partnership, which is modeled by our Heavenly Parents.

The divine model for marriage should be based on what we know of our Heavenly Parents' relationship. Your first thought might be, "But what do we really know?" Turns out, after we did all the research for these books, *plenty*.

And once we saw that there was a lot of information to construct a new divine model, we knew it had to be told. Young children—both girls and boys—needed to be shown this model as something to aspire to.

Q: Why does Heavenly Mother matter?

BETHANY: We Mormons speak so much about the fullness of the gospel. But to me, it really feels like we're wrestling with just half. The splendid poet Carol Lynn Pearson writes that we can't have holiness without wholeness.<sup>6</sup> And to me, wholeness is only found as we embrace Heavenly Mother and welcome Her into our collective and personal worship and spiritual lives. To have a fullness of the gospel, we need *both* our Heavenly Parents. Can you imagine what would change if we disregarded the cultural baggage of a "heavenly hush" surrounding Her and instead shouted out a "heavenly hallelujah"? Imagine how young girls in Primary would feel if we included Heavenly Mother into the hymn: "I am a child of God / and *They* have sent me here."<sup>7</sup> Imagine how teenage girls would think of their bodies if they fully knew that God has breasts and hips and curves. Imagine how newly endowed sister missionaries would serve if they saw Heavenly Mother as part of the creative process in the temple ceremony. Imagine how young professional women could work in the world knowing that Heavenly Mother is a creative powerhouse. Imagine a new bride beaming after a

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6. "Finding Mother God — Carol Lynn Pearson," interview by Aubrey Chaves, *Faith Matters*, Sept. 13, 2020, <https://faithmatters.org/finding-mother-god-carol-lynn-pearson/>.

7. See "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, no. 301.



sealing ceremony performed by a woman and man, celebrating a union in the image of our Heavenly Parents. Imagine how new mothers would feel giving birth and nurturing children, knowing about a Heavenly Mother equal in might and glory! And the list goes on and on . . .

MCARTHUR: But let's be clear: the truth of Heavenly Mother doesn't just benefit girls, it's also vital for boys! The prophet Spencer W. Kimball spoke often about Heavenly Mother. My personal theory on this is that because he lost his earthly mother at a young age, he was craving a mother's love, and Heavenly Mother could help fill that void.

Originally, Bethany and I were only going to write *A Girl's Guide*. We have daughters. We write "girls' stories." But a woman reached out to us—a mother of five boys—and asked that we include boys. That wouldn't work for *A Girl's Guide*—there were very specific reasons that we needed to discuss this doctrine in a female context. Yet the long list of reasons she offered was compelling. Boys can be blessed by the perfect love of a divine Mother.

Boys need to understand that girls are their equal—in the classroom, at work, in family life, at church, in the world. Boys need Heavenly Mother to more fully grasp the divine role of women.

Both boys and girls need to learn that the equality of their Heavenly Parents is the divine model in order to avoid the pitfalls of a skewed world. A few seemingly disparate examples come to mind:

- A recent study from Brigham Young University highlighted the overwhelming inequity of how men and women communicate in group projects. If these students understood the divine model of women and men working together, would those communication patterns be different? I think so.
- A book I recently read about Mongol queens described how their accomplishments were *literally* cut out of the official records.<sup>8</sup> The scrolls were sliced to remove their names, their roles, their actions. The world has removed the glory of women; truth can restore it.

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8. Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (New York: Crown, 2010).

- Having lived almost a decade in India, it is readily apparent that even in the present-day world, the glory of women is not honored. India practices female infanticide and has one of the highest female suicide rates in the world. But let us not overlook the sexism in our own backyard, including unequal pay in the professional world and unequal workload at home.

BETHANY: And knowledge of Heavenly Mother benefits not only individuals but also communities and even countries. Our Heavenly Parents exemplify the divine model of equal partnership. As Valerie Hudson and co-authors' work shows, the benefits of treating women more equitably are stunning.<sup>9</sup> In countries with higher gender equality, people live longer, there is less disease, less war, and higher levels of education. The divine model is equality. When we as humans follow a divine model, better things happen everywhere.

MCARTHUR: So why do we write these books? Why did we think it was worth highlighting these truths? To change ourselves, our families, and the world. You know. Just that.

Q: How did you choose the art for the guides?

BETHANY: McArthur was the genius behind gathering the art for the book, so I'll let her answer with all the details. But we both felt adamant that the art be expansive and widen our understanding of God, knowing that how we humans view God determines what we believe is sacred and supreme. If we believe only in a white, male God then of course whiteness and maleness become superior. And this has damaging effects. Living in Richmond, Virginia (the capital of the Confederacy) during the racial unrest and reckoning in the spring and summer of 2020, I saw up close the ugliness of white supremacy. We wanted our guides to be part of the solution to achieving racial justice.

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9. Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

MCARTHUR: We were incredibly blessed to receive the contributions of more than fifty artists. Most of the pieces in the book were done specifically for the book, which is a great risk and investment on the artists' side.

In my own immediate family, we have Polynesian, Haitian, Native American, East Indian, and a mix of European heritage. To show a Heavenly Mother as only white would be an appalling assertion. We wanted to ensure that as many people as possible who saw the book had an entrance point to relate to their own Heavenly Mother. So, in our book we have depictions of Heavenly Mother from artists in Cambodia, South Africa, Nigeria, Lebanon, Canada, Argentina, Qatar, and New Zealand. Heavenly Mother is depicted as Polynesian, African American, Native American. We have images that are very classical and images in the style of street art. In order to find such a wide range of talented artists, we were lucky to have the resources of the Church History Museum. Their international art competitions from the last fifteen years are available online, so we were able to cull many of our international artists from there.

Through this project, we've seen just how much art matters. When my husband (who is not of our faith) toured the Conference Center for the first time, he turned to the guide afterward and said, "Is your church a men's club? Sure looks like it." For the record, we had had zero conversations about gender and the Church—he was just observant. Later, when we published the *Girls Who Choose God* series, I thought it was an opportunity to change the face of the Conference Center. We heard that the Church leaders were aware of this quandary and were actively working to change it. We are happy to say that Kathleen Peterson's powerful images of women from the scriptures were some of the first art depicting women to hang at the Conference Center. For two years, girls could go to general conference and see themselves in these inspiring portraits. Now, we are happy to say that the first image of Heavenly Mother to appear on Temple Square was Caitlin Connolly's painting *In Their Image*, commissioned from the cover of our book, *Our*

*Heavenly Family, Our Earthly Families*. Images can reflect truth; they can also obscure it. Let's choose truth.

Q: Tell us about some of the art.

MCARTHUR: Every time someone asks me about my favorite artwork in the series, I answer differently because they all make me swoon. But, today, one of them is particularly on my mind. Laura Erekson created a portrait of Heavenly Mother by embedding objects in plaster. It is magnificent. A God with Her arms outstretched wide and open. And, what I love the best, Her crown, Her glory, is made of tools. Pliers, specifically.

The phrase comes to mind that we are our Heavenly Parents' "work and glory"—and what a powerful way to show that! And what a reassuring truth to understand—that in addition to a divine Brother's and Father's love, we also have a Mother's love!

BETHANY: Well, I am sitting here staring at Richard Lasisi Olagunju's Nigerian rendition of our Heavenly Parents. We needed a safe home for it until our art show in Provo in May 2021, so I happily volunteered my bedroom wall. It is about four feet tall, completely hand-beaded. Every day it serves as a bold reminder to me and my husband to work through our conflicts, reconcile, and aspire to a loving and full partnership. Plus, I need to up my hairdo game.

Q: Is there any significance to the colors on the cover of the *Girl's Guide*?

MCARTHUR: Why, yes. Thank you for asking. With these books, we actually got to decide the cover. That is not how the children's book world usually works. So, we decided that we wanted a color that carried all the celebration of life, vibrancy, and energy that we would imagine. What would represent that better than hot persimmon coral orange? (Plus, if you see Bethany's kitchen stools or my chaise lounge, you'd see we both live with that color too! Hmm, I just realized that Bethany's kitchen stools and my chaise each says quite a bit about our individual passions.)

BETHANY: Additionally, one of the most beautiful descriptions of Heavenly Mother came from a rabbi. He had a vision of Heavenly Mother in Her glory: “he saw Her dressed in Her robe woven out of light, more magnificent than the setting sun, and Her joyful countenance was revealed.”<sup>10</sup> For us, this bold color was a tribute to the vividness of the setting sun.

Q: Why did you choose a guide format for the books?

MCARTHUR: We wrestled with how to convey the abundance of information about Heavenly Mother in a way that was interactive and accessible for young people. Then, Bethany was inspired—a guidebook! Bethany and I are both travelers and have relished seeing the wide-reaching parts of our Heavenly Parents’ stunning planet, and guidebooks have been our fast friends along the way. Voilà! So, we sat down to see if that could work. And by sat down, I actually mean we Skyped, FaceTimed, WhatsApped—whatever technology could connect us from rural India to Richmond, Virginia, then Australia, Bhutan, South Africa, Greece, and more far-flung places as Bethany’s family worked their way around their global sabbatical. (You can see how some of these places now feature in the guidebook!)

BETHANY: And the guidebook format enabled us to highlight three different sections for our readers: first, a focus on the divine attributes of Heavenly Mother; second, discovering how Heavenly Mother teaches us magnificent truths about ourselves; and third, a call to action: use these sublime truths to create a more loving world!

Q: Who should read our guides to Heavenly Mother?

BETHANY AND MCARTHUR: So, if you are interested in making change, children are a good place to start. Children have not yet heard the false

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10. Val Larsen, “Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture,” *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2015), available at <https://www.squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

traditions of our forefathers or our cultural taboos around Heavenly Mother. We don't want them to go through life as we did, lacking a key component of the identity of God and hence our own.

However, the truth of our Heavenly Mother is clearly not a doctrine that only benefits children. As Joseph Smith taught, we need to have a correct understanding of God in order to understand our own nature and destiny.<sup>11</sup> Hence, this is for *everyone*. Literally. We've been delighted to hear from little kids, great-grandmas, middle-aged bishops, Young Women presidents, elderly high councilors, and others in-between who have been deeply moved by our books.

Q: How has writing these books changed your life, especially your relationship with Heavenly Mother?

MCARTHUR: I think what has changed my relationship with Heavenly Mother even more than writing the books has been the interactions we have had with people since they've been published. Writing the books helped clarify a lot of information about Heavenly Mother. These were things I had heard from prophets and apostles scattered in articles here and there, and then the guides made a gathering place for all of them. And, frankly, that's lovely, but it's not the be-all and end-all. What happened from there is that people started asking us about Heavenly Mother and telling us about their faith journey to learn of Her. Those conversations pushed me to a place to realize that while I had spent the time and work to learn *of* Her, I had not put the same effort into actually having a relationship *with* Her. It is a very different thing to learn something academically and to learn something personally. Both are valuable, but one without the other is not enough. And so, while I have a list of moments when I have felt Jesus' love for me or direction from my Father in Heaven, I now have added to my faith list a single

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11. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007, 2011), 345.

interaction with Heavenly Mother. It was very clear that it was a different Being than who I had interacted with before.

Now that I *know*, I cannot *not* testify of Her. When I hear simple gospel phrases that slide out of our mouths, I want Her included. When people say “Our Heavenly Father’s plan for us,” immediately there is a bell that goes off in my head. The truth is, almost all mothers I know are involved in or even the primary planners for the family, so I cannot imagine Heavenly Mother not being involved in the plan of salvation. We also have a quote by Elder M. Russell Ballard talking about our Heavenly *Parents’* plan for us.<sup>12</sup> So, the most truthful portrayal of the plan of happiness is one that includes both of them.

This is true for many, many phrases we use. “I know my Heavenly Father loves me” is often said in sacrament meeting. Yes, good to know that. Do you also know you are beloved by your Heavenly Mother? Speak that truth. It matters.

BETHANY: Amen!

MCARTHUR: And a heavenly hallelujah!

Q: What response have the books received?

BETHANY: The responses we have received have prompted some of the most humbling moments of our lives. We hear from grown women and men who say that this knowledge changed the trajectory they were on and tell us how much they wished they would have had it sooner.

We have written a handful of children’s books but never has one resonated as deeply as this. People buy one book, and then we see that a week later, they come back and buy a dozen more. It is clear that when they get it in their hands, they feel the power of the truth, and they want to share! We have been taught to let our light shine, and I think this

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12. M. Russell Ballard, *When Thou Art Converted: Continuing Our Search for Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 62.

relates directly to knowledge of Heavenly Mother. Simply, truth helps people. Why hide it?

I think this leads us into our last question . . .

Q: What are our hopes for the Heavenly Mother books?

BETHANY: That people feel loved—divinely, gloriously, *perfectly loved* by both Heavenly Parents. And that that love spills out into the world to create a more balanced, beautiful place.

MCARTHUR: That women will come to know their own worth and the worth of their sisters. That they will come to expect—and work for—the world to move closer to the divine model.

If you have questions you wished we would have answered, feel free to ping us via email ([mcarthurkrishna@gmail.com](mailto:mcarthurkrishna@gmail.com) and [bethanybrady@yahoo.com](mailto:bethanybrady@yahoo.com)) or social media (Instagram @mcarthurkrishna-creates).

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"Enough to Share," by Page Turner, 2021

# IN PRAISE OF BELLY BUTTONS (FOUR MEDITATIONS)

Megan Armknecht

*[one]*

My belly is expanding.

It is not as much as I had expected—nothing like the maternity models (who I suspect might not even be pregnant) who now populate my computer screen’s pop-up ads.

Nonetheless, it expands, inch by inch, week by week, straining veins and skin, with my belly button starting to tighten and protrude outward.

“Belly button” is such a funny term. I suppose “navel” is more sophisticated, with all its connotations of centering, of the middle, with its cognates in French and German.

But I prefer “belly button.” For a navel is still a navel, and even if “navel orange” sounds more marketable than “belly button orange,” the knob at the top still reminds you of an umbilicus, not because oranges are the center of the marketplace, let alone the world, but simply because it looks like a belly button.

I suppose I love the term “belly button” because it’s such an apt description. It does look something like a button, albeit one more oval than circular, with rays protruding from its hollowed center, a mundane cavity (or, for some of us, a knob) in the middle of our abdomens; a physical reminder of the nine-month lifeline between mothers and children; a remnant of the womb that incubated us, giving oxygen, blood, and energy.

And every day, my belly button tightens, stretching with my stomach, its eloquent silence a sermon on the miracle of life, the mystery of love.

[two]

Toddlers are fairly obsessed with their belly buttons. They are such abnormal, oblong things, after all. It is not uncommon to see a gaggle of three-year-olds congregated, giggling and pulling their shirts above their midriffs, poking and jabbing at their own and others' belly buttons. Belly buttons are funny, belly buttons are fascinating. Why hide them when you can show them off?

Unafraid of their bodies, they gleefully, proudly point to their female sign, a key to a home unremembered.

[three]

I look for signs of Her presence in the grand and the mundane, from constellations to belly buttons. I search for Her like the hatchling bird in P. D. Eastman's *Are You My Mother?* (As a three-year-old, I adored this book and memorized it before I could officially read, turning the pages as I "read" to my younger sister: "I will find her, I will!" and, "You are not my mother. You are a SNORT!")

Heavenly Mother certainly is not an exhaust-exhuming excavator like the one the little bird mistook for his mother. She is, I believe, more likely to be found in kittens or hens or hatchlings than in modern machinery. But even then, I search all the same, believing that Her divine patterns can be found anywhere, on anything, on anybody, including (and perhaps especially) myself.

I wonder if there is a distinct mark on my spirit, like the dent left by the umbilical cord, somewhere in my mind, in my soul, in my body. If I delve far enough inside myself, will I uncover the hidden mysteries of Her spiritual mitochondrial DNA?

Or maybe that spiritual umbilical cord has never left. Unlike the worried mama bird of *Are You My Mother?*, She has not left go find food, for She is life, She is nourishment, She is energy.

*[four]*

In the temple, I wait, hoping to one day part the veil and see Her face. I imagine Her, standing at the veil, waiting for me—waiting for us—to find Her, to see Her signs in the seasons, in children, in Her Son, in ourselves, and to point out those signs joyfully, unashamed of Her, unashamed of the mystery and miracle of Her love.

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“Little Wheels, Spin and Spin,” by Page Turner, 2021

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PAGE TURNER is an assemblage artist who collects items of deep personal meaning to create delicate sculptural pieces infused with a new feminist aesthetic and a soulful reverence for her heritage. Recently featured in *50 Contemporary Women Artists: Groundbreaking Contemporary Art from 1960 to Now*, her work is grounded in the Appalachian region of Virginia. Turner has exhibited widely in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Washington DC, New York, and Los Angeles. Her recent exhibitions include *FemiNest* at Equity Gallery in New York, *Contemporary Appalachia: Zephren & Page Turner* at Artists & Makers Studios in Maryland; and a solo exhibition *Power & Restraint: A Feminist Perspective on Mormon Sisterhood* at the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University in Roanoke. Turner was the cover artist for *Exponent II* and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Her sculptures have been featured in *Immediate Present*, *Artemis Journal*, *Women Speak*, *About Place Journal*, and *Young Ravens Literary Review*.

# MOTHERS AND AUTHORITY

Katie Ludlow Rich

It was not in a grove of trees, and I did not see a pillar of light when I first communed with Heavenly Mother. Instead, I was lying crumpled on the floor of my shower, hot water beating down upon me. My breasts were heavy and sore from producing milk for my second baby, a colicky newborn who would just not stop crying. I called out for help, “Heavenly Mother, I need you. Where are you? Why can’t I talk to you?”

I did not see Her. I did not hear Her. But I felt Her presence and had a thought that was not quite my own: “Katie, I am here. Who do you think has the authority to stop you from talking to me?”

The thought astonished me. Who had I granted more authority in my life than God Herself? Yet I knew the answer: Gordon B. Hinckley.

As a Mormon girl growing up in the nineties and early aughts, I adored my prophet. I gathered with my dad and brothers to proudly watch him represent us on *Larry King Live*. I listened as Hinckley responded to a question about women and the priesthood: “Well, they don’t hold the priesthood at the present time. It would take another revelation to bring that about. I don’t anticipate it. The women of the church are not complaining about it. . . . They’re happy. . . . I don’t hear any complaints about it.”<sup>1</sup> As a child I didn’t question the words of the man I had been taught was God’s spokesman. When I would later hear quotations from his 1991 general conference address, “Daughters

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1. “Pres. Gordon B. Hinckley on Larry King Live (Full Interview),” originally aired Sept. 8, 1998, video, 43:55, published June 5, 2014, <https://youtu.be/jAsNMWwRXvs?t=2317>.

of God,” I was sure he must be correct that it was inappropriate for anyone in the Church to pray to our Mother in Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

As the only girl in a family with five brothers, I saw the gender discrepancies in our youth programs, but I trusted my leaders when they told me that our church honored women and viewed Eve differently from other traditions. We revered Eve for making the brave and wise choice to partake of the fruit and launch Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation into action. The atonement of Jesus Christ was never the backup plan—it was the plan, and it required Eve. I was utterly unprepared to have my trust shattered when I went through the temple for the first time in 2008. I was twenty years old and getting married a few days later.

In the endowment ceremony, Eve did not seem to be honored. In the film, she was depicted as airy and naïve, and after partaking of the fruit, she was punished and put under Adam’s stewardship to the extent that she made covenants with her husband and not with God. Then she was silent. In church, Eve was praised in talks and lessons, but when it came to ordinances and structures of power, Eve was still subject to all the consequences of patriarchy—men were to lead in the home and in the Church. To add insult to injury, in the endowment’s depiction of the creation of the world and humankind, Heavenly Mother was nowhere to be found. Creation was an all-male endeavor. I sobbed in the celestial room as I realized that this was a Motherless house.<sup>3</sup> My family didn’t know what to say to me after the ceremony as they saw that mine were not tears of joy.

It was about a year later, in my first semester of the English master’s program at Brigham Young University, that I read my first Mormon

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2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Daughters of God,” Oct. 1991, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1991/10/daughters-of-god?lang=eng>.

3. Carol Lynn Pearson, “Healing the Motherless House,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 231–45.

feminist book—*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams. She wove together the narrative of her mother dying of ovarian cancer and the rising flood waters of the Great Salt Lake. She wrote of watching the men in her family lay their hands on her mother's head to bless her; later that night, she asked her mother if she could feel the tumor, and with her hands on her mother's belly, she prayed.<sup>4</sup> I knew some of the history of women in the Church giving blessings by the laying on of hands, but I hadn't before considered claiming that power for myself. Williams described acting as a midwife to her mother's death, and I came to see the end of life in a new and sacred way.

In 2010, I got to hear Williams speak at a lecture series at BYU. She responded to a question from the audience about the challenge of being accepted as a Mormon writer among other Mormons due to her unorthodox beliefs and practices. She spoke of a book review of *Refuge* published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 1995 that argued that by choosing to not give birth herself, Williams refused her connection to Mormon women. The writer criticized Williams for calling herself a "midwife" to her mother's death but then argued, "It could be painfully appropriate, however, since one who refuses to give life might be the best midwife to a dead flock."<sup>5</sup> As Williams described her pain at this criticism, she wondered aloud if, having since adopted a child, she was now a sufficiently Mormon woman for this critic. And I wondered, having lost my first pregnancy to miscarriage a few months earlier: even among Mormon feminists in a tradition that "sees Eve differently," are a woman's power and belonging expressed exclusively through the multiplication of her sorrow and her conception?

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4. Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 34–35.

5. Laura L. Bush, "Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge*: Sentimentality and Separation," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 158.



I gave a copy of *Refuge* to my mother for Mother's Day in 2010. A month later, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer (later reclassified as primary peritoneal cancer). The next two years were filled with surgeries, chemotherapy, scans, and sickness. Her belly swelled with fluid as mine grew with what became my firstborn son. We spoke on the phone frequently, comparing detailed stories of rushing to the toilet or trash can to vomit, commiserating in each other's disparate pains. My mother died of complications related to her cancer in May of 2012. We buried her the day before Mother's Day. The flood waters of my grief rose, intertwining my mother's death with my Mormon feminist awakening and the search for voices who, whether biological mothers themselves or not, spoke the questions of my heart.

In the months that followed my experience on the shower floor calling out for the Mother, I would read David Paulsen and Martin Pulido's "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven." Their essay reassured me that the "sacred silence" surrounding Heavenly Mother was not official doctrine and did not need to be repealed for people to start speaking up.<sup>6</sup> Rachel Hunt Steenblik, who had worked as a full-time research assistant for Paulsen and Pulido, did just that. In 2017, when I was pregnant with my fourth and final baby, I read her poetry collection *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother*<sup>7</sup> and then bought as many copies as I could to give to friends and neighbors. Despite all this, I knew it still wasn't acceptable to talk about Heavenly Mother openly at church. I had been taught both explicitly and implicitly that women were to be mothers, not seek the Mother. It didn't seem to matter how many women or nonbinary or queer individuals were pushed out by the narrowness of this path.

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6. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 85.

7. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2017).

In time I learned that when Hinckley spoke of women being happy and not agitating for change, he wasn't reflecting reality, he was trying to create it with his words. He spent years as the primary organizer of the Church's anti-ERA campaign.<sup>8</sup> He would have been well-acquainted with the organization Mormons for ERA and the Church members who agitated for equal rights under the United States Constitution. And he knew of women seeking greater authority within the Church, too. In 1993, Ezra Taft Benson was mostly incapacitated due to health issues.<sup>9</sup> As his first counselor, Hinckley was the de facto leader of the Church during the September Six excommunications of feminists and intellectuals, including several writers in Maxine Hanks's collection *Women and Authority*, published in 1992.<sup>10</sup> He knew that there were women in the Church asking for equality and for their authority to be recognized, but he denied the voices of these women in the Church to push the conversation where he wanted it to go.

Perhaps it is an intentional mechanism of Mormon patriarchy that women are at times honored as symbols while actual women are cut out of the structures of power. When women speak up about systemic inequality in the Church, we have ready symbols to point to that allow us to dismiss their concerns. Look, we have a Heavenly Mother! (Just don't talk to Her or about Her.) Look, we honor Eve, the Mother of All Living! (Just don't notice how we use the Garden of Eden mythology to justify patriarchy on earth and in heaven.) Humans are a meaning-making people who use story and symbol to express, teach, and share. It is not inherently problematic that the Church uses symbols

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8. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 124.

9. Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 115–17.

10. Maxine Hanks, ed., *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

to represent womanhood. The problem is how the Church uses the symbols of womanhood to deny power and privilege to women and individuals at the margins.

Symbols are adaptable, but in order to stop using symbolic womanhood as a weapon to silence women, we have to be willing to listen to and act upon what we hear from those hurt by the way we represent or fail to represent women and gender minorities in the Church and in the temple. When the Church rolled out significant changes to the temple ceremonies in January 2019 that expanded Eve's role in the endowment and cut out some overt sexism in the ceremonies, the changes were accompanied by a message from the First Presidency instructing members not to discuss the changes.<sup>11</sup> While I found the changes to be an important starting point toward greater egalitarianism, the demand for silence was a fresh injury. It was the updated version of "the women of the Church aren't complaining about it"—because aside from the inherent sexism in the idea that women asking for a voice equates to complaining, placing members under a demand for silence is a fine way to signal not being willing to hear them at all. And even with the changes, the temple remained a Motherless house.

Hinckley-era redirection from our theological shortcomings regarding Heavenly Mother aren't working anymore. Especially among younger generations, the role of women in the Church is among the top reasons for leaving the Church.<sup>12</sup> We can't "sacred silence" our way out of how our ceremonies fail to address the eternal potential of women and gender minorities in a satisfying way. And we can't insist "our women are happy" by excommunicating or informally pushing out the

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11. Peggy Fletcher Stack and David Noyce, "LDS Church changes temple ceremony; faithful feminists will see revisions and additions as a 'leap forward,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 2, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/01/02/lds-church-releases/>.

12. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 224–25.

women who are not, in fact, happy with current gender dynamics. My sons and daughters see and point out sexism in the Church as Primary children in ways that I didn't learn to do until my twenties.

Heavenly Mother needs a theology of Her own. This theology will need to grow out of the voices of those who have sought Her, which will require centering the voices of the marginalized, not pretending that they aren't speaking. Through her poem-turned-hymn "O My Father," Eliza R. Snow turned "the hearts of the children to their Mother."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps by speaking openly and publicly about Heavenly Mother now, we can turn not only hearts but ears to Her as well. Maybe someday it won't seem so astonishing for a Mormon woman to call out to the Mother and believe she was heard and answered.

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13. Line from "The Spirit of Eliza" in Steenblik, *Mother's Milk*, 96.

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"Taken Away," performance art,  
by Sara Lynne Lindsay, 2018

# A WOMAN HERE

R. R.

I try to strengthen my relationship with my Heavenly Mother, but I'm not always sure how. Some days I sing, "Heavenly Mother, are you really there? And do you hear and answer every child's prayer?" but I always get stuck on the word "prayer" because President Gordon B. Hinckley said we shouldn't pray to our Mother in Heaven.<sup>1</sup> I struggle with this. Why not? Does praying to Heavenly Mother somehow take away from my relationship with Heavenly Father? Why talk with one parent but not the other? That doesn't seem right. These questions usually lead me down a road of cognitive dissonance with two main signposts: "Listen to prophets" and "Where's the female authority on Heavenly Mother?"

I wonder what praying to Her would look like in the first place. Is reaching out with my heart too prayer-like? If it is, how, then, do I honor Her?

*By honoring womanhood*, I think some would answer.

*What does that mean?* I would respond. What does that look like? Getting married and having kids? Dressing feminine?

Perhaps I should describe the beginning of my obsession with and desperation for Heavenly Mother and womanhood. Back before my older brother, glasses pushed up his nose and uncomfortable expression twitching on his face, said I couldn't use the word "frick"—which I learned from him—because girls don't talk like that. Before I asked my dad what the purpose of women would be if we couldn't have children, and he responded, "There wouldn't be one," as he fired up the computer, so nonchalant, so every-day-is-this-way attitude. Before my mom

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1. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," Oct. 1991, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1991/10/daughters-of-god?lang=eng>.

tentatively suggested that the cause of my depression had less to do with genes and environment than it did with marital and parental status.

But now that I think about it, now that I've listed it out, I can't really find a beginning. Maybe my musings on feminine deity kickstarted during my undergrad years. As an English major, I took an American literature class where we read "The Yellow Wallpaper," and my professor described how the narrator's husband, John, treats his wife like a baby throughout the story. Words like "hypocrisy," "feminism," and "double-edged sword" rooted to the tip of my tongue. Finally, I could attempt to describe the culture machine, grounded in patriarchal traditions and misguided gendered belief systems, that spun out phrases like "girls can't" and "women should."

I hit a breakthrough—breaking point?—a few years ago when I visited my parents in Florida, where they served an eighteen-month mission. Their apartment was modest with a wide window exposing a dark blue lake. Mom, Dad, and I sat at a long wooden table in the small dining room. I don't remember how the topic came up, but we discussed women in the workplace. Dad declared that women should not be in the workforce because they "tempt the men." My jaw dropped in shock.

I wasn't shocked when a few months back I'd driven down a winding lane with my parents, them in the front seats and me in the back, and my dad said he was pretty sure Elder Bruce R. McConkie said that in the Millennium, men would have multiple wives. My mom, glancing at me in the rearview mirror and with an edge to her voice said, "He's excited for that." My dad didn't respond. I wasn't shocked when I told my dad while he watched TV, his feet propped up on the couch, that my friend was thinking of getting a PhD, and he responded, "I think she should get married," the two options mutually exclusive in his mind. I wasn't shocked when my dad, watching a movie where a woman was raped, said, "Well, duh, don't go down the dark alley, you idiot." And I wasn't shocked when my sister told me that Dad thought the few women engineers he worked with were idiots.

Despite all this, hearing my father blame women for men's inability to control themselves that night in the dining room shocked me. I don't think it was the sexism that shocked me. It was when he decided to explain his meaning and give an example of when he was tempted by other women—and he said this in front of my mom. He'd attended a work conference where he'd met ladies who were "mighty friendly" to him and his coworker. Together, my dad and his coworker had decided the women wanted to be invited to my dad's and his coworker's hotel rooms. My dad told my mom and me that he was "awfully glad" someone else was with him when he met these ladies because, in his words, he "would have been miiiighty tempted" if by himself. I felt myself go stiff at this revelation, partly in shock, partly in horror. Mom stared at the floor. I waited for her to say something. Say something. Anything.

She didn't.

I decided my mom wasn't surprised by this story. But I was, and I didn't know what to say.

These are only a few examples from my life. I've made it a personal mission to collect stories from close friends. Stories of wives with cheating husbands. Stories of rape. The story of a close friend who, as a teenager, was sexually assaulted at a youth activity. The solution that her parents and the bishop came up with was that, in the future, she should wear different clothing.

These are stories I think need to be shared with the world, but they are not my stories to share.

Instead, I'll share about the time I went to the doctor with chest pains, and he told me that "women in particular" tend to get anxious, which can cause chest pains. Come to find out, my allergies were affecting my lungs. Or the time an elderly gentleman stood at the pulpit during sacrament meeting and said, "Young women, when you dress immodestly, it's not only the young men you attract . . ." Or the time a guest speaker at a Young Women activity told us that immodest girls were like unwrapped candy bars—irresistible.



I started to understand the power of women when a friend in grad school told me about *Mother's Milk*, a book of poetry about Heavenly Mother.<sup>2</sup> His suggestion sent me on a hunt for any literature referencing Her. I found "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven" by David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido. Paulsen and Pulido gathered "important historical accounts that cast serious doubt on the specific claims that, first, a sacred silence has always surrounded this treasured Mormon doctrine [of Heavenly Mother] and that, second, Heavenly Mother's ascribed roles have been marginalized or trivialized."<sup>3</sup> Their research shares accounts from apostles, prophets, and other Church leaders who describe Mother in Heaven "as procreator and parent, as a divine person, as co-creator of worlds, as coframer of the plan of salvation with the Father, and as a concerned and loving parent."<sup>4</sup>

I loved finding these accounts of Heavenly Mother, but I'm disappointed that the authors of "A Mother There" and most (but not all) of the sources they cite to discuss the Goddess are men. The great irony of my life is that most of my understanding of women (women's roles, women's purposes, and the ideal woman) has been shaped by men, whether sexist or feminist.

Male family members helped shape my own sexist views of women; my professors, my friend who first talked with me about Heavenly Mother, and Paulsen and Pulido helped shape my view of feminism and the Goddess. When listening to and learning from these men, I wasn't bothered that they were men.

But I am now.

Why do men have a corner on the market of defining women, or why did I believe they do? Why did I ask my dad what the purpose

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2. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2017).

3. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 75.

4. Paulsen and Pulido, "A Mother There," 76.

of women would be if they couldn't have kids instead of my mom? I think part of the reason lies in the fact that the sources members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints most trust are, by default, men—namely, prophets and apostles but also any priesthood leader. Would my friend who was sexually assaulted during a youth activity have been blamed for the attack if the ultimate authority in her ward had been a woman instead of a man (the bishop)?

My questions in and of themselves hold a certain irony. I can't talk about women without talking about men. The etymology of the word "woman" shows that it comes from the Old English word for "wife" plus "man," meaning that even linguistically the concept of "woman" is created in reference to men.<sup>5</sup> This is not so for the English word "man," which has Germanic roots meaning "human being" or "adult male human being."<sup>6</sup>

Given this confusing and often contradictory cultural understanding of women, how do I define myself, much less understand myself?

After learning about Heavenly Mother and realizing the irony of learning about Her from men, I was angry. But I'm not angry now—not that this won't change tomorrow, but in this moment, I just want to know my Mother.

I want to correct the misunderstandings that surround Her. I want my sister, who, during a "Come, Follow Me" lesson hosted by my parents, emphatically told me, "No, no, we think of Her as so sacred. We respect Her. Heavenly Father respects Her so much we don't talk about Her," to know she can talk about Heavenly Mother. I want my brother, the same one who cautioned me against using "frick" and who agreed with my sister, adding that his institute teacher (another male authority) told him that Heavenly Mother was too sacred to talk about, to know he can love and respect our Mother as much as our Father. He

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5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "woman (*n.*)," <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00286737>.

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "man (*n.*)," <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00139525>.

can teach his daughters to love and respect themselves and know one day they will be goddesses, cocreators, co-framers, women defined by whatever can possibly define a god.

What I do know is that I can't and won't try to define everything about Heavenly Mother in this one essay. That understanding Her will take as much study, struggle, patience, and joy as understanding Heavenly Father does. The frustrating thing is that I don't know much about Heavenly Mother. Sometimes I am still genuinely asking, "But, Mother, are you *really* there?" I try to understand Her by studying the imperfect accounts we have, but I struggle to imagine what She'll look like, and honestly, I don't always want to try to imagine. I want to step over the trap of creating the Goddess in my image and instead leap into Her arms, but the more I look outside of myself, the more statuesque She becomes: sculpted, frozen, a Greek goddess created by man.

So I've chosen to believe in Heavenly Mother, and to believe in Her is to believe in Her power and authority. It's to believe in the power and authority of women.

I'm looking to my own intuition now. I'm trusting my own wisdom and believing that my frustration with women being defined by men is genuine. That wanting and needing to commune with my Mother is okay. I'm choosing to believe in and just *believe* women.

That feels divine.

I don't want to ask anymore. I want to declare: Mother, you are *really* there. And when the world understands you, your grace and love and might, it will be because of your daughters.

Amen.

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# DEAR HEAVENLY MOTHER

Taisha Ostler

Dear Heavenly Mother,

You have been lost to me, hidden from my view behind a veil of professed sacred protection, but I am searching for you—pulling you into the light. Now that I am also called Mother, I know you are strong. I know you do not need protecting, that you are a force of love and life. I believe you have always been with me. Guiding. Directing. Giving me strength in time of need and celebrating my moments of joy. I know you were there as I pushed and breathed and bled my own babies into the world. Yet, I looked past you.

Now, I see how my self-proclaimed “daddy’s girl” attitude has been shaped by the patriarchal system that hid you from me in the first place. I do not pray to you, and until recently, hadn’t even prayed about you. Now I ask Father to help me feel your love and guidance and to understand when you are present in my life. I long to find my way into your arms, to be held up by you.

For so long, I felt unbalanced, but I didn’t understand why until others of my faith began to speak your name. Now, each time you are acknowledged, I feel righted. I see myself as a woman loved by Heavenly Parents, with an inheritance that includes the feminine divine. “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man” (1 Cor. 11:11).

I wept when you were included (as a Heavenly Parent) in the Young Women theme, Now, when my nieces recite those powerful words, you become part of their identities. I am grateful for this, but the young men, my own boys included, repeat a weekly theme that still does not include you. How long before they will be allowed to acknowledge your divinity too?

I am encouraged by small changes, but change takes time. For now, I will speak your name. I will make you part of our eternal narrative. I will share your love and stop myself from looking past you. I will teach my children to see your light and be lifted by your strength, that they will speak your name as easily as they do Father's—for both of you are part of their eternal makings.

All my love,

Daughter

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# THE SEEKING HEAVENLY MOTHER PROJECT: UNDERSTANDING AND CLAIMING OUR POWER TO CONNECT WITH HER

Kayla Bach, Emily Peck,  
and Charlotte Scholl Shurtz

If power is the ability to act, then creation is the ultimate manifestation of power. A creator is an engineer of something new, an artist of something never before seen, a musician of what has not been previously heard. Creation is not innately masculine or feminine. It is not defined by gender or channeled only through administrative practices. It is something that is ever-present in our everyday lives.

Within Latter-day Saint theology, Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father provide a clear example of creative power by creating the universe. Eliza R. Snow proclaimed this truth boldly, that the “eternal Mother [is] the partner with the Father in the creation of worlds.”<sup>1</sup> More recently, Patricia T. Holland explained how together our Heavenly Parents are involved in “our creation and the creation of all that surrounds us.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. John Longden, “The Worth of Souls,” *Relief Society Magazine* 44 (Aug. 1957): 492, 494. Quoted in David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011): 7.

2. Patricia T. Holland, “Filling the Measure of Our Creation,” in *On Earth as It Is in Heaven* by Jeffrey R. Holland and Patricia T. Holland (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 4.

Though our Heavenly Parents are both involved in creation, Latter-day Saint discourse, teachings, and rituals often leave out Heavenly Mother, thus making it difficult to see creation as a universal opportunity. For us, this imbalance is unacceptable. As we have each sought to understand our own divine nature, as well as the nature of God, the need to know, seek, and recognize our relationship with Heavenly Mother has grown stronger. For this reason, we started the Seeking Heavenly Mother Project, centered on the idea of creativity as a pathway for connection. We believe that by creating in a variety of mediums, both artistic and literary, we can connect to the Divine Mother. Additionally, our project aims to create a community of individuals seeking to know and become like Her, thus allowing our interactions with one another to serve as acts of creation in building connection and unity.

### Creation as Power

For each of us, creation has been personally meaningful. It has led us to know and feel Heavenly Mother's love on a deeper level. For Charlotte, connecting to Heavenly Mother started during her preteen years. While reading the Doctrine and Covenants, a marvelous idea came into her head. If we have a Heavenly Father, if families are so important to God, and if we are on this earth to become like Him, wouldn't it make sense to also have a Heavenly Mother? If we have a Heavenly Mother, what is She like? When Charlotte took these thoughts to her dad, he responded that we do have a Heavenly Mother, but "it" wasn't really something we talk about. This interaction left her feeling rebuked for asking about Heavenly Mother, and she quieted her questions for many years.

When she got married, the questions she had asked as a child returned and brought three more questions. What do the eternities look like for me, as a woman? What does Heavenly Mother do? How am I supposed to become like someone I know almost nothing about? These questions were so persistent and left her feeling so lonely and

hopeless that she sat in the shower and cried. Merely knowing that Heavenly Mother exists was not enough. Without any knowledge of Her love, Her power, or anything else about Her, Heavenly Mother didn't feel real.

Eventually Charlotte heard about *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* by Rachel Hunt Steenblik and *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry*, a collected anthology of poems edited by Tyler Chadwick, Dayna Patterson, and Martin Pulido. Both poetry books are exclusively about Heavenly Mother. Reading them gave her comfort and hope that she, too, could know Heavenly Mother like the poets whose words she was reading. Realizing that creation is a way to learn about Heavenly Mother directly motivated Charlotte to write poetry, paint pictures, and claim her authority to know and emulate Her as one of Her daughters.

### Connection in Community

Like Charlotte, each of us has seen the power of creativity in connecting to our Heavenly Mother. We have been inspired to create a community where, together, we can connect and collaborate in the search for our Mother. While individually, we each have immense creative power, together, this effect is multiplied. Thus, the invitation is open to everyone to join with us by submitting art, music, poetry, essays, or experiences centered on Heavenly Mother to [SeekingHeavenlyMother.com](http://SeekingHeavenlyMother.com).

Already through our efforts, we have come to know others who are using their creative power to connect with our Heavenly Mother. Two of these amazing individuals are McArthur Krishna and Bethany Brady Spalding, the authors of *A Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother*. Their book pairs artwork from artists all over the world with quotations and text in order to help girls visualize their Heavenly Mother and what She means in their own lives. Its initial success inspired McArthur to



coauthor a second book with Martin Pulido, edited by Bethany Brady Spalding, entitled *A Boy's Guide to Heavenly Mother*. In addition to McArthur, Bethany, and Martin, we have joined with other incredible artists, thinkers, and authors to share in this journey, many of whom are featured on our website [SeekingHeavenlyMother.com](http://SeekingHeavenlyMother.com). Their creative contributions to our community have allowed us to gain additional understanding of our Heavenly Mother and how She relates to her children. As we encourage one another to seek our Heavenly Mother through creativity, we will feel Her love not only in our work but also in our friendships. We will feel Her love more abundantly as we strengthen our bonds as members of the human family.

The experiences we have together in community can be transformative. Emily had one such experience during her sophomore year at Brigham Young University. While taking an Indian dance class, she learned an interpretive dance about the Hindu deity Ganesh. During a section of the dance, she used her hands to imitate the blooming of a lotus flower while slowly standing up. During this process of uplifting and unfolding, she suddenly became aware of her own divine potential. She realized that regardless of what she was going through, she had the power to ascend above the turmoil and one day become divine. After this realization, she saw all the women around the room dancing in unison, all rising above their life's confusion. She saw divinity in them. Emily felt a sense of community and kinship with the women dancing together and felt she was journeying with them to become like the Eternal Mother.

Like the community Emily found in her dance class, this project builds a community through creative works. This sense of community has the ability to encourage and enlighten others to reach for the divine. One of our key goals is to establish a safe and inclusive venue in which we can celebrate our Heavenly Mother through our own creations. Through works of creation, we can lift and influence others. We want this project to help us grow together in our understanding of the eternal connection we have with our Heavenly Mother.

## Belonging with the Divine

A community has many purposes. One is to support the efforts of the individual members. The other is to support the edification of the whole. The Seeking Heavenly Mother Project is a place where anyone can go to find art, essays, music, and poetry to ponder as they seek their own personal revelation about Heavenly Mother. We desire to build a community ever growing toward Her through creative works. Through the acts of creating and witnessing others' creations, we can build personal relationships with Heavenly Mother.

Kayla experienced how a strong personal connection to Heavenly Mother can bless and empower others while serving as a missionary in Santiago, Chile. During her mission, she developed a friendship with Constance,<sup>3</sup> a recent convert who had grown discouraged about her relationship with God. Kayla decided to teach her about Heavenly Mother. As she taught and as Constance gained her own belief in the Divine Mother, the question became obvious: "Why don't we talk about Her more?" Constance wanted to know why the missionary discussions and Church lessons that had taught her the gospel had neglected to teach her about her Mother in Heaven. It seemed to her to be of the utmost importance that she had an all-powerful, infinitely loving Divine Mother. This understanding empowered her as she felt more connected to her own divine nature.

Throughout her mission, Kayla encountered others who were seeking this same sense of belonging that comes from learning about the Mother. As she shared her beliefs with them, her conviction of the importance of Heavenly Mother was strengthened. Other missionaries who served alongside her also sought reminders that they, too, were "created in the image of God."<sup>4</sup> By expanding their understanding of

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3. Name has been changed.

4. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2010/11/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

divinity to include Heavenly Mother, they expanded their understanding of themselves. Their belief in Her helped them to claim the power they had to effect change, for as children of “divine, immortal, omnipotent Heavenly Parents,”<sup>5</sup> power was a part of their spiritual DNA.

Our goal is for the Seeking Heavenly Mother Project to have this empowering effect on all who participate. We see a strong need to ensure that our community is inclusive and intersectional, creating spaces wherein LGBTQ+ individuals and other members of marginalized groups can be affirmed in the knowledge that they too are created in the image of God. We want to encourage each individual to develop their own personal connection to the divine while also offering them a sense of belonging in a community of seekers where every journey is honored. By creating, connecting, and building understanding, we can support one another as we each discover our divine nature.

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5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “O How Great the Plan of Our God!,” Oct. 2016, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/10/o-how-great-the-plan-of-our-god?lang=eng>.

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## Ascension

*after John Donne*

*Kathryn Knight Sonntag*

*Embrace the first and forever night,  
Heartening as this Moon journeys from cresting  
To full-figured, and in this ecstasy begins to fall  
Earthward, pulling me down to orchards heavy  
And underground, into mysteries of regeneration—soft-  
Bellied seeds nursing. Death-life-death, Her step  
Makes darkness delicious. Licking sweet syrups from fungi  
Kingdoms, Mother God is not the sun, the straight, golden  
Path, but braided roots, white pears of underworld offering  
Themselves into these my hands, dispelling the garment  
Of wrath. Lady Wisdom reigns in me, in time and ever-presence,  
To my own recovered humanity. My heart, finally.  
My Holy Cloud, the only Holy Ghost—  
*Knit my heart with wind and rain and wolf.**

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KATHRYN KNIGHT SONNTAG {kavalier@gmail.com} is the author of *The Tree at the Center* (By Common Consent Press, 2019). Her poems and essays appear in *Colorado Review*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Rock & Sling*, *Ethel*, *Psalmery & Lyre*, *Exponent II*, *Blossom as the Cliffrose: Mormon Legacies and the Beckoning Wild* (Torrey House Press, 2021), and others. She holds a Master of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning degree and works as a land planner in Salt Lake City.

## Big Bang, with Sternutation and Seer Stones

*Tyler Chadwick*

i.

In the beginning, Mother worked ylem  
into a loose sphere. A swirl of stray particles,  
  
stirred by the breeze blown through her  
studio window, circled her workbench,  
  
tickled her nose. She rubbed it, sneezed.  
Light filled the globe she held in her palm,  
  
seared it to a sea of glass and fire. She  
polished it marble-smooth with her apron  
  
then, calling Father to come see, balanced it  
on the brim of the universe, stepped back,  
  
watched it sputter, spin, orbit  
into the cosmos' overturned hat.

ii.

Faces pressed tight in the hat's mouth,  
Mother, Father watched the orb whirl, churn,  
  
effloresce, breathe. Their eyes burning with  
focus, they traced its off-kilter pirouette  
  
through the darkness, translating  
its circuit around their peeping  
  
into prophecy. Its respirations stirred  
their fervor, flooded their knowing

with the promise and uncertainty of life  
sprawling across the sphere. Consciousness  
flickered in the chaos. Mother exhaled,  
whispered the spark to smolder, flare, blaze.

## iii.

God-bodies stirred in the burning. Piqued,  
Mother, Father leaned in, inhaled,  
ash whirling helical in their huffing,  
the whorl baring the paired *adamah*: dyad  
tangled fetal in red soil. Mother, Father  
praised the unfolding, prodded the bodies  
to sigh, to rise, to shake soot from  
saurian skin, to amble forth—fever-hot  
and hungry—and plunder the Gods' orchard.

## iv.

Baskets ripe with their picking, their take,  
the *adamah*—weary from reaching—  
looked God-ward, stretched, sat against  
a tree. The orchard's dappled canopy,  
whispering like scales confessing  
the Gods' oracles, gossiped  
with the harvest. Eavesdropping,  
the *adamah*—insatiate—palmed a drupe,  
took a bite, breathed its sweetness while  
mulling its flesh, its inebriating grace.

v.

Fingering the drupe-stone, tracing  
 the ancient and always unfolding breviary  
 etched in the seed-face, the *adamah*  
 breathed in (two, three, four),  
 breathed out (two, three, four, five),  
 blew open the cosmos. Emergence and  
 movement murmured in the reverie:  
 Mother, Father chatting in the next room,  
 trilling laughter and “Let there be . . .”  
 their gerunds palimpsest and penumbrae,  
 life written on and written over,  
 the groove of ritual and remembering,  
 epiphanies and recurring dreams.  
 Their conversation seared the drupe-stone  
 seared the open palm of the *adamah*’s  
 peeping. The seed cracked wide, sighed  
 flaming tongues of quanta through  
 the holy book of appetite and consciousness.

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TYLER CHADWICK, an award-winning writer, editor, and teacher, received his PhD in English and the Teaching of English from Idaho State University. He teaches writing at Utah Valley University and has three books to his name: two anthologies, *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-First Century Mormon Poets* (Peculiar Pages, 2011) and *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry* (Peculiar Pages, 2018), and a collection of poetry and essays, *Field Notes on Language and Kinship* (Mormon Artists Group, 2013). His first full-length poetry collection will release via BCC Press in 2022. He lives in Ogden, Utah, with his wife, Jess, and their four daughters.

## creation story

*Maren Loveland*

He makes the light and the primeval oceans and the rapturous Word,  
but I have the dirt  
the ground the chthonic underbelly and sustenance of all. I have the  
jewel-toned beetles and cavern cathedrals and the slick blesmols.  
The translucent jellyfish and the elegant otherworldly bats. The  
velutinous darkness I see when I close my eyes and look out is  
what I create—  
that moment of descending into something unknown  
with limitless possibility. Black calla lilies and thick root webs and  
lithe olms and the young coyotes with protruding ribcages.

Before I sculpt the earth  
and the atmosphere too  
I try to enjoy this night and remember my sliver of time before the  
labor of creation. The time of loving and crying and walking  
through snow floating down like tiny newborn stars. The time of  
waking up to the bright marmalade sunrise shining through the  
bathroom window and whispering to the daytime moon. I was a  
lover eating rabbit stew  
wondering how I could rupture so violently  
so completely  
and still move forward through time.  
The old time of unknowing, of not knowing the unknown.

On the first day  
I made the starling and then let its feathers become the centerpiece of  
the highest world  
glittering with iridescent speckles  
letting the undertones of violet and turquoise shine through.



This  
(I thought)  
is the sky  
the world's favorite quilt: the starling as firmament.

I rest tonight and think about my large-souled days  
like when my father taught me how to fish  
or when I picked bucketfuls of fresh strawberries in spring  
or flew through gilded air on a bicycle in June.

It is no coincidence then  
that the words soil and soul are nearly identical sonic twins  
seeing as the layers of my soul  
like a stratigraphy  
read certain scales of time  
experience  
and remember past lives fossilized in the sentient sensual sediment  
    of the body. The strata run horizontal like long thin snakes with  
    writhing bellies underneath my skin  
varying in width  
as some strands of time are denser with memory than others.  
This is where I will begin and end  
in remembering these moments of unknown beauty and quiet grit.

Underneath the soul's many mineral deposits  
the liquid core sends a pulse through the body  
spilling blood through an ecosystem of veins. Here, at the heart, I  
    remember my shame  
which smells like cinnamon—sharp and harsh and cathartic. Memory  
    may not be a reality  
but it bends and melts into worlds both known and unknown  
preserved in our salubrious soils.  
I recall that I am a world unto myself

slowly dissolving until  
at last at last my burning center is exposed  
and burns hot and shimmers right before it erupts into a thousand  
shining pieces that float like meteors in an unknown reservoir.

On the second day  
I will make the dirt  
a luscious loam with a dense liquid heart that beats and writhes and  
fuels the world forward. It is the origin from which everything  
else will flower and grow without my help, alone and unabated. I  
will make the ground strong and soft  
full of sculptures and sepulchres and pools of oil and iron. I will  
create sandstone red as summer cherries and rough as a man's  
stubble, like thistles.

Worldmaking is an act of time grace and pain anger and patience  
love. It is a birthing. I trust my body and create the underworld  
the underneath the subterranean. The clay the silt the dirt the  
sand. Within the soil of the world is where the fleshy self is  
where secrets are whispered and sung. All things are taken into the  
soft world of the earth in a returning  
a homecoming that invites new life through transforming death. It  
is where things are made radical and rejuvenated and why mud  
spread over the eyes gives sight. A body placed into the ground is  
born anew  
made supple through time and slithering annelids.

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*Mothersong*  
*Bonnie Shiffler-Olsen*

Let us amass

our wandering kicks, wondering in awe at these  
costumes her womb hath made. O Mother  
of the sacred hearts, sing your peasant lullabies

before our every sleep. Ring like waves against  
sand-swept ears. Hark, the angels weep  
Her ocean's cradle & She drinks their briny tears

to feed our hearts, the lungs, the liver, the teeth  
of us. Our tongues stretch forth for honey  
dropped like gems from powdered buds beneath

bees' feet. We are atoned for this matter, for  
our Mother & her earthy star. We each appear  
& hover above our swaddling, alive and silver—

O blessed human Mothers—in tender kindness  
& hope for joy. Chime, you quiet bells. Open  
lapping mouths and let us laugh your milk of life.

O thou

good and faithful servant of Earth-flesh, to whom  
is born this morning,  
its birds pealing birth of dawn. Hear

the compensate call of renewal & answer  
calling us by name. O thou blessed mother,  
who lie in wait & will be delivered

when her days are accomplished on the  
hour we last scream in this world. The third  
day cometh. We are dressed in the deaths

of forbears, silken and glowing,  
a placid transgression of light. See the trees  
in our fingers, blades of grass beneath

moons of every toe. Count their numbers  
in quiet amaze: ten for good works, another  
creeping in good paths.

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## God the Mother Speaks of Hearts

*Dayna Patterson*

won't you agree with me the heart's a glorious organ

moon jelly    a ghost heart throbbing in ocean  
 lily bulb    an earth heart humming underground  
 bear    a furred heart curled up in cave's dark

I'm fond of hearts the way chefs are fond of salt

snowflake in the snowball's down    cold heart  
 moon    night's heart rinsing earth to pearl  
 thrush    feathered heart rushing limb to crown

liberal with my gifts    why not put a little in everything

horse    a chestnut heart champing in her field  
 pear    gold heart of autumn in the basket of your hands  
 fetus's heart a mother's heart    how she bends to hear its hold

scattergood    I impart the essential ingredient

black hole a galaxy's heart    threaded veins of light  
 burnwork at the center of earth    molten heart  
 nucleus thrumming with simple purpose    atom's heart

when you rock to your motor's whirring    remember

I knit every heart    to mine  
 even the tongue    mouth's heart pulsing through a poem  
 even a queen    hive's heart pumping a honeyed hum

## Book of Life

*for Timothy Liu*

*Dayna Patterson*

If there is a literal book  
on a plinth of filigreed gold, and an angel  
standing as sentinel at heaven's

needle-eye entrance, who's not to say  
our names appear etched  
on its pages,

un-erasable. Maybe no church on earth  
holds power to inscribe, or to cross out  
and deny access to the garden

of God's fruit: fig, pear, ambrosial  
pomegranate. After we've shed  
impedimenta, stumbling

blocks of flesh  
removed by death's  
flensing, maybe we write our own

names in the book, write them with a quill  
dipped in the ink  
of our hearts,

flawed, but mostly good. Maybe  
friends await, the ones whose hands we held  
as they passed through the nadir

of their own shadow valleys. Maybe God  
baptizes us anew with the green  
of her gaze, her blazing

godlight. Look—her luminous  
fruit like light bulbs,  
velutinous and warm

in the palms of our hands.

## Benediction

*Dayna Patterson*

Here's the truth: My faith remains  
tepid. Lukewarm as summer rain.

Spew-worthy. A compass in fragments, I saved

pieces: base plate, arrow, needle.  
Reassembly is beyond me. Millennia ago,

I stood on a street corner & thumped

my brick of scripture. Made my mouth  
a spout. A megaphone. In the forest of now

there are a thousand paths

with no signs. Where is the boat launch? Where the islands  
cleaving mist? My feet fall

led by whim, by tug. I try

anyway. What I can't name  
I name new, sift

old silt for any speck

that glitters. What shines  
in the palm: bird call, blue eggshell.

A breast, handcup of milk. God



has lived in a stone house  
hewn by men's hands

for so long. I seek

entrance to earthen chambers, mounds  
that swallow solstice. There I see them,

Elohim, female & male, but choose

her: Mother, the hem  
of her robe a garment

I'd like to touch: her face

my mother's face, her eyes  
my daughters' eyes. I want a god

soft as dough, yeasty, caught in a wooden bowl

at the edge of dawn's field, rising  
on my stove. But, oh—if there's anything

I can expressly say *I know*, it's this: I bear witness

to my penchant for bitter soil,  
barren figs. Tending my goats, I make a house

of doubt. I build sanctuaries

of sand, altars to unknowing,  
cover them with my thoughts'

intricate lace, upon which I place a nest,

a cradle. And yet, I confess I believe  
this world can't be healed, its bleeding

staunched, unless

we listen  
to midwives who for ages

have been coaxing forth

from their own minds our hidden  
Mother. So let's

ready salves, unguents, salt & muslin for her

urgent redelivery, what could be  
this earth-redeeming,

salvific Mother-work.

You, Dear Reader, could be a midwife.  
Who am I to say? Maybe

you already are

massaging perineum with sunflower oil,  
hands bracing her crown.

## God the Mother Speaks of Xenia

*Dayna Patterson*

I AM the children sleeping under mylar in a Texas warehouse.  
I AM the fathers lifting toddlers to their shoulders on our journey  
to safety and rest. I'm safety and rest. But I'm mostly the mothers  
who'd rather not lug the heavy memory of the twelve-year-old boy  
cut to fit in a sack, ditched on the neighbor's steps. I hold his ghost  
hand,

a pale flower. Some call us vermin, an infestation. We're waiting  
for recognition's spark, milk of kindness, hoping for something to  
hope.

Even a goddess like me needs birds to perch in the soul. Even I  
require feathers, the tune that never stops. Don't look for me in the  
guards,

or their guns. I'm not in the false borders, the fenced miles or razor  
wire.

Haven't I taught you better? Even the body arrives by crossing  
over. Sperm into egg. Then uterine guestroom. Then cervical gate.  
Each life a light-chip, hard & bright, I slip into like second skin. So,  
I will walk *with, as, in* them. My names rhyme with exile & asylum.  
I wear boots, steel-toed. I wear running shoes. I wear these cracked,  
bloody soles.

## God the Mother Speaks of Salt

Dayna Patterson

I baptized you before you were born. After, rubbed you clean.  
I'll cleanse all your wounds in season. You've forgotten  
how to savor my holy. If you seek,  
you'll find these veins

run deep. See my face in the cliffs, taste my milk  
in the sea. You've made a covenant with me—  
never to be broken. Witness  
my abundance, crystals crusting the pits. In season,

your wounds I'll salve. When I say *of the earth*,  
I mean all my children—animal, vegetal—reflected in  
my multihued skin: black, pink, blue, grey, red.  
So pass me from hand to hand

at the table. I'll preserve your good  
works in time. Plant pillars to mark  
daughters I rapture. Each hurt I'll scour, each wound  
wash clean. Come judgement, every creature will crave

my salvation—all are mine  
to weigh in the clear grain of my eye.

---

DAYNA PATTERSON is the author of *If Mother Braids a Waterfall*, winner of the 2020 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Her second poetry collection, *O Lady, Speak Again*, is forthcoming from Signature Books in 2023. She is the founding editor in chief of *Psaltery & Lyre* and curates Poetry + Fungus in her spare time. [daynapatterson.com](http://daynapatterson.com).

## Prism

*Robert A. Rees*

They had agreed  
that if she were seen  
the boy wouldn't be believed  
in seeing them.  
Nevertheless, she was there,  
her iridescent sphere  
a corona  
over their column of sun,  
reflecting,  
refracting  
the morning.  
The flowers turned to her,  
the green of the trees  
grew greener as the fruit trees  
burst their chroma.  
She listened to the voices,  
saw celestial beings in the boy's eyes.  
Afterward,  
she watched him home,  
the bend of her bow  
over his mother's house  
where he collapsed.  
That night and many nights  
he dreamed her.

Later, it hovered  
the holy fire over Kirtland,  
sheltered the long march  
to the Missouri,

and bent over the new temple  
at Nauvoo.

Nearing the end,  
standing on the far side  
of the great river,  
he saw the double bow  
in the East  
and turned toward Carthage.

---

ROBERT A. REES, former editor of *Dialogue* (1971–76), is director of Latter-day Saints/Mormon Studies at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His poetry, which has appeared in various journals, magazines, and anthologies, has been gathered in *Waiting for Morning* (2017). His most recent publications include *A New Witness to the World: Reading and Re-reading the Book of Mormon* (2020) and *Why I Stay 2: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Latter-day Saints* (2021)

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have not been allowed to speak about Heavenly Mother.

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On the cover: "Taken Away," performance art, by Sara Lynne Lindsay, 2018. The performance, which is not seen in the photo, includes weeds taken from the streets of Manhattan and then rubbed onto the dress leaving behind a green pigment that revealed the names of victims of the 1918 Spanish Flu who died in Manhattan

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