

HEAVENLY MOTHER: THE MOTHER OF ALL WOMEN

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Heavenly Mother is a cherished doctrine among many Latter-day Saints. Her unique esthetic of feminine deity offers Latter-day Saint women a trajectory for godhood—the ultimate goal of Mormon theology. Though Heavenly Mother offers a uniquely feminine perspective of God, there are some problematic aspects. First, Heavenly Mother can be discouraging for some Latter-day Saint women who desire more equitable representation among gendered deities. Since Latter-day Saint women are discouraged from directly worshiping, communing, and praying to Her, She is disconnected from Her spirit children in ways that Heavenly Father is not. Second, the standard Heavenly Mother esthetic doesn't offer a trajectory for women who desire godhood without motherhood. 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. Third, the Heavenly Mother concept of godhood combined with Latter-day Saint culture can be harmful to some Latter-day Saint women who struggle with fertility—especially when godliness is connected to the ability to produce children. Lastly, the cisgender, heterosexual Heavenly Mother esthetic fails to give queer women a feminine trajectory that exemplifies their earthly experience and desires. Though Her example may appeal to conventional, heterosexual, cisgender women, there is still room for improvement in how we speak of Her when She is the Mother of all women. Here I will suggest ways to overcome these four obstacles within the Mormon theological tradition.

Mormon theology puts a strong emphasis on theosis—the idea that humans are to become Gods. According to Joseph Smith, we must learn to become Gods the same as all other Gods that came before us.¹ From this perspective, Latter-day Saints are polytheists. There is a potentially infinite number of Gods that dwell in worlds without end. Some might claim this theology is strictly monotheistic in that Latter-day Saints only worship one God (God the Father), but this is problematic for a few reasons. Though some Latter-day Saints only worship one male anthropomorphized God,² the idea that other infinite Gods exist is not controversial. If God became God through evolutionary means, God is not a singleton. The status of God’s godhood is intimately connected with the other Gods who collectively become Gods together, with their respective wives, or in other words, Heavenly Mothers. Furthermore, when Latter-day Saints worship God the Father, they are also implicitly worshiping Heavenly Mother and the multitude of Gods who also made God’s godhood possible. In Mormon theology, God the Father is sealed to God the Mother³—though it is also worth mentioning some Mormon leaders have claimed we have many Heavenly Mothers through the practice of polygyny.⁴ According to Latter-day Saint doctrine, God is not God unless They are composed of both man and woman: God is both man and woman, and all are made in the image of God.⁵ However,

1. Joseph Smith, Jr., “The King Follett Discourse,” *General Conference Meeting* (Nauvoo, Ill.: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 7, 1844).

2. LDS Gospel Topics, s.v. “Godhead,” accessed Jul. 30, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/topics/godhead?lang=eng>. “They acknowledge the Father as the ultimate object of their worship.”

3. LDS Gospel Topics, s.v. “Mother in Heaven,” accessed Jul. 30, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/topics/mother-in-heaven?>

4. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 11:269 “The only men who become Gods, even the sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.”

5. Genesis 1:26–27; Romans 8:16–17; Psalms 82:6; Elder Erastus Snow, Mar. 3, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 19:269–70: “If I believe anything that God has ever

if the standard narrative implies God is both male and female sealed in a simplistic heterosexual union to produce spirit children, why is Heavenly Mother's role not as prominent as Heavenly Fathers? What does this mean for women who are infertile, or do not desire motherhood? What does this mean for queer women? How can we emphasize the office of Heavenly Mother without perpetuating cisgender, heterosexual biases? Essentially, how is it possible for Heavenly Mother to be the trajectory for all women when Her esthetic is limited and neglectful of all women's experiences and desires?

Motherly Women

If theosis is the ultimate goal of Mormon theology,⁶ Heavenly Mother is the most prominent feminine example of that trajectory. She is the deity Latter-day Saint women are to aspire to.⁷ However, Her lack of presence in our communion and worship has caused many women to wonder why she is mostly absent in Her children's lives, or at least in their communal worship.⁸ Is that a woman's trajectory in the heavenly eternities? For some Latter-day Saint women, the thought of deifying into Heavenly Mother is a terrifying disconnect between them and their potential spirit children. If Latter-day Saint families are to be sealed together as whole families, why is it our own Mother's presence is

said about himself . . . I must believe that deity consists of man and woman. . . . 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.⁴⁶ We may never hope to attain unto the eternal power and the Godhead upon any other principle . . . this Godhead composing two parts, male and female."

6. Joseph Smith, Jr., "The King Follett Discourse," *General Conference Meeting* (Nauvoo: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 7, 1844).

7. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, "Apostasy and Restoration," *Ensign*, May 1995, 84. "Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them."

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," *LDS General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 1991).

so essential, but simultaneously veiled? Many women have begun the search for more concerning Heavenly Mother, Her presence, and Her role in the theological narrative. Books, such as *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry*, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother*, and communities like *Feminist Mormon Housewives*, *Exponent II*, and the *Finding Heavenly Mother Project* are a direct product of this aspiration to find our feminine trajectory in an androcentric religion. So what can we do to enrich our vision of Heavenly Mother?

First, our language could more fully reflect the richness of Latter-day Saint doctrine and Mormon theology. If God is man and woman combined in a sealed eternal union, instead of using the pronoun *He*, the plural *They* pronoun could be used. The gender of our God, our Heavenly Parents, is far more inclusive than exclusively, yet our semantics fall short. How we talk about God matters, and the shift from *He* to *They* is more inclusive of diverse gender experiences, including non-binary identities and intersex anatomies. *They* also reflects the potentially infinite plurality of God.

Following a shift in language could be a shift in our literature, music, vernacular, and by extension, our worship. Policy could be extended to include the worship of a feminine deity with feminine pronouns and prominence. Latter-day Saints could be offered the opportunity to submit literature and music to be included in our Sunday worship about Heavenly Mother. Our language, worship, rituals, vernacular, and esthetics can include so much more than a male singleton. If we so choose, we can free our Mother and ourselves from the prison of thoughtless repetition. Her role is directly reflected in the roles of the women who worship Her in a symbiotic process of becoming.

Independent Women

Being a lifelong Latter-day Saint, I can say with confidence that one of the most common justifications for the exclusion of women from

priesthood ordination can be summarized in one brief sentence: women have motherhood and men have the priesthood. 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. As Elder John A. Widtsoe argues in *Priesthood and Church Government*, God the Father gave his sons priesthood power through ordination and gave women motherhood—“of equal importance and power.”⁹ It is strange that Elder Widtsoe suggests it is God the Father and not God the Mother that gave women motherhood. It would seem more fitting that motherhood is gifted by the Mother and fatherhood is gifted by the Father, or that parenthood is gifted by our Heavenly Parents. Even still, Widtsoe continues, “That grave responsibility [of motherhood] belongs, by right of sex, to the women who bear and nurture the whole race. Surely no right-thinking woman could crave more responsibility nor greater proof of innate powers than that!”¹⁰ According to a prominent apostle, a high-ranking official in the Church, a woman who craves a role or desires responsibility outside motherhood, could not be a “right thinking woman.” The critical underlying assumption Widtsoe projects is that women would inherently desire motherhood as the source of her godly power and glory. This assumption excludes the experiences of women who do not desire motherhood or even marriage as their divine purpose or trajectory.

This idea is not exclusively limited to Widtsoe. In my work in the Mormon feminist community, it has been condescendingly explained to me by critics that women who desire ordination risk shirking their responsibility of motherhood and are neglectful of their children. However, what many fail to acknowledge is that a man can be ordained

9. John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* (Salt Lake: Deseret Book Company, 1954), 84.

10. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government*, 85.

to the priesthood without shirking his responsibility of fatherhood or being neglectful of his children. The double standard is that men use their priesthood authority to bless the lives of others, while a woman would be using priesthood authority selfishly or at the expense of her children. Why is this assumption necessarily different for women than men? Furthermore, if a woman doesn't desire motherhood as her primary way of exemplifying godhood, why can't she seek after her godly potential by entering into the priesthood to serve and bless the lives of those around her? Her power and service may not need to include nor be limited to motherhood or marriage. Priesthood ordination is one way to empower women who strive after a godly potential—by acting in the name of God. By broadening the offices women may hold in religious practice, we will also be broadening the offices women may hold in the eternities, such as with Heavenly Mother. In this sense, Heavenly Mother is only one office a woman might hold in the eternities. Heavenly Mother may be the bearer of all spirit children, but that is only one office, role, or responsibility a female deity might have. There are countless ways women can serve and participate in their communities beyond motherhood or marriage.

Infertile Women

Another problem with the Heavenly Mother concept of godhood is that Her power and glory are predicated on her ability to produce offspring. It's in her title: Heavenly *Mother*. I can say from personal experience that worshipping deified motherhood can be extremely painful for some, though not necessarily all, women who struggle with infertility. In the Church, womanhood is treated as if it is tantamount to motherhood, functionally speaking. The Latter-day Saint essentialist position of womanhood is to produce offspring to build up the Father's kingdom. Before I continue, I should clarify that my experience is not every woman's experience. Many Latter-day Saint women struggle with infertility and

do not share my criticisms. Some take comfort in the Heavenly Mother concept of godhood when it offers a trajectory through which she may eventually be able to conceive children in the eternities. On the other hand, others may become resistant to Heavenly Mother when She feels like an unreachable trajectory for the infertile Latter-day Saint woman on earth. Every woman's experience is different, and I honor and respect those diverse experiences, just as I hope other women would honor and respect my experience.

For me, the Heavenly Mother concept of godhood has been both a friend and foe in my efforts toward motherhood. Motherhood and biological reproduction have been a personal struggle for me.¹¹ Being raised in a religion that puts a heavy emphasis on motherhood can be very difficult for women with a gender variant biology, like myself. I wanted to be a woman, even when my body didn't comply. My womanhood was dependent upon my uterus. Since my uterus was faulty, I saw myself as faulty. Comments like Widtsoe's only perpetuated the problem. In his commentary on how priesthood is comparable to motherhood, Widtsoe continued, "Such power [reproduction] entrusted to women proves conclusively that they have been recognized and trusted. Our Father even chose a Daughter of Eve to be the earth-mother and guide of His Only Begotten Son, and thus honored womanhood for all time and eternity!"¹² If this comment is to be taken seriously, it implies that women who cannot reproduce are not recognized, honored, and trusted by God the Father. Why would God the Father trust the woman sitting next to me in the pews, but not me? Am I even a woman if I'm not a mother? It can be incredibly painful for women with fertility issues or gender variant anatomies like mine to internalize ignorant sentiments like these. I cannot help but feel like the constant barrage of messages

11. Blaire Ostler, "How a Mother Became a Transhumanist," *Queer Mormon Transhumanist*, accessed Jul. 31, 2018, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2015/6/6/how-a-mother-became-a-transhumanist>.

12. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government*, 85.

about motherhood being the overriding guiding concept for a woman's existence is a way to maintain the patriarchal order of the Church structure and narrative, and not to comfort the women who need it most.

Similar to women who do not desire motherhood, infertile women should not be bombarded with messages of motherhood being their only or most valuable contribution to eternal glory. Women could be honored in other accomplishments to their religious community, just as men are, without overly emphasizing the role of mother. Doing so would not eradicate the role of the motherhood, nor its importance, just as fatherhood is not eradicated nor considered unimportant within the Church. Instead, a more balanced rhetoric would greatly reduce the mental and emotional pain for many women. It would also help if women were granted access to all offices through priesthood ordination. It is also worth mentioning the most obvious way to help infertile women who desire motherhood is to support medical and scientific advancements which would allow safe reproduction for all gender variant anatomies. I have greatly benefited from these technologies, and trust there are many more inspiring possibilities for the future of biological reproduction and creation.

Queer Women

Queer women are of particular concern when it comes to godly representation. Heavenly Mother offers a feminine template, but queer women are often neglected from the narrative. Is it possible for Heavenly Mother to know a transgender experience? Are transgender women also made in the image of God? If so, shouldn't the esthetics of our worship reflect that?

Despite the ignorance of Widtsoe's comments concerning women, he leaves open a very intriguing possibility—motherhood by proxy, or by vicarious means. Widtsoe continues under the subheading *The Spirit of Motherhood* to clarify: "Women who through no fault of their own

cannot exercise the gift of motherhood directly, may do so vicariously”¹³ If motherhood may be accomplished vicariously, then why must motherhood be accomplished by cisgender women? Could motherhood be accomplished vicariously via transgender men or transgender women? New reproductive technologies are changing the landscape of both gender and procreation.¹⁴ Soon, uterus transplants may allow transgender women the ability to carry children. If this is the case, a transgender woman who can gestate her own offspring through technological means is not significantly different from her cisgender sister who gestates her own offspring through technological means. According to bio essentialist claims, functionally, a transgender woman would be the child’s biological mother. The primary difference between the two is that the cisgender mother is a mother by assignment and the transgender mother is a mother by affiliation. In time, we will see our Heavenly Parents have granted *The Spirit of Motherhood* to a diversity of genders.

It is understandable why an individual who was assigned a male sex at birth might aspire to motherhood. Latter-day apostles teach “the highest and noblest work in this life is that of a mother” and motherhood “is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind.” Please note that motherhood is to be assumed by *mankind*. The semantics implicitly leave room for mothers of various anatomies. Why shouldn’t someone who was assigned male aspire to motherhood if she agrees it is her noblest work? Why does biology prevent her from the experience of motherhood anymore than a woman like me who struggles with fertility? If a transgender woman desires motherhood as her holiest work, who are we to impinge on her service the community with a gender assignment? Why not simply allow parents to engage in parenthood as their holiest work according to their skills and gender preferences

13. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government*, 85.

14. Blaire Ostler, “Sexuality and Procreation,” *Queer Mormon Transhumanist*, accessed Jul. 31, <https://www.blaireostler.com/journal/2016/3/22/broadening-our-understanding-of-sexuality-and-procreation>.

instead of an imposed gender assignment? Likewise, why not allow people to serve through various priesthood offices according skills and preferences instead of an imposed gender assignment? If parenthood is a holy service and priesthood is a holy service, it seems fitting to rejoice in such aspirations regardless of the gender identity or biological sex assignment of the person pursuing such holy endeavors.

Mormon theology also embraces the notion of proxy work—the idea that we can each fulfill the role of each other when the occasion calls for it. If this is the case, transgender women who desire motherhood could attain motherhood via proxy for cis women who don't desire motherhood. Likewise, transgender men who desire fatherhood could be bearers of children as gestational dads.¹⁵ Consider a heterosexual couple composed of a transgender man and transgender woman. The transgender man could use his uterus to carry the child, while the transgender woman could assume the role of mother once the child is born. Consider a gay couple in which one of the fathers wants to assume what is traditionally thought of as the motherly role. Any couple, queer or not, might be able to benefit from surrogacy with a willing, consenting woman as a proxy gestational parent.¹⁶ Even traditional adoption could be a form of proxy parenting. There are many possibilities as to how families might be composed of people doing “proxy work” for one

15. Gestational dad is a term used to describe transgender men or intersex men with functioning ovaries and uterus that allows him to carry, deliver, and even nurse his offspring.

16. I want to acknowledge that surrogacy is fraught with controversy, especially around gay dads who participate in overseas surrogacy. The bodies of women of color are often exploited and misused in the underground network of overseas surrogacy. It is unacceptable for advancements in queer parenting to come at the expense of women of color, their bodies, their health care, and their economic position. They deserve our love, care, and consideration to their volition, consent, and autonomy. Methods of surrogacy need to be radically revised to benefit and respect women of color and other economically disadvantaged women.

another according to their needs and desires in a system of love, respect, and cooperation. As Widstoe suggests, *The Spirit of Motherhood* includes many possibilities through vicarious participation.

Conclusion

The sealed union between Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father may not strictly be a cisgender heterosexual experience. According to Latter-day Saint doctrine and Mormon theology, God is composed of both man and woman. In Hebrew, Elohim is a plural noun. His godhood is dependent on Her, just as Hers is dependent on Him. I see this sealed union as a representation of partnership between the sexes, not a necessary mandate for heterosexual copulation. In this reading, Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father represent two offices a person may hold, but under the infinite plurality of God, there is room for every gender, race, orientation, experience, and benevolent desire. Our Heavenly Parents, *They*, don't even mandate a necessary binary for our non-binary and genderqueer siblings. The broad all-encompassing plurality of God leaves no one behind, and our esthetics, language, and pronouns should reflect the doctrine that we are all made in the image of God.

If anyone has the potential to be a God in Mormon theology, Godly esthetics should reflect the image of all Their children. Likewise, Heavenly Mother, as the Mother of all women, holds multitudes under Her wings. Hers is the face that is reflected in the motherly woman, the independent woman, the infertile woman, and the queer woman. We need not restrict Her esthetics and by extension, her love, on account of our ignorance. Her image is the image of all those that choose the label "woman" with as many faces, variations, and expression that are manifested on earth and in the heavens. She is the Mother of all women.