

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

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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.”¹ 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.’”² 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

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.³ 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,

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.⁴

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

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷

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

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?”⁸ 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

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.⁹ 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

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

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.¹² 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).¹³ Though the connection between the angel's question about the "condescension of God" seems unrelated to the vision of

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.¹⁴ 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

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.¹⁵ A long tradition connecting the divine female with the

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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,

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.¹⁸ 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

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

Testament.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

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.²² 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.”²³ 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

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.”²⁴ The Church presents a male Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, while

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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*

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.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

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.³⁰ 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

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.³¹ 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.

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.³²

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

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.”³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.

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.³⁵ 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

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ I have desired to create diverse pictures of our Divine Mother who, in all her manifestations,

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.³⁸ 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

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.³⁹ 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.

39. Barker, 329–75.

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