

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

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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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