

# I AM A CHILD OF GODS

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

—D&C 132:20

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

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

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

### Early Gods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Feminist Gods

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Queer Gods

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

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

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

18. 2 Nephi 26:33.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

23. Moses 7:18.

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

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

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

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

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

27. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

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

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

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28. Genesis 1:3–5.

29. Genesis 1:5.

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

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

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

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

### Generational Gods

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

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32. Moses 1:3.

33. Oaks, "Apostasy and Restoration."

34. Moses 1:33.

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

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

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

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

36. Malachi 4:6.

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

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

39. Doctrine and Covenants 76:24.

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

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

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

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

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41. Hebrews 7:3.

42. Smith, "King Follet Sermon."

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

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

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

### Joyful Gods

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

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

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45. Smith, "King Follet Sermon."

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

47. James 2:20.

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

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

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

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

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

50. Alma 34:35.

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

52. Hebrews 6:12.

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

54. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

64. Job 1:1.

65. Job 1:22.

66. Job 36:1–12.

67. Job 31.

## Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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68. 2 Nephi 26:33.

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

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

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

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