

Chapter Thirteen

Heavenly Mother

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Archaeologists in 2009 announced the discovery of the oldest known depiction of the human form: a figurine of a woman carved from mammoth bone that dates to the Paleolithic Era, some thirty-five thousand to forty thousand years ago.¹ Findings like this figurine, or “Venus” as archaeologists have called this type of artifact, are nothing new. Excavations over the past century have uncovered dozens of prehistoric Venuses and most of them share characteristics like the naked and corpulent (possibly pregnant) body, the small size and fine detail, and the exaggerated female body parts.² This time, however, the Venus discovered at Hohle Fels Cave in Germany astonished researchers not because it exhibited the classic features of a Venus figurine but because its carbon-dating placed it almost a full five thousand years before all other similar finds. This indisputably female sculpture single-handedly pushed the envelope back on Paleolithic material history. Where archaeologists had thought early humans were barely acquiring the skills of crafting stone tools and where the art depicted only animals and plants—there she was in superb detail, the hidden mother, possibly the mother goddess of prehistoric religion.³

1. Nicholas J. Conrad, “A Female Figurine from the Basal Aurignacian of Hohle Fels Cave in Southwestern Germany,” *Nature* 459 (May 14, 2009): 248–52.

2. Patricia Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Goddesses and Heroines*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood Press, 2010), 1:xii–xiii.

3. The verdict is still out whether this particular Venus is a depiction of a mother goddess, a heroine, or an anonymous woman. As a whole, however, Venus figurines—which outnumber prehistoric male figurines ten to one—do provide ample support for goddess worship. See Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, eds., *Ancient Goddesses: Myths and Evidence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); James J. Preston, “Goddess Worship: An Overview” in *Encyclopedia*

Artifacts like this directly challenge the assumption that male-oriented monotheism has dominated human religiosity. Anthropologists and other scholars throughout the twentieth century focused on monotheism as a fairly ubiquitous worldview across human societies. Some even attributed monotheism to the default religious impulse of the human condition. More technical debates that recognized variants like polytheism and pantheism still operated on the basis that modern religiosity culminated in a monotheistic standard.⁴ Historians often implied this standard in the case of American religious history, since the communities under discussion have generally held to a monotheism devoid of a female deity.

A norm of situating studies of religious history within the male or monotheistic frame emerged even as these same scholars continued to discover more Venuses and other goddess artifacts. Regardless of the technical arguments debated in the previous century, the material history available today suggests that goddess worship or the veneration of female divinities has had as much occurrence and salience as any other theism. And yet studies of religion that consider the context of historical goddess belief fall outside the norm.⁵

of Religion, 14 vols., ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Thomson-Gale, 2005), 6:3585–86; Gary Beckman, “Goddess Worship—Ancient and Modern” in *A Wise and Discerning Mind”: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley (Providence, R.I.: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 11–23. For a critique against assumptions that Venus figurines constitute depictions of mother goddesses, see Naomi Hamilton, et al., “Can We Interpret Figurines?” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 6, no. 2 (1996): 281–307.

4. Key works that advanced the theory of prehistoric monotheism include Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1909); Wilhelm Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, 12 vols. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1912–1955). Even studies that noticed the prevalence of goddess worship in prehistory still invoked assumptions of male-oriented monotheisms or a patriarchal kind of matriarchy. Now a classic in the anthropology of goddess cultures, Erich Neumann’s *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton, 1955) has sustained criticism in recent years for adhering to these assumptions.

5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) deals mainly with anthropology and feminism, but many of these same trends have also occurred in the fields of history and religious studies. See also Lotte Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) for sustained argumentation supporting these observations; also Andrew Fleming, “The Myth

Against the backdrop of historical goddess belief and historical monotheisms, Mormonism presents a unique convergence. Here is both the belief that a goddess exists as the Heavenly Mother and the avowal of the First Commandment to have no other gods before God the Father. With their anthropomorphic concept of God-as-male, Mormons have ventured beyond Christian orthodoxy by taking male descriptors of God to a literal extreme. He not only embodies male attributes, but he is anatomically male. Such masculine literalism did not exclude the divine feminine from early Mormon thought, but rather became the impetus itself for Mormons to arrive at a belief in Heavenly Mother. This development occurred because of early Mormons' fascination with hyper-literalistic readings of scripture. They arrived at the texts of the scriptures relishing the simplicity of their meaning and purposefully eschewing "spiritualizing" (or non-commonsensical) modes of interpretation.⁶ Feeling unencumbered by formal theological creeds, early Mormons projected onto the characters of the Bible, including the Godhead, a uniform humanity. God was human—just in a resurrected, immortal, and glorified state of being.

When earth functioned as a transitional (albeit essential) phase of one's eternal progression toward godhood, the human family and the heavenly family shared a physical correspondence. There are mothers on earth, so the logic went, so there must be mothers in heaven.⁷ Eliza R.

of the Mother-Goddess," *World Archaeology* 1, no. 2 (1969): 247–61 and Peter J. Ucko, *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete*, Royal Anthropological Occasional Paper No. 24 (London: Andrew Szmidla, 1968).

6. Parley Pratt is perhaps the most famous critic in early Mormonism of what Mormons called "spiritualizing" the Bible. "Does that need spiritualizing?" Pratt asked after quoting from the New Testament in an 1855 sermon. "Does it need some learned man from a college to tell you what that means, and give you the spiritual sense of it? It had but one sense, and that a child could understand." Statements like this are indicative of the early Mormon antipathy toward non-literalistic readings of the scriptures. Parley Pratt, October 7, 1855, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–86), 3:129. See also Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 110–11.

7. Linda P. Wilcox provides an excellent brief history of the development of Heavenly Mother doctrine in "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 64–77.

Snow, one of the first to give expression to a Mormon belief in Heavenly Mother, saw the doctrine as a necessary and logical corollary to this understanding of the grand cosmic narrative. “In the heav’ns are parents single?” she posed in an 1845 poem, “No, the thought makes reason stare; / Truth is reason—truth eternal / Tells me I’ve a mother there.”⁸

As soon as the idea of a Heavenly Mother was introduced, Mormon commentators immediately set out to qualify it as a belief, not a practice of worship, saying that many exalted people in the eons of pre-existence had become gods and that current mortals could also attain to divinity. Mormons all along avoided worshipping these exalted individuals—they understood their worship to be directed only to God the Father.⁹ With this new cosmology came a key distinction that would preclude goddess worship yet allow goddess belief.

An ambivalence has resulted within Mormonism over whether to extend that belief into ritualized or devotional practices. As a fully qualified goddess and the coequal spouse of God the Father, Heavenly Mother enjoys an omnipresent power only gods can have. And yet she remains, like the Venus of Hohle Fels Cave, hidden from view and just under the surface of all of God’s dealings that Mormons celebrate. The degree that Mormons see her accompanying God in sacred history fluctuates. In a sense Heavenly Mother remains present and absent in all of Mormon theology about God—everywhere and nowhere. One thing is certain: belief in her existence persists to the point of a resounding affirmation.¹⁰

8. Eliza R. Snow, “Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (November 15, 1845): 1039; also Eliza R. Snow, *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson (Provo: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), 313–14. Snow’s is one of the first documented expressions of Heavenly Mother belief in Mormon history, though she claimed that the idea originated with Joseph Smith who had died more than a year before this poem’s publication.

9. Joseph Smith’s last recorded sermon attempted to reconcile his new doctrine of deification with charges that he was teaching polytheism. He would claim a monotheistic mode of worship while affirming that the Bible itself taught a plurality of gods in its formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. See Smith, Sermon, June 16, 1844, in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 378–82.

10. Margaret Merrill Toscano explores in greater detail than I will undertake

Mormon belief in a Heavenly Mother has not been lost on scholars. Excellent work in the past has focused on the contested space that such a belief has set up within Mormon culture. After all, women do not hold ecclesiastical office within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Church leaders have explicitly discouraged the practice of Heavenly Mother worship.¹¹ Most recently, a survey of Mormon and non-Mormon literature about Heavenly Mother has improved the historiographical discussion.¹² Scholars have yet to undertake, however, a contextual reading of Mormonism's Heavenly Mother theology that places it within the greater phenomenon of historical and prehistorical goddess worship.

The terrain shifts considerably when we navigate these waters. Here the source material abounds in oral and material history. Documentation—the staple of historians—lacks coverage of goddesses especially for the most recent age. Mormonism follows suit. We have no shortage of statements regarding the existence of a Heavenly Mother, but not much moves beyond this basic affirmation, and no qualified theological work has emerged that systematically connects Heavenly Mother to the principal theologies of Mormonism. Official statements and policies say much about the institutional level of Mormonism, but like most cultures of the world's goddess worshippers, modes of god-

here how Mormon culture and policy have contributed to a theological silencing of Heavenly Mother. See Toscano, "Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology? An Investigation into Discourses of Power," *Sunstone* 133 (2004): 14–22.

11. The most explicit statement to this effect came from Gordon B. Hinckley as a counselor in the First Presidency in his sermon "Daughters of God," *Ensign* 31 (November 1991): 97–100. While this ban on Heavenly Mother worship does not appear as official policy in administrative manuals of the Church, in one case the ban was enforced at Brigham Young University in 1996 when Assistant Professor Gail Turley Houston was effectively fired for praying to "Heavenly Mother as well as Heavenly Father." The University administrators considered Houston's prayer as constituting "a pattern of publicly contradicting fundamental Church doctrine and deliberately attacking the Church." Houston was an outspoken critic of the Church's policies toward Heavenly Mother worship prior to being denied continuing status at BYU. See Linda Ray Pratt, C. William Heywood, and Robert M. O'Neil, "Academic Freedom and Tenure: Brigham Young University," *Academe: Bulletin of the AAUP* 83, no. 5 (September–October 1997): 52–68.

12. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71–97.

dess worship tend to find expression outside of institutional fixtures. Oral histories better target where these expressions thrive: in the private, familial, and extra-orthodox spaces of a culture. New sources based in oral history and material culture would provide access for drawing a more symmetrical comparison between the Heavenly Mother of Mormonism and historical goddess belief.

Thanks to the recent and growing Claremont Oral History Project containing oral histories by Mormon women, such access has become at least preliminarily available. The interview questions included specific references to Heavenly Mother belief. Comments ranged from a simple affirmation to detailed descriptions of theology and private devotional practices. Despite variations between these women on their beliefs in Heavenly Mother, several patterns emerge in the oral histories that complement and uniquely amplify historical goddess belief. This context suggests that Mormonism aligns at certain points with goddess history and diverges at others.

James J. Preston's *Mother Worship*, an important anthropological anthology on goddess history, ends with a summary of patterns that have emerged across world cultures. These patterns set apart practices and beliefs surrounding goddess worship from other religious expressions and traditions. Preston observed that worshippers have tended toward connecting goddesses to motherhood, the bearing of children, virginity, and nurturant attributes. Even those female divinities that held no expressed role as a mother-figure could serve as a nurturer in miscellaneous ways. Goddesses often imbued ambivalence by functioning as the supreme agent of such opposites as beauty and violence, love and anger, and nurturing and destroying. Other patterns included venerating the goddess as the source of fertility of crops and humans, as a mediator between humans and more distant male deities, as polymorphous and associated with nature, and as a divine receptacle for suffering.¹³

The oral histories of these Mormon women exhibit a correspondence with some of these patterns of historical goddess worship despite arising out of a Christian monotheism. Mormon women reported a strong association of Heavenly Mother with motherhood and derived a sense of their social ideals of the mother from her. They tended to

13. James J. Preston, "Conclusion: New Perspectives on Mother Worship," in *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 330–36.

appeal to nurturant and natural metaphors to describe how they understood Heavenly Mother's role within (or sometimes without) the Godhead. Where these Mormon women diverge from historical goddess traditions demonstrates some Mormon innovations. The oral histories show that Mormon women currently occupy the space many goddess worshippers in the past have inhabited—a space where the dominant understanding of God-as-male moves the open veneration of the Goddess to the sidelines, and yet their accepted and orthodox view of cosmology prevents them from denying her presence.¹⁴

What follows illustrates how Mormonism and particularly Mormon women have a place within the broad and ancient movement of goddess belief. The renaissance of goddess belief in the case of Mormonism coincides with Mormons' core goals of "restoration," or the resurrection from a primitive or primordial age a truth long obscured or a practice long dormant. Perhaps what we are observing in these oral histories is a moment within the continuing process of Mormon restoration, a process via Heavenly Mother of reclaiming and reinstituting modes of goddess awareness and communion diminished within Christianity after the rise of orthodox theologies and the rise of male monotheisms. Whether Mormons identify Heavenly Mother within their own restoration narrative, their goddess concept functions within various contexts—contexts as diverse as historical goddess traditions and idiosyncratic theologies of Mormonism.

General Patterns in the Oral Histories

Motherhood, Nurturant Attributes, and Childbearing

Many Mormon women automatically associated Heavenly Mother with motherhood; no interviewee in the oral histories indicated anything to the contrary.¹⁵ This might seem an obvious aspect of

14. For an extended discussion on this sidelining effect in Euroamerican religious cultures, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

15. The oral histories referenced in this chapter are from the Claremont Mormon Women's Oral History Collection, Library of the Claremont Colleges, Claremont, CA, hereafter COHC. Oral histories that made explicit mention of the motherhood or mothering qualities of Heavenly Mother included #012, #014, #020, #021, #025, #036, #043, #044, #046, #057, #072, #076, #095, #096, #123,

Heavenly Mother belief, however in historical context, motherhood has not always been immediately associated with goddesses. In the cases of Anat of ancient Israel and the goddesses of Çatal Höyük, Crete, and Malta, worshippers venerated women deities for their divine queenship, not because they understood their goddesses as divine mothers.¹⁶ Recent scholarship has questioned the presumption that all goddesses throughout history served a motherly role. These scholars point out that researchers with a Eurocentric perspective have brought their own cultural presuppositions to their interpretations of the evidence.¹⁷

A good deal of goddess worship, therefore, does not immediately include mother worship. Nevertheless, many cultures have still held to a mother-goddess cosmology. In these settings, goddess worshippers viewed their divine mothers as extensions of the earthly matriarchs.¹⁸ By framing a Heavenly Mother belief in principally motherhood terms, Mormon women in the oral histories parallel both those historical groups that saw their goddesses as extensions of earthly matriarchs and the Euroamerican researchers that have assumed a uniform mother-goddess aspect to historical goddess traditions.

Of the ancient traditions, the West Semitic goddess Athirat most closely resembles the Heavenly Mother of Mormonism. Her proper name in the earliest sources was Ashratum-ummi, "Athirat is my mother." Later Ugaritic mythological texts depict Athirat as the mother of the other gods and the consort of Amurru, the chief deity of the Babylonians over the western nomads. Some scholars believe that because Amurru served as the moon god, that Athirat filled the role of a solar deity, a sun goddess governing the diurnal rhythms and giving life and beauty to nature. Athirat appeared in later Syriac and Ugaritic texts as the consort of the chief god El, the mother of all the gods, and the "Queen of Heaven." A Hittite text names her the wife of Elkunirsha, meaning "El, the owner of the earth." This matrimonial connection to El brings Athirat into an association with the God of the Torah, Elohim.¹⁹

and #132.

16. Goodison and Morris, *Ancient Goddesses*, 17, 48–49, 60, 85–88.

17. Ibid., 17; Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess*, 2–4, 18–23.

18. Goodison and Morris, *Ancient Goddesses*, 19–21.

19. Edward Lipiński, "Athirat" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1:589–92; Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Goddesses and Heroines*, 1:62–63; Goodison and Morris, *Ancient*

Exactly what Elohim meant and how the ancient Semitic concept of El changed with Israelite history remains debated among scholars.²⁰ Nevertheless, the vicarious presence of Athirat in the Old Testament via El connects her with Heavenly Mother in one crucial way: Heavenly Mother is conceptually possible for Mormons because of her association with God the Father, and, from as early as 1842, they have identified God the Father with the Elohim of the Old Testament.²¹ While

Goddesses, 79. For over thirty years, scholars have debated the “Asherah problem,” or the difficulty establishing exactly what Athirat and Asherah meant in their ancient source texts. The Khirbet al-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud contain inscriptions where the phrase “Yahweh and his Asherah” appears. Two views differ over whether to interpret *āshērāh* as the name of a goddess or as an early Hebrew word for “holy place.” To avoid an overly technical discussion on the nuances of the Asherah problem, I side with Lipiński and offer Athirat as the consistent example across western Semitic traditions of ancient goddess veneration of the wife of El and the Queen of Heaven. Regardless of the verdict on pre-exilic Israelite worship of an Asherah goddess, Athirat worship has been well substantiated with evidences dating to the periods I discuss here and provides the best ancient comparison for a Heavenly Mother-type goddess. New discoveries might yield better insights into a contextual comparison between Asherah and Heavenly Mother, but for the time being, the evidence for Asherah remains suspect and prone to etymological and semantic debates over the meaning of Khirbet al-Qom and Kuntillet Ajrud. For an extended defense of Asherah as a pre-exilic Israelite goddess, see Judith M. Hadley, “The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess,” *University of Cambridge Oriental Publications*, No. 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Baruch Margalit, “The Meaning and Significance of Asherah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 40, fasc. 3 (July 1990): 264–97. Lipiński’s article as cited in this note remains the most recent challenge (2005) to Hadley’s and Margalit’s arguments.

20. M. H. Segal, “El, Elohim, and YHWH in the Bible,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 46, no. 2 (October 1955): 89–115; Patrick W. Skehan, “The Divine Name at Qumran, in the Masada Scroll, and in the Septuagint,” *Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* 13 (Fall 1980): 14–44; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); Diana V. Edelman, ed., *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yabwisms to Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995).

21. Joseph Smith recorded a prayer to Elohim in his journal in 1842: “O, thou who seeeth [sic], and knoweth the hearts of all men; thou eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Jehovah, God; thou Eloheem, that sitteth, as sayeth the psalmist, enthroned in heaven; look down upon thy servant Joseph, at this time; and let faith on the name of thy Son Jesus Christ . . . be conferred upon him.” Smith, Journal, August 23, 1842 in *Journals*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, et al., vol. 2 of

Mormons clearly have not gone so far as to identify Heavenly Mother with Athirat, they do have in this ancient example a contextual cousin.²² Venerating a goddess because she accompanies the chief deity as a spouse and because she serves a motherly role came naturally to Mormons and ancient western Semites alike.

the *Journals* series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2011), 117. Smith also gave an exegesis of Elohim as it appeared in Genesis 1:1 in his King Follett Discourse. See Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 202–3. Kevin L. Barney explores how Smith understood Elohim to mean the head of all the gods convening a grand council before the creation of the earth in "Joseph Smith's Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30 (Winter 1997): 103–35 and "Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–24. Barney defends Smith's exegesis of Elohim as consistent with what biblical scholars now conclude about the meaning of Elohim and the persistence of Hebrew pluralism across biblical eras. For a scholarly examination of Elohim by a Mormon scholar, see Donald W. Parry, "4QSam^a and the Tetragrammaton," in *Current Research and Technological Developments: Proceedings of the Conference on the Judaean Desert Scrolls, Jerusalem*, April 30, 1995, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996). Even major shifts in Mormon conceptions of godhead have not displaced their association of Elohim with God the Father. Compare David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 60, 80, 111–14; Brian W. Ricks, "James E. Talmage and the Nature of the Godhead: The Gradual Unfolding of Latter-day Saint Theology," Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2007; and Nate Oman, "Scripture and Interpretation: Some Thoughts Inspired by 'The Family: A Proclamation to the World,'" *Times and Seasons* (blog), February 13, 2007, <http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2007/02/scripture-and-interpretation-some-thoughts-inspired-by-the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world> (accessed July 2012).

22. Daniel C. Peterson argued that the Book of Mormon provides scriptural evidence of this connection in Nephi's account of the Tree of Life; see Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25. Whether or not the Book of Mormon contains traces of ancient Semitic goddess worship, the women interviewed did not mention the Book of Mormon as a source for their belief in Heavenly Mother. Peterson does provide a useful account of the ancient Israelite context of goddess worship, though it should be noted that his references of "Asherah" largely correspond to my use of "Athirat," except in some technical distinctions between the two. Recent scholarship has challenged prior associations of "Asherah" with the consort of El (see note 19 above).

One woman captured the motherhood pattern that appears in the oral histories with this wonderfully succinct statement: “I guess she would be a lot like our mothers here.”²³ Her logic is instructive. First, she performs mental guesswork in answering the interview question about Heavenly Mother, and in so doing exposes the impulse to begin with herself and her own family. Many Mormon women shared this impulse throughout the oral histories; the subsequent concepts they derived from Heavenly Mother were frequently interpreted relative to their own mothering experiences. Second, for this woman, pre-mortal, mortal, and post-mortal mothers share a continuity in their motherhoods regardless of any barrier between these mortal and heavenly spheres.

Heavenly Mother’s role as mother does not, however, extend into the mortal realm. Whenever the interviewees explored the motherhood of Heavenly Mother, they invoked spiritual, not physical, vocabulary. As one woman described, “I think of what my Mother in Heaven is—Mother of our spirits, the way [Heavenly Father] is the Father of us all. She is the mother of us all.”²⁴ She left out any direct resemblance between the mortal process of childbearing and how Heavenly Mother might have conceived spirit children. Perhaps the human reproductive process is implied in associating Heavenly Mother with spirit birth, though spiritual motherhood does correspond to some ancient patterns.

A grand mother of human spirits appeared in the religious expressions of some ancient Hellenistic societies. Known as *meter* and *mater* (“mother”), this Mother of the Gods ruled the mountains and the peoples below them (*metropolis* meant a whole town built in her honor), not due to reproductive powers but because of a spiritual motherhood. For giving spiritual life to earth and her human creation, she was revered by some as the *Magna Mater*, the Great Mother/Queen.²⁵ No one in the oral histories described Heavenly Mother’s spirit birthing with any biological reproductive terminology. They left the status of her being the mother of human spirits in the same mysterious ambiguity of the *Magna Mater*. Procreation for both Mormon women and the Hellenized traditions of the Phrygians and Romans involved strictly spiritual possibilities, nothing directly mortal or biological.

23. COHC, #057 (2010), 11.

24. COHC, #072 (2010), 23.

25. Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess*, 115–17.

Mormon women did use physical metaphors to insinuate that Heavenly Mother participated in something similar to the reproductive and birthing processes in bearing spirit children. Their metaphors in most cases, though, maintained rather than collapsed the separation between physical and spiritual categories. A pregnant Heavenly Mother was never described as such in the oral histories, though some women in their own pregnancies felt a spiritual connection to her as though she understood the experience of having a child. Mormon women left the biological aspects of motherhood ambiguous and resonated instead with the emotional roles mothers share in giving life to a child and nurturing that child to adulthood.²⁶ A mother of six mentioned, "As a mother I am cognizant that emotions are so much more magnified in a woman than they are in a man. . . . I can't imagine the sadness she feels about choices we make or things that happen to us. It must be a hundred times more for her."²⁷ Another woman identified both Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother as co-nurturers, though the Mother had more involvement in giving beauty and gentleness to nature. "I totally believe that we have a Mother in Heaven [who] is the co-nurturer with Heavenly Father. . . . I think that the women in the Church are obviously the nurturers and the decorators and the ones who make things beautiful and gentle. That is our role in life."²⁸ Most of the interviewees generalized the nurture of a Heavenly Mother as simply love, or sometimes "unconditional love."²⁹

Heavenly Mother's role as a bearer of children remains vague in the oral histories, often nothing more than assumed, most likely due to her stronger association with the spiritual and the ambiguity surrounding spirit birth. Prehistoric goddess traditions likewise left little detail about how they imagined goddesses and childbirth. Not until the Bronze Age did creation myths involving goddesses giving birth to the human family surface. One of the earliest childbearing goddesses was Inanna-Ishtar, the goddess likely to have originated in Sumeria whom Egyptian and Babylonian cultures transposed from a divine creator into a warrior goddess. For traditions like the Inanna-Ishtar culture,

26. Oral histories that mentioned the nurturing attributes of Heavenly Mother included #014, #021, #025, #063, #070, #082, #095, #112, #124, and #125.

27. COHC, #021 (2009), 8.

28. COHC, #082 (2010), 5.

29. COHC, #124 (2011), 9.

the mother-goddess conceived in her womb through intercourse with a consort or another god and then birthed life by converting her womb into the earth itself.³⁰

When Mormon women identified Heavenly Mother with child-bearing, they sometimes began the line of reasoning with a kind of biological assumption that could possibly mirror Bronze Age goddess traditions, but would still align with these traditions indirectly—the interviewees never suggested that Heavenly Mother birthed the world. One example is typical: “It’s always made sense to me that there should be a Mother in Heaven because if family is the most important thing then everybody has a mother.” She went on to reason that no one could exist without a mother, so at some point a spirit birth must have occurred, and the one doing that birthing would consequently be Heavenly Mother.³¹ Another woman suspected that the physical reality of Heavenly Mother’s child-birth was what led Church leaders to leave out details. “God didn’t have us all by himself,” she put it bluntly, suggesting that Heavenly Mother participated sexually in bearing children.³² Though some room for a more sexual association with childbearing appears in the oral histories, by and large Mormon women did not connect Heavenly Mother with child-birth, sometimes even minimizing such a connection. For one woman, Heavenly Mother was motherly due to her service and attitude, not because she “has given birth to children.”³³

The least vague reference to childbirth in the oral histories recognized Heavenly Mother as sharing in the birth process. As a former Catholic, this woman felt a reticence to pray to or even think much about Heavenly Mother, fearing that the Mormon doctrine of plural marriage might mean that multiple Heavenly Mothers could exist, an idea she found disturbing. Still, she saw in the Mormon belief in a Heavenly Mother the eternal ideal for women to follow: “I’ve felt that in times of birth that there was a strong connection with a Mother who understood the power I was going through. I felt assured by that,

30. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Viking, 1991), 148–55; Melissa L. Meyer, *Thicker Than Water: The Origins of Blood as Symbol and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1, 5, 34, 37–39.

31. COHC, #036 (2009), 15.

32. COHC, #042 (2010), 14.

33. COHC, #123 (2011), 10.

and that I got a little glimpse of something eternal that I don't usually bother to think about a lot."³⁴

While this woman felt a "strong connection" through childbirth, others tended to focus less on Heavenly Mother's motherhood in child-bearing terms and resonated instead with her role as a divine nurturer. The conceptions of divine motherhood in goddess traditions and Mormonism both include nurturant attributes but deviate on the stronger associations with procreation, pregnancy, and childbearing. For Mormon women, Heavenly Mother is mother because of her role in providing pre-existent spirits with life and because of her divine nurturant qualities, not because the earth sprang from her primordial womb.

Supreme Agent and Mother Nature

Among the larger patterns of historical goddess worship and belief, only scant references remain in the oral histories. Mormon women did acknowledge Heavenly Mother as a supreme agent in the ordering and government of the universe and as evident in nature, but not with as much detail as they directed to Heavenly Mother's motherhood, nurturant attributes, and associations with childbearing. Furthermore, statements that demonstrated one of these patterns tended to express opinion or admit to falling outside of the general views of most Mormons.

Those that identified Heavenly Mother as a supreme agent in the universe used qualities commonly associated with Heavenly Father to describe her glory and power.³⁵ "I conceive of her as the absolute equal in stature, power, and authority to God the Father," went the most concise of these descriptions.³⁶ Understanding the Mother and Father as two glorified people in an eternal marriage relationship led one woman to associate Heavenly Mother with supreme agency. "[My husband] and I see in that situation an eternal union, a fifty-fifty relationship. I see Heavenly Mother as someone who is so central and as one hundred percent part of godhood as Heavenly Father."³⁷ Marriage, though, did not immediately connote supremacy; the fundamental notion of goddesshood stood out

34. COHC, #056 (2010), 19–20.

35. Interviews that mentioned the supremacy of Heavenly Mother include #061, #072, #116, and #125.

36. COHC, #061 (2010), 17.

37. COHC, #062 (2010), 24.

for another woman as phenomenal enough to identify her with biblical motifs of God's authority. "You look at Isaiah, and you read, 'Wonderful! Counselor! The Mighty God-Goddess! The Everlasting Mother! The Author of Peace!' I think of her in those terms."³⁸

The matriarchal role of the goddess in ordering the heavens is one of the longest threads connecting historical goddess belief across traditions. Not too distant from the Isaiah-esque concept of Mighty Goddess, examples abound of goddesses ruling with absolute power in the ways that Christians have ascribed to God. Venus figurines that date to the earliest epochs of human prehistory possibly suggest supreme goddesses, even a supremacy of female goddesses over male gods. Neolithic pantheons included goddesses associated with sky, earth, and the waters, and when natural catastrophe struck, these prehistoric peoples often attributed the turbulence to the behaviors of a supreme goddess. Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Anatolian, and Roman traditions each included goddesses who commanded veneration because of their supernatural power and often their superiority above other deities.³⁹

Compared with Mormonism, these ancient traditions maintained a much stronger sense of the goddess as absolute, sovereign, and supreme. While Mormon women allowed for a Mighty Goddess, they never superordinated her above Heavenly Father. In fact, her supernatural power was possible to them because of her relationship to God the Father. Whereas Mormon women derived their concept of Heavenly Mother from their understandings of motherhood, these other ancient traditions derived their concepts of goddesshood from understandings of sovereignty, power, queenship, and matriarchal preeminence. Ideas of queenship or supremacy only supplemented Mormon women's sense of Heavenly Mother as the divine mother; for much of ancient goddess traditions, this dynamic was inverted; and motherhood only supplemented their sense of goddesshood as power and sovereignty.

Like supreme power, nature has factored significantly in historical descriptions of the goddess. Once again, Mormon women made little mention of nature in their reflections of Heavenly Mother, but

38. COHC, #072 (2010), 23.

39. Book-length studies of these traditions abound. See especially Preston, *Mother Worship*; Goodison and Morris, *Ancient Goddesses*; Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*; and Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Goddesses and Heroines*, as previously cited in this chapter.

the ones who did expressed similar views. Their reasoning combined Heavenly Mother and nature through beauty: nature is evidently beautiful; women are more inherently in tune with beauty than men; thus Heavenly Mother has a divine connection with nature. The outdoors displayed Heavenly Mother's influence for one woman with a hobby for hiking and backpacking. During regular trips to national parks, she found evidence of Heavenly Mother in the scenery: "I see Mother in Heaven as a divine Mother Nature who created all that is beautiful in our natural world. I credit her for the majesty of natural wonders and the breathtaking landscapes of our earth."⁴⁰ Even landscaping arranged by human designers suggested something of Heavenly Mother's touch for another woman: "I have this window that I look out of when I sit in my office and I'm looking out of it right now. It looks out onto a golf course and it's so beautiful and serene. . . . I just think there's a woman involved in that."⁴¹

Only aesthetics factored into these women's concepts of Heavenly Mother as being uniquely involved in the creation of the natural world. Unlike other goddess traditions, Mormon women did not venture into any topographical associations with Heavenly Mother. For example, no one in the oral histories described making a pilgrimage to a sacred natural site or identified a mountain, ocean, river, or natural feature with Heavenly Mother herself. Heavenly Mother creates natural beauty but does not embody nature for these women—a sharp contrast from the traditions that have detailed mythic narratives of the land and sky, sun and moon, and forces of nature that locate the goddess in the natural world.⁴²

40. COHC, #071 (2010), 29.

41. COHC, #082 (2010), 13.

42. African traditions provide excellent historical examples of the veneration of the goddess as nature. A classic study that some consider dated material but nevertheless one of the first important studies of African goddess worship is Joseph Boakye Danguah, *The Akan Idea of God*, 2nd ed. (London: Cass, 1968). Daniel McCall's work provides more recent contextual examples. See his chapter and bibliography in "Mother Earth: The Great Goddess of West Africa," Chapter 15 in *Mother Worship*, ed. James J. Preston (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). See also Noel Q. King, *African Cosmos: An Introduction to Religion in Africa* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1986); and Barbara C. Sproul, *Primal Myths: Creating the World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), esp. Chap. 1, "African Myths." Other traditions that have earth-mother or mother-nature myths, rituals, or beliefs include some Anatolian, Vajrayana Buddhist, Native American, and

Discontinuities

Several patterns of historical goddess traditions find no traction in the oral histories and remain discontinuous in the larger Mormon culture. The goddess served as a mediator between humans and a more distant deity in many traditions; only one woman in the oral histories cast Heavenly Mother in a mediator relationship, and then reversed what would have been the typical arrangement in other goddess cultures. In this woman's view, Heavenly Father mediated her prayers and passed along only essential information to Heavenly Mother in the way that she wrote emails to her mother and let her mother pass that information along to her more distant father.⁴³

No one mentioned or associated Heavenly Mother with virginity, fertility of crops or humans, polymorphism, or suffering. These patterns appear in prehistory and early human history due likely to the emergence of agriculture and the decline of nomadic societies.⁴⁴ A great deal of the human life cycle in those ages involved the diurnal and seasonal patterns cultivation brought, as opposed to strictly hunting and animal migration. Mormon belief in Heavenly Mother arose during a time of intense industrialization in the United States and Europe in which those agrarian life cycles were displaced by machinery and human labor. In the contemporary context, Mormon women of the oral histories made only passing mention to any kind of farming, and if that, never located themselves as actors within a subsistence economy. The urgency toward sustaining a close-knit family group that could till the land effectively, which likely led to worship patterns that celebrated goddesses' virginity, fertility, and powers over the land, is just not felt by these women. In this sense, their goddess belief has developed along a distinct trajectory asymmetrical from the social circumstances that informed earlier goddess traditions.

Patterns Unique to Mormonism

Some patterns that emerge in the oral histories are better contextualized by Mormon society and history than by ancient goddess tra-

Orisan-Indian. See Preston, "Goddess Worship," 6:3583–91.

43. COHC, #107 (2010), 17.

44. Preston, "Goddess Worship," 6:3588–91.

ditions. These patterns derive from features of Mormon theology and society that developed from an inchoate field into a distinctly Mormon system of thought. Here we might look to historical and sociological developments within the Mormon community to note influences on Heavenly Mother belief. The first expressions of Heavenly Mother belief began to appear in the mid-1840s before Mormons left Illinois for Utah. A system of church government and revelation had gained enough of a grip by then that Mormons would consider doctrine within these institutional and ecclesiastical structures. This meant that Mormons regarded “official doctrine” as coming only through certain key men of ecclesiastical authority or through official Church departments. It turned out that those men in positions to interpret or reveal Heavenly Mother doctrine neither issued any revelatory claim regarding her nor enacted any policy that restricted Latter-day Saints from worshipping her.

These theological and cultural circumstances unique to Pioneer-era and later Mormonism set the stage for five major patterns⁴⁵ to appear in the oral histories: (1) the lack of revelation regarding Heavenly Mother;⁴⁶ (2) the cultural reaction to that lack of revelation by assuming God the Father must be protecting Heavenly Mother through a kind of sacred censorship;⁴⁷ (3) the anthropological understanding of Heavenly Mother as an exalted human being;⁴⁸ (4) Heavenly Mother’s relationship to the Father as his wife;⁴⁹ and (5) the possibility of mul-

45. I have noticed patterns similar to what Paulsen and Pulido found in their research on LDS leaders’ statements on Heavenly Mother, as previously cited; their major headings have inspired some of the structure of this section on patterns unique to Mormonism.

46. Interviews that mention the lack of revelation regarding Heavenly Mother include #009, #012, #014, #018, #022, #023, #024, #035, #040, #042, #047, #051, #053, #057, #063, #072, #094, #122, #126, #134, and #138.

47. These comments included those women who expressed favor regarding this sacred censorship concept and those women who were either offended by or against it. The pro-censorship statements appear in interviews #021, #037, #046, #049, #058, #076, #102, #116, and #134. The anti-censorship statements appear in interviews #019, #061, #072, #085, #099, #107, and #119.

48. The interviews included #012, #018, #021, #026, #039, #045, #061, #062, #072, #103, #107, #116, and #133.

49. These interviews included #039, #044, #045, #046, #049, #055, #059, #062, #104, #107, #119, #122, #126, and #139. Some of these types of comments mentioned Heavenly Mother that mention the divine parent motif include

tiple Heavenly Mothers who live in a polygamous relationship with a single Heavenly Father.⁵⁰ These five patterns deviate sharply from the historical patterns of goddess belief in ways that highlight the singular aspects of a Mormon theology of Heavenly Mother. These motifs as imagined by Mormon women within the Mormon theological and cultural systems demonstrate an idiosyncratic idea of the mother goddess.

Lack of Revelation

More than any other single theme in the oral histories, Mormon women acknowledged a lack of revelation regarding Heavenly Mother by a factor of almost two to one.⁵¹ One woman wondered why Heavenly Mother herself had chosen to remain hidden,⁵² but most interviewees attributed this lack of revelation to either the scriptures, the leaders of the Church, or Heavenly Father deliberately protecting his divine wife from the ridicule of people who take his own name in vain. In all of these statements, revelation served as the primary mode for doctrine making. Even the women who lamented a lack of revelation about Heavenly Mother regarded the Mormon process of revelation as paramount for any discourse about her to thrive. Standardized revelatory procedures, or at least perceived procedures, dictated their expectations. Many women felt beholden to the system, as though they could not wonder about Heavenly Mother without facing scrutiny or censure by Church leaders. Until further revelation could come down through the

#055 and #061 as a divine parent while others included a reference to her direct involvement in the interviewee's life. The interviews #069, #070, #072, #085, #107, #113, and #117. Interviews that mention the involved parent motif include #021, #025, #043, #046, #068, #070, #076, #082, #117, and #133.

50. Women who mentioned a polygamous aspect to Heavenly Mother's relationship with Heavenly Father or a plurality of Heavenly Mothers usually expressed skepticism about such a possibility. Their interviews include #047, #055, #056, #104, #109, #112, #122, and #126.

51. The single most common category of Mormon-specific patterns in the oral histories was the lack of revelation; in second place were references to Heavenly Mother as wife. More precisely, the lack of revelation theme occurred 1.6 times more often than the Heavenly Mother as wife theme. If we combine the pro- and anti-censorship motifs into a single category, then the lack of revelation theme occurred only 1.4 times more often.

52. COHC, #009 (2009), 19.

authoritative channels already in place, Mormon women preferred to wait rather than rock the boat with any kind of theological activism or theorizing about Heavenly Mother in public.

The revelation issue fosters a tension in the mental world surrounding Heavenly Mother belief. One of the strongest sources of their commitment to Mormonism—ongoing revelation—is precisely what blocks further exploration of a topic for which Mormon women generally felt an affinity. This tension inculcates the two most common attitudes to emerge in the oral histories: apathy and waiting. Some women decided not to care about Heavenly Mother because no authoritative revelation existed on the topic, and others, though interested in Heavenly Mother, decided to wait it out. Regardless, both camps saw official revelation as necessary for Mormons to realize a more robust doctrine of Heavenly Mother.

The women that recognized the current lack of revelation regarding Heavenly Mother almost always had an opinion in mind for how Latter-day Saints should regard her. These reactions ranged from urging others to accept that humans would not learn much about Heavenly Mother on this mortal side of the veil to a kind of feminist incredulity toward the status quo. In an LDS Institute classroom setting, an instructor urged the class not to probe into Heavenly Mother theology on the grounds that the Latter-day Saints first needed a revelation to justify further belief; anything else would inevitably lead to speculation and folklore. “Our teacher has the courage,” a student of this class reported, “to say we don’t know.” She saw a connection between speculating about Heavenly Mother and Jacob 4:1—“I think about [this scripture] in the Book of Mormon . . . where it talks about the Jews looking beyond the mark to their detriment.” She concluded that she only needed to “work on the things that I do know” and that “part of the gospel that I understand.”⁵³ Another woman valued the relative anonymity Heavenly Mother would enjoy as a result of an obscured theology. Part of her was “OK with not knowing.” Many good women “are behind the scenes,” she said, “and we don’t know what they do. They’re the real influence behind a man. . . . Why [Heavenly Mother]’s not mentioned, I don’t know.”⁵⁴ Still another woman desired to keep the doctrine closed. “The Mother in Heaven controversy is another non-issue for me. Yes, she is

53. COHC, #138 (2011), 19.

54. COHC, #018 (2009), 21.

there. Do I need to know more than that? Heavenly Father and Jesus don't seem to think so. Neither do I."⁵⁵

Others, however, bristled at the current state of Heavenly Mother theology. They wished for further revelation and even thought the male leadership was to blame for little, if any, progress in obtaining a revelation. A former ward Relief Society president reported,

I think we'll wait a long time if we wait for men to talk about her, officially, in the Church. But I look forward to that. One of the great promises of the Church, and again, one of the theological tenets is continuing revelation. . . . As we mature spiritually, and as we become ready for revelation, it is opened to us. . . . I think that fear drives the idea that she is too sacred to talk about or talk to. . . . Fear on the part of men losing control, of everything. Fear by women of rocking the boat.⁵⁶

Sacred Censorship

One of the chief reasons Mormon women gave for a lack of revelation was centered on a concept of sacred censorship. Latter-day Saints already practice an esoteric liturgy in their temples in which only adult initiates who have demonstrated faithfulness and conviction are invited to participate in the ordinances of the endowment and marriage sealings. The temple has come to occupy the pinnacle of Latter-day Saints' sense of the sacred, and they maintain this sacred space by closing participation to outside observers or even members of the faith who have not received a formal, ecclesiastical recommendation. Within the culture, Latter-day Saints emphasize a sacred silencing of temple rituals and liturgy. In the interests of not casting pearls before swine or compromising the sacred integrity of temple ordinances, they have limited much of their temple discourse to the temple itself; only in the temple do many Latter-day Saints feel comfortable discussing what occurs in temple rituals. Outside of the temple, Mormons alter their temple-speak to almost a meta-temple discourse. They talk frequently and thoroughly about the temple, but never explicitly of temple practices.

55. COHC, #094 (2010), 6.

56. COHC, #072 (2010), 23.

By adhering to this sacred censorship pattern, Mormons feel they are preserving the sanctity of their most holy places, not practicing deception or an exclusionary elitism meant to favor temple participants. In the same ways that Mormons have prized guarding the temple from outsiders who might profane it, Mormon women in the oral histories valued a sacred censorship of Heavenly Mother. She was too holy to God the Father for Him to allow her to be profaned, and so her absence from scripture and revelation was justified as chivalrous protection. These women not only appreciated God blocking humans from knowing about Heavenly Mother, but also admired him for it. Good men who love their wives stand up to protect a woman's honor, so goes the reasoning.

Mormon women were divided over this rationale. Approximately half of the responses that mentioned censorship took a pro-censorship position while the other half argued against it. All of those that resonated with the idea of a sacred silencing considered this a protecting act on Heavenly Father's part. Many pointed out the spousal relationship the two share, as though Heavenly Father had a duty as the Mother's husband to see to it that her name not be insulted. One of the more vivid examples of this line of thinking emphasized Heavenly Father's chivalry: "I personally feel that the reason we don't read about her is that our Father in Heaven loves her so dearly that he will go to any lengths to protect her. She is so treasured by him."⁵⁷ In many cases like this, the interviewee recognized the need for a scriptural basis before speculating about Heavenly Mother, but then offered a non-scriptural justification for censorship. This incongruity of reasoning suggests that these women feel comfortable with what appears emotionally palatable, but they feel uncomfortable with an intellectual foray into Heavenly Mother theology.

Some women spotted this incongruity in other Mormons' attitudes about pro-censorship and even criticized it: "I don't believe that we don't know about her because Heavenly Father is trying to protect her. She's a God; surely she can take care of herself and whip some butt if she needs to."⁵⁸ Most women simply did not buy the idea that Heavenly Mother needed protecting. And if she were indeed so special, then shouldn't Mormon women pursue further understanding of her

57. COHC, #046 (2010), 18.

58. COHC, #107 (2010), 17.

qualities and attributes? “People would say that she is so special that we don’t talk about her. I thought, ‘But if I’m going to love her I’ve got to know her and her personality.’”⁵⁹

Divine, Glorified Human Person

Early Mormonism of the 1830s and 1840s produced a radical reconceptualization of the nature of God, angels, and humankind tantamount to heresy for much of the Christian mainstream. Prominent Mormons like Joseph Smith, William Phelps, and Parley Pratt turned the traditional formula of divine and human nature on its head. The hierarchical distinctions between a transcendent, incomprehensible deity and mundane, earthly humans became inverted as these key Mormons projected the mortal human family arrangement and ontology onto the order of the heavens. God was human in very nature, just glorified by undergoing a process that included resurrection and exaltation. Humans superseded the angels as a species and could eventually ascend to the same glory and status as God. It was in their blood to be godly, and so their families reflected the same order as the godly family—the family that culminated in a great Chain of Belonging extending into the eternities.

Without arriving at these major innovations of divine anthropology, Latter-day Saints might not have had enough of a theological toolkit from which to fashion a belief in Heavenly Mother. As it was, Heavenly Mother belief arose out of early Mormons’ conceptual network of ideas about the physical, ontological nature of God, angels, and humans. It would be this backdrop that would delimit much of the Mormon belief system surrounding Heavenly Mother.⁶⁰

Three major threads that connect with this divine anthropology came to the surface in the oral histories. First, many women extrapolated Heavenly Mother’s personality and behaviors from their imagined

59. COHC, #085 (2010), 9.

60. The divine anthropology of earliest Mormonism and its development is given excellent treatment in Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially Chapter 9, “Divine Anthropology: Translating the Suprahuman Chain,” 248–78. See also Benjamin E. Park, “Salvation through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–44.

sense of the divine, glorified woman. This image of the glorified woman did not imbue superhuman or transcendent characteristics, rather exemplified the fullest potential of human women. "If the temple promises to both men and women today are true," mentioned one grandmother, "then we have the potential to become as God is with our husband, and if that idea is true and if He was once as we are, then the model would include a Mother in Heaven."⁶¹

Second, many women located Heavenly Mother strictly in the hereafter, usually with the anticipation of meeting her after death.⁶² This linear arrangement of space and time fits the Mormon narrative of eternal progression and divine anthropology. One could not skip mortality to go from an unembodied spirit to a divine exalted god. The whole purpose of earth life was to provide the conditions whereby humans could follow in the progression of their heavenly parents. It did not make sense to Mormon women to identify Heavenly Mother with mortality or with a kind of spiritual otherworld that shares the same space as earth. In this vein, a businesswoman anticipated the hereafter experience to include a reunion with Heavenly Mother. "I pray that I can be the mother in Zion that my Father in Heaven wants me to be, that my parents hoped I would become, and that I know I'm responsible for exemplifying. I look forward to being reunited with my Mother in Heaven and hopefully making her proud."⁶³

Third, Heavenly Mother offered a singular model for mortal women to emulate.⁶⁴ Mormon women resonated with this option as more closely linked to their own female experience and fully emblematic of the greatest potential a human woman could realize. Some narrators identified features in Heavenly Mother that could not necessarily be demonstrated by (even glorified) men. For one grandmother, Heavenly Mother exhibited the desired image to which all mortal women should aspire. She believed that prayer and meditation involving Heavenly Mother would help "women who have felt alone in a patriarchal church," but "leaders

61. COHC, #051 (2010), 40.

62. Interviews that mentioned Heavenly Mother as present in the hereafter include #027, #039, #049, #050, #069, #078, #082, #085, #104, #114, and #118.

63. COHC, #050 (2010), 23.

64. These types of statements appear in interviews #021, #022, #026, #029, #044, #047, #051, #056, #058, #062, and #072. One interviewee disagreed with the idea that women should emulate Heavenly Mother: COHC, #042 (2010), 14.

tell us that it is not suitable for a woman to pray to her Mother in Heaven because Jesus is only recorded as having prayed to his Father.” It was unfortunate for her that “authority has to come down hard on people who are feeling a need for some feminine leadership and comfort.”⁶⁵ Another woman found the potential for goddesshood in herself and sought to follow Heavenly Mother’s example. “I think about what my role would be as a goddess, a queen, a co-partner. I feel like there is this perfect woman whose ideal I have to live up to somehow.”⁶⁶

Wife of the Father and Involved Heavenly Parent

A number of oral histories identified Heavenly Mother as the wife of God. Just as the motherhood of Heavenly Mother followed a basic logic and seemed to most Mormon women fundamental to the very possibility of a goddess, so did her status as the wife of God seem obvious. She could not be mother without also being wife, the two identities cooperating simultaneously in the theologies of exaltation and deification. “Obviously my Father in Heaven is living a Celestial marriage,” one laconic comment went.⁶⁷ Another thought the idea obvious. “Of course Heavenly Father has a partner,” this woman said, almost in passing.⁶⁸ Little other details about how she behaves or functions as the divine wife appear in the oral histories.

The idea that Heavenly Mother was married to God led women to identify other traits in her as a co-creator with God, a co-framer of the Plan of Salvation, and a heavenly parent involved in the lives of Her children. She participated regularly, for one woman, in making eternal decisions in counsel with Heavenly Father. Others understood her as not only a mother of spirits but as a contributor to the ordering and creation of the universe.⁶⁹ “I do believe I have a Heavenly Mother who participates fully with Heavenly Father in overseeing this world they created,” mentioned a mother of six.⁷⁰ Despite downplaying overt worship toward Heavenly Mother, another woman felt blessed by her and

65. COHC, #012 (2009), 38.

66. COHC, #056 (2010), 20.

67. COHC, #059 (2010), 14.

68. COHC, #122 (2011), 12.

69. COHC, #043 (2010), 8; #056 (2010), 19–20; #117 (2011), 13.

70. COHC, #117 (2011), 13.

that she was cognizant of everyone's feelings and challenges: "I have had experiences with my Mother in Heaven. . . . The times when I have been alone and I needed a mother's comfort, particularly at the time when I lost three of my babies, she was there. I felt comforted and I knew she was real."⁷¹ For others, that heavenly involvement did include separation. One woman described this kind of involvement much like the way a mother stays involved with a child while that child is away on a mission. She thought that this earth life represented a profound separation between Heavenly Mother and humankind to the point that her direct presence remained distant though her concern would never waver.⁷² Heavenly Mother's parental involvement helped another woman relate to marriage. "She knows everything I'm going through. She talks to [Heavenly Father] and she knows me just as I talk with my husband concerning the children."⁷³

Plurality of Heavenly Mothers

Polygamy and Mormonism have become such a tired dyad that after over a century of repudiating plural marriage, Mormons still cannot shake off their reputation as polygamists.⁷⁴ Neither can Mormon women totally consider Heavenly Mother apart from the strong history and theological currency of polygamy in Mormonism. Eight women referenced or alluded to multiple heavenly mothers on the grounds that Celestial marriage as practiced in early Mormonism would mean that God enjoys a polygamous relationship with his goddess-wives. This belief did not stem from polytheistic leanings or a belief in a pantheon of goddesses like other ancient goddess traditions. These women ranged from feeling disturbed by the prospect of a plurality of mothers in heaven to accepting polygamy as a necessary condition in the heavens, even for God the Father.

71. COHC, #070 (2010), 12.

72. COHC, #076 (2010), 17.

73. COHC, #133 (2011), 21.

74. As of 2007, "polygamy" continued to be the first one-word association with Mormons that Americans reported when asked in a national survey. See "Public Opinion about Mormons," Pew Research Center, December 6, 2007; available online at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/648/romney-mormon>.

A former Catholic felt uneasy about a polygamous Heavenly Mother arrangement to the point of angst. "That sometimes upsets me," she said, not entirely disagreeing with polygamy itself but finding the possibility of multiple mothers disturbing.⁷⁵ Such angst disappeared for one grandmother who saw in the idea of multiple heavenly mothers a useful explanation for racial diversity: "I've often thought maybe different races come from different wives. I don't know, I just know that the principles that the gospel are founded on are going to be the same in heaven as they are here." She went on to associate the responsibility to populate the earth with multiple mothers, as though reproducing on this scale could only occur in a polygamous fashion: "I used to moan and groan about various different things about women not being important. My father said to me 'Oh shucks, you won't mind there being more wives because you don't want to populate a whole earth.' I don't think I said another thing about polygamist marriage or plural wives."⁷⁶ Another woman agreed that God would need more than one wife to people earths with children: "Maybe Heavenly Father was here on this planet and brought one of the heavenly mothers here who started this half divine, half mortal race."⁷⁷ One woman regarded Heavenly Mother's polygamy as fundamental to her existence: "I think the reason that Heavenly Father doesn't talk about Heavenly Mother is because there are too many of them. He obviously has numerous wives."⁷⁸ "Isn't polygamy supposed to be rife in the Celestial Kingdom?" asked another.⁷⁹

Attitudes toward Heavenly Mother

Beyond conceptual commentary on Heavenly Mother, the oral histories also evince several attitudes surrounding Heavenly Mother belief. The most common attitude to appear in the histories was by far apathy: most women who gave any indication of their feelings didn't care about Heavenly Mother.⁸⁰ "Does it matter?" was one woman's

75. COHC, #056 (2010), 19–20.

76. COHC, #104 (2009), 18.

77. COHC, #055 (2010), 9.

78. COHC, #109 (2010), 3.

79. COHC, #126 (2011), 8.

80. Interviews that expressed apathy included #009, #011, #012, #015, #017, #023, #032, #038, #048, #050, #054, #063, #078, #080, #081, #086, #092, #093,

response.⁸¹ Their reasons for feeling apathetic about the topic usually followed three types: those that recognized a lack of revelation about Heavenly Mother, those that wished to avoid controversy, and those that felt exercising faith in Jesus Christ or in God the Father sufficed for their religious practice. Unless a revelation demanded their attention, many women said they would not let Heavenly Mother belief or worship crowd into their lives. These women seemed to almost scoff at other women who considered the Church's current position somehow unfair or misogynistic. "We don't know, so let it go," would be a fair characterization of these women's comments.

The sufficiency of Jesus or Heavenly Father had more coverage in the oral histories beyond just those that expressed apathy. Many women who felt a connection to Heavenly Mother nevertheless deferred that connection to God and Jesus in their daily lives. A musician in her thirties responded to feminists' critique of Heavenly Mother's invisibility in the larger Mormon culture by downplaying the importance of a model of divine femininity: "That's never been as much of a problem for me because I look at what we're told in the scriptures and in revelation, and we're told that we should be like Christ." Whether male or female, everyone could emulate Christ because "he displays characteristics and traits and actions that are appropriate for anyone regardless of their sex." To teach that Christ was the perfect example for all humankind meant that one must be "willing to acknowledge that men can be like women and women can be like men."⁸² Other women thought along these same lines, which always resulted in less agitated or confused attitudes about how Mormons regard Heavenly Mother.

Many oral histories manifested more rational than emotional colors in their descriptions of belief. Such belief in Heavenly Mother was simply a matter of logic for sixteen of the women interviewed. These women adhered to a simple syllogism, described well in this interview: "If I have a mother and father here on earth, then certainly I have a mother and a father in heaven. It would be necessary. I believe heaven is gender-oriented. I think we have male and female, therefore a mother and father in heaven is logical."⁸³ In other words, there are mothers and

#094, #099, #109, and #114.

81. COHC, #011 (2009), 6.

82. COHC, #026 (2010), 19–20.

83. COHC, #039 (2009), 12.

fathers on earth, the society in heaven mirrors human families; therefore there are mothers and fathers in heaven.

Few women gave any indication that they felt free to worship Heavenly Mother, and those that did admitted to disguising their worship in front of other Mormons. The most detailed statement describing an open worship attitude about Heavenly Mother began by asking how anyone opening oneself up to the divine could offend God or be immoral. "So I think about [Heavenly Mother] and I want to include her in my language." She acknowledged the controversy such open worship would likely bring in a Mormon setting, so by referencing Heavenly Parents, she could include Heavenly Mother in her worship without offending others. "I use the term God in church because in my mind I'm defining God as both of them—God the Mother and God the Father. So whenever possible I pray to God." She didn't feel right excluding Heavenly Mother from prayer.⁸⁴

While this woman implied a sense of pressure that would preclude Heavenly Mother worship, other women made explicit mention of social pressures. These types of statements denoted feelings of stress, frustration, confusion, disturbance, or ambiguity. A district Relief Society president experienced public gossip in her Mormon congregation for having discussed Heavenly Mother at church.⁸⁵ Only one woman reported having a negative encounter with her local Church leaders over publicly acknowledging Heavenly Mother, which resulted in her feeling scared enough about her membership that she began to censor herself in public. She admitted that she might risk excommunication to include Heavenly Mother more openly in her worship.⁸⁶ Some histories reported negative emotions or attitudes about the doctrine or its surrounding Mormon culture.⁸⁷ On the contrary, others mentioned not feeling worried about the doctrine or the social environment.⁸⁸

84. COHC, #061 (2010), 17.

85. COHC, #060 (2010), 17.

86. COHC, #119 (2011), 23–24.

87. The interviews that expressed social pressure included #012, #029, #034, #060, #119, and #121; Oral History (OH) #019 expressed confusion; OH #060 and #115 expressed frustration; and OH #074 and #124 expressed feeling disturbed or anxiety.

88. COHC, #018, #020, #027, and #048.

Finally, two exceptions emerge among the oral histories in which Mormon women admitted to having little or no concept of a Mother in Heaven. Though in the minority, these women suggested that Heavenly Mother belief does not immediately attend Mormon belief or practice. Even so, these women did not repudiate the existence of Heavenly Mother outright; she was not seen as incompatible with their Mormonism as they understood and practiced it. One woman put it this way: "It makes sense that I have a Mother in Heaven, but I have no real conception of her. My own mother is in heaven as well. Still, I feel like a motherless child."⁸⁹ The other described her concept of Heavenly Mother as "sketchy": "I believe there is a Mother and that she is very important and sacred, but other than this, I have no other beliefs or thoughts."⁹⁰

Conclusion

This survey of Heavenly Mother belief includes three major contexts: the historical range of goddess belief and practice, the uniquely Mormon theological and social spaces, and the emotional attitudes Mormon women conveyed in their reflections on Heavenly Mother. Together these contextual analyses describe an idiosyncratic goddess belief among Mormon women. True, these women have not formed many of their beliefs from official Latter-day Saint theology, but they have maintained a concept of Heavenly Mother that, when compared with other goddess traditions, deserves recognition as a legitimate version of historical goddess veneration. Heavenly Mother occupies a supreme yet hazy location in their expansive Mormon cosmology. She inhabits this status through the systematic reasoning and spiritual attunement of these Mormon women.

The Heavenly Mother of the oral histories is foremost a divine mother who arrived at that matriarchal role as a human being who had once participated in a mortal life. She progressed to the point of glory and resides in the hereafter, ready to reunite with her daughters and sons. In these oral histories, Mormon women's feelings about Heavenly Mother range from apathy to careful consideration. Where she is present in the hearts and minds of these Mormon women, she exudes sovereignty, nurture, involvement, and creative power. Where

89. COHC, #069 (2010), 16.

90. COHC, #114 (2011), 11.

she is absent or little-known, her daughters wait for further revelation, still regarding her existence and still calling her their divine mother. For some, Heavenly Mother is more than one, the collective array of wives all sealed to God the Father—a vestige of the early Mormon family that knew what it felt like to call more than one woman “mother.”

The goddess of the oral histories shares some qualities with Anat, Inanna-Ishtar, and still other goddesses like Athirat and Cybele: she is queenly, a sovereign agent in the married godhead; she is motherly, a creator and (in some mysterious fashion) a birther of spirits; she is more than a consort, the very wife of the male god, the father of creation. The patterns of goddess worship that cut across these very different human cultures speak to the complexity of goddess traditions. Mormon women have a place in that discussion and a tradition that offers intriguing congruities with other, even prehistoric, settings. Above all, Heavenly Mother decidedly occupies a place in the consciousness and spirituality of contemporary Mormon women.

