
MONOLOGUES AND DIALOGUES

OUR MOTHER IN HEAVEN



By Robert A. Rees

"Sometimes I feel
like a motherless child.

—American spiritual

—Statement made by a Mormon woman
describing her feelings in her search for a
Heavenly Mother.

MORMONISM IS UNIQUE among Christian religions in believing in a Mother in Heaven. What is strange is that we do not make more of this in the Church itself. What a wonderfully liberated and liberating doctrine! And yet at times it seems as if we are almost embarrassed about it. Certainly, we have not brought this concept centrally into our teaching and thinking. Why is this so?

Perhaps one of the reasons is that in our anxiety to be accepted and accommodated by our fellow Christians we do not want to emphasize differences, especially differences in doctrine that represent a radical departure from traditional Christianity. But this can't be the whole answer since we openly teach other doctrines that are more offensive to our fellow Christians (such as plurality of Gods, baptism for the dead, and eternal marriage).

We are told that one of the reasons there are not more references to Heavenly Mother is that God the Father does not want men taking her name in vain or speaking disparagingly of her. Let's consider the implications of such a line of reasoning for a moment. What it suggests is that our Heavenly Mother must be protected from language somewhat in the way that women were protected during the Victorian era. But wouldn't she, being God, be much more offended by the actions of her children? Wouldn't seeing them destroying themselves break her heart more than hearing her title used disparagingly? Would she rather be protected from the possibility

of offensive language than to let her sons and daughters know not only of her existence but of her love? It seems inconceivable that either the Father or the Mother would prefer no references to her than to let their daughters go without divine gender identification.

If the Mother and the Father are coequal, coeternal, are in fact one in a deeper and more mysterious way than the oneness of the Father and the Son, then she would be no less concerned for our spiritual welfare than is the Father, no less anxious that we know our true identity as men *and* women.

What we are left with is an image of our Heavenly Mother staying at home having billions of children while the men—the Father and his sons—go off to create worlds, spin galaxies, take business trips to outer space. She is happy, it would seem, to let them have all the recognition, all the glory.

We believe that like the Father, God the Mother has procreative powers. When the Gods said, "Let us make man [generic] in our own image," I think it should read, "And God the Father and God the Mother said, 'Let us make man and woman in our image, after our likeness,' and so in the image of the Gods, male and female, made they them." This is confirmed in a statement issued in 1909 by the First Presidency: "All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity"¹ Given Mormon theology, it is the only thing that makes sense. Ultimately as well as presently, she should be part of our awareness, part of our identity.

But our Heavenly Mother must have creative as well as procreative powers (perhaps our lack of awareness of this fact is reflective of our sexist orientation in favoring mortal women's procreative powers over their creative ones). If everything here is, as the scriptures say, a type of what exists in the eternal worlds, then God the Mother's brightness, inventiveness, creativity, to say nothing of her love and compassion, must equal in magnitude those of the Father. How

could she be God and be otherwise? I am reminded of Ben Jonson's lines addressed to the goddess Diana:

Bless us then with wishéd sight
Goddess excellently bright.

* * * * *

Thou that makest day of night
Goddess excellently bright.

But this is misleading since Diana is goddess of the moon and Heavenly Mother is goddess of the sun. A better line is that of Sir Thomas Browne: "The sun itself is but the dark simularacrum, and light but the shadow" of this goddess.

Why do we not know the voice of this mother of all creation, this mistress of light and space? Is it possible that that divine feminine voice has been speaking all these centuries and men just haven't been listening? Could her voice be that still, small voice through which the Father tries to communicate with us at times? If so, I believe that hers is also a powerful voice, rolling at times like thunder and cutting through the darkness like lightning. What explains the fact that many Mormon women, and perhaps a few Mormon men, are beginning to feel her presence in their lives, other than that our consciousness of her identity has been awakened? The freeing of the bondage of women has also liberated our Heavenly Mother from the silence in which men have held her. An increasing number of Mormon women testify to hearing her voice and are finding lyric modes in which to tell us about her. Like Procne in Greek Mythology, her liberation from the bondage of silence has been a transformation into song.

As a bishop of a singles ward, I have been painfully aware of how Mormon women suffer from not having a clearer identity of themselves as women. In blessings that I have given I have expressed to both men and women that before they left the preexistence to come to mortality their Heavenly Father *and* their Heavenly Mother called them to their side, mutually blessed and embraced them, and expressed their love and confidence as they sent these, their sons and daughters, into this dark world. I truly believe that happened to each of us, personally and individually. I also believe that when we return to their presence, we will be embraced again by them, and we will feel our hearts melt with joy in the presence of their manifold and manifest love, as we greet them, Mother and Father, in their "royal courts on high."

The idea of having a Mother in heaven is particularly meaningful to me. I was separated

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from my own mother in infancy and even though I lived with her for several periods during my early childhood, I never really knew her and, for reasons that were not entirely her fault, never received from her the nurturing love that every child deserves. I might have received some of this from my paternal grandmother, to whom I have felt close even though I never knew her; but she was killed in a tragic accident just after I was born. I had three step-mothers but none of them was a mother to me. All my life I have wished for that special love that only a mother can give. For as long as I can remember the lack of this love has left a giant absence in my heart.

Although I have only a vague sense of her identity, I am grateful to know that I have a Heavenly Mother who, like the Father, "will wipe away tears from off all faces" (Isaiah 25:8) when we are reunited. All that we know of her from modern revelation, all of the images we find of her in other traditions, all the ways in which our imaginations reach out to her, make the idea of heaven more inviting.

I would like to suggest that as individuals and as a church we open our hearts and minds, awaken our imaginations to the possibilities that our Heavenly Mother holds for us. Let us celebrate her elevated place in our theology and teach others about her. Surely many men and women in this godless world might find their way back to the light through this goddess of all the worlds. ☐

NOTE

1. First Presidency, "The Origin of Man," *Messages of the First Presidency*, James R. Clark, comp., vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 201.

GOOD FRIENDS

We talk late in the dim room
Of the women you have known
The men I have known
Our histories, fantasies, and passions
There's nothing I would not share with you
Except—

my wish to touch your soft beard
that gleams in the lamplight
that screens the delight of your smile

We walk home separate ways
You to your woman
I to my man.

—KARLA BENNION

LIGHTER MINDS

THE BISHOP'S DREAM: A STORY

By D. B. Paxman



You find your failings fascinating, as if all creation holds its breath while you go through your Sunday-morning personality adjustment. This is not the stuff of great personal struggle.

I'M A BISHOP. Last night I dreamed that hundreds of people—most of the ward—were lined up wanting to confess their sins. Mormon Lent. Flesh eaters, mutton grease still on their lips. And they wanted me to pull out my ecclesiastical napkin and wipe them clean. But I wanted to hear no more confessions. So I stood at my office door and snapped, "If you want forgiveness, start living what you know. Stop coming here with your miserable cycle of follies. I don't want to hear

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about your hard feelings toward Sister Avery because she didn't invite you to her daughter's baby shower three years ago, and how you're concerned for her social insensitivity and want to know what we can do for her. I don't want to hear ANY MORE [I shouted now, my voice trembling with rage] about your Sunday shopping or your adolescent petting sessions that you found INCONVENIENT to confess when you first went to the temple. I don't want to hear any more about cans of beer and dirty jokes on the deer hunt, movies in hotel rooms on your business trips, or about how you cheat each other so your kids will have the right skateboards and shirt labels. Or about your seasickness,

now you've helped them anchor their self-esteem in the things of the world. What did you expect! Just once I'd like to see some self-initiated, four-fold recompensing. I'm fed up listening to gossipers pinched in their souls who want to feel just good enough to start meddling in others' lives again. And I'm fed up with prigs who tattle on gossipers. Most of all, I'm fed up with your self-importance. You seem to find your failings—and believe me, they are trivial, unoriginal, and dull—infinately fascinating, as if all creation had nothing better to do than hold its breath while you lie to yourselves, bear grudges, lust, scream at your kids, and go through your Sunday-morning personality adjustment so you can teach a lesson that makes everyone think how righteous you are. Believe me, this is not the stuff of great spiritual struggle. Now, if anyone needs to talk to me about real sin, real struggle, I'll be here for an hour. The rest of you get home and take control of your lives. Stop using me as a crutch. Now beat it before I excommunicate the lot of you."

THE crowd was shocked. No one in the church had ever talked to them this way. No one dared look anyone else in the eye. No one dared mumble. They shuffled their feet uneasily and started filing toward the chapel door. Then a man cleared his throat—dryly, full of tension.

"Bishop," he stammered. It was my membership clerk. "We're sor . . ."

"Shut up!" bellowed someone else. The ward turned to gaze in the direction of the voice. "I suppose I'm one of your trivial sinners who thinks what he's doing is pretty important, but then, I've been taught to be like this, haven't I?"

I shivered: it was my former bishop. I'd better to see him.

"You think we'd show up here on our own if it hadn't been drummed into us that this was absolutely indispensable? What happened, anyway, to make this necessary? You really think the scriptures mean it the way it's explained in the lessons and talks we get? I'll tell you what I think. I think someone couldn't leave things alone. Afraid we might live in the open and confess to just anyone with broken bones like ours. Right now I'm thinking what's going to happen if we haven't been told the truth."

He went on. "You want to know why we're here? Because we've been told we'd better, or our souls will be in jeopardy. What a joke! Our souls are in jeopardy because we've been taught to LIVE trivially, to stay in

the mainstream, float where the current takes us. We're here because this is all we have to offer the Lord, as miserable an offering as it may be.

"You think we like showing the stains in the underwear of our lives? And how do you think women feel, telling intimate details of their lives to men in dark suits like you and me, who stink like everyone else if they don't bathe? But now you're bored with us, eh. Maybe you're the addict. Well, we can't give you stronger doses of confessional pleasure. We're only petty thieves. Hardly worth a cross.

"You tell us we don't know what we want, and then command us to go home and leave you alone? Who's the hypocrite? We've learned to want what we've been told to want, so don't be surprised when we come back asking what that is. We're a patchwork of oughts and shoulds, scared our own fabric will show through. Ever listen to our questions? 'Elder so-and-so, what do we believe about the moral justification for bombing brown people?'—as if what we believe is not what we believe, but something out there, detached and floating like an escaped silver lining to the cloud we live in. We're told to listen and follow and we can't go wrong. It's an attractive proposition to people who feel they'll never completely go right anyway. Much safer, when there are men with answers, eh? Did it ever occur to you that if we knew what God wanted of us—really knew—we'd deliver ourselves over with our sins on our backs, leap into eternity, jump off the ladder and catch us Jesus, confession or no confession, church or no church? And I'm going to ask you something, Bishop, and you mark my words. You think we're scared of taking control of our own lives and sins? We're terrified. Even more scared than some leaders are that we just might. It's enough to make you sick.

"Sick? Yes, we're sick. You know why? We're trapped. Ever think about what we've pledged? Ever look one of us in the eye—not like a leader with a supercilious assurance and a patronizing pat on the knee, but like a fellow, fractured human—and ask us if we can live up to our oaths? If you ever did, you won't forget it. Yes, we're sick. We've signed a contract we can't deliver. We've taken solemn vows to give everything—including our selves, and we swore that the selves we'd give would be new creatures, whole and saintly, and we know that failure is the penalty, and the penalty is to be just what we're afraid we are after all. And we can't just quit because that means quitting what we are, if

you follow me. So we look for relief—relief from our own shame and betrayal. We figure, the way out is to be honest. Believe tenaciously, and share our sins. With anyone. Anyone will do, as long no one pretends to be whole. How about you, Bishop?"

"I'll tell you what I propose. I propose we all look each other in the eye and say, 'I'm pretty mediocre, and so are you.' And then let's laugh at ourselves. Yeh. I suggest you join in. And if you have anything to confess to us, anything we really need to know, we'll hear you. And if you find a way out, don't tell us what to do. Show us. Who knows, maybe you're only angry at yourself, tearing and biting at us from the shallows of your own stagnation. It's all right, Bishop. It's our way. I know what it's like.

"And then let's go home, and each of us sit alone and ask how on earth we ever let ourselves get this way. That's what I propose. Then maybe we can start to think what it would be like to be fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God."

BY the time he stopped speaking, everyone had vanished. I was alone in the meeting house, then alone in my bed in the night, wishing for morning. ☞

I COME FIRST TO THE RUINS

Fog that yesterday had cat feet
Had teeth today,
Leaving the trees
Dripping white blood.

Hunch-back crows, black fruit
On the limb of winter,
Shadow the perfection of death:
They will not clutter
The ground like apples.

I come first to the ruins,
To see the stalks
Brittle in the clasp of each other's arms,
To hear the grey sky sing
Through the wind.

—DIANNA BLACK

(Title from W.S. Merwin's "December Nights.")