

Despite institutional friction, the nineteenth-century's generalized image of a female counterpart to a literal, male Father God is receiving increased attention and expansion and is becoming more personalized and individualized.

THE MORMON CONCEPT OF A MOTHER IN HEAVEN

By Linda Wilcox

THE IDEA OF A MOTHER IN HEAVEN IS shadowy and elusive, floating around the edges of Mormon consciousness. Mormons who grow up singing "O My Father" are familiar with the concept of Heavenly Mother, but few hear much else about her. She exists, apparently, but she has not been very evident in Mormon meetings or writings, and little if any "theology" has been developed to elucidate her nature or characterize our relationship to her.

While nearly all world religions have had female divinities and feminine symbolism, the god of western Judeo-Christian culture and scripture has been almost unremittingly masculine.¹ Still, the idea of a heavenly mother or a female counterpart to the male father-god is not unknown in Christianity. Recently discovered gnostic texts from the first century after Christ reveal doctrinal teachings about a divine Mother as well as Father. In some texts, God is conceived of as a dyad, both male and female. There is also a body of writings that identifies the divine Mother as the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, which then becomes a family group—the Father, Mother, and Son.²

Christianity has also had the elevation of Mary in Catholicism. From first being the Mother of God, Mary eventually became the mother of everyone as she took on a mediating function and became a divine presence to whom prayers could be addressed. This feminization of the divine made possible some further theological developments, such as the fourteenth-century thought of Dame Julian of Norwich, who wrote about the motherhood as well as fatherhood of God and developed a symbolism of Christ as Mother.³

The nineteenth-century American milieu from which

Mormonism sprang had some prototypes for a female deity as well. Ann Lee had proclaimed herself as the feminine incarnation of the Messiah, as Christ had been the male incarnation—a necessary balance in her system since she described a god who was both male and female, father and mother. The Father-Mother god of the Shakers and Christian Scientists included both sexes in a form of divine androgyny, as in this prayer by Mary Baker Eddy:

Father-Mother God
Loving Me
Guard me while I sleep
Guide my little feet up to Thee.⁴

By the end of the century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in her *Woman's Bible*, was explaining Genesis 1:26–28 ("And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . .") as implying the "simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God. It is evident from the language," she writes, "that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented" in the Godhead that planned the peopling of the earth. To her, as in the gnostic texts, a trinity of Father, Mother, and Son was more rational, and she called for "the recognition by the rising generation of an ideal Heavenly Mother, to whom their prayers should be addressed, as well as to a Father."⁵

Half a century before Mrs. Stanton's *Woman's Bible*, Mormonism had begun to develop a doctrine of just such a Heavenly Mother—a glorified goddess, spouse to an actual Heavenly Father, and therefore the literal mother of our spirits. While the need for a divine feminine element in religion is perhaps universal, the form it took in Mormonism was particularly well suited to other aspects of Mormon theology. The Mother in Heaven concept was a logical and natural extension of a theology that posited both an anthropomorphic God who had once been a man and the possibility of eternal procreation of spirit children.

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ORIGINS IN MORMONISM

With scant scriptural basis, early Church leaders inferred the existence of a Heavenly Mother.

THE origins of the Heavenly Mother concept in Mormonism are shadowy. The best known exposition is, of course, Eliza R. Snow's poem "O My Father," or—the title it was known by earlier—"Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother." When the poem was first published, in the *Times and Seasons*, it carried the notation, "City of Joseph, Oct. 1845," but the actual date of composition is not known. (It does not appear in Eliza's notebook/diary for the years 1842–1844.)⁶

Although President Wilford Woodruff gave Eliza R. Snow credit for originating the idea ("That hymn is a revelation, though it was given unto us by a woman"⁷), it is more likely that Joseph Smith was the first to expound the doctrine of a Mother in Heaven. In 1895, the First Presidency Second Counselor Joseph F. Smith preached that God revealed that principle ("that we have a mother as well as a father in heaven") to Joseph Smith; Joseph Smith revealed it to Eliza Snow Smith, his plural wife; and Eliza Snow was inspired, being a poet, to put it into verse.⁸

Other incidents tend to confirm this latter view. Susa Young Gates told of Joseph's consoling Zina Diantha Huntington on the death of her mother, in 1839, by telling her that not only would she know her mother again on the other side, but, "More than that, you will meet and become acquainted with your eternal Mother, the wife of your Father in Heaven." Susa went on to say that at about this same time, Eliza R. Snow "learned the same glorious truth from the same inspired lips" and she was then moved to put this truth into verse.⁹ Since Zina Huntington and Eliza were close friends as well, it is also a likely possibility that Zina might have spoken of this idea to Eliza.¹⁰

Women were not the only ones to have had some acquaintance with the idea of a Mother in Heaven during the lifetime of Joseph Smith. There is a third-hand account of an experience related by Zebedee Coltrin:

One day the Prophet Joseph asked him and Sidney Rigdon to accompany him into the woods to pray. When they had reached a secluded spot Joseph laid down on his back and stretched out his arms. He told the brethren to lie one on each arm, and then shut their eyes. After they had prayed he told them to open their eyes. They did so and saw a brilliant light surrounding a pedestal which seemed to rest on the earth. They closed their eyes and again prayed. They then saw, on opening them, the Father seated upon a throne; they prayed again and on looking saw the Mother also; after praying and looking the fourth time they saw the Savior added to the group.¹¹

Church leaders of the nineteenth century, though they did not speak much about a Mother in Heaven, seemed to accept the idea as a commonsense one, that for God to be a father implied the existence of a mother as well. Brigham Young said

that God "created man, as we create our children; for there is no other process of creation in heaven, on the earth, in the earth, or under the earth, or in all the eternities, that is, that were, or that ever will be"¹²—an indirect reference to the necessity of a mother for the process of creation. He also quoted Apostle Heber C. Kimball's recollection of Joseph Smith's saying "that he would not worship a God who had not a Father; and I do not know that he would if he had not a mother; the one would be as absurd as the other."¹³

Apostle Erastus Snow also used indirect inference to explain the logic of the Heavenly Mother concept. "Now, it is not said in so many words in the Scriptures, that we have a Mother in heaven as well as a Father," he admitted. "It is left for us to infer this from what we see and know of all living things in the earth including man. The male and female principle is united and both necessary to the accomplishment of the object of their being, and if this be not the case with our Father in heaven after whose image we are created, then it is an anomaly in nature. But to our minds the idea of a Father suggests that of a Mother."¹⁴

Elder Snow was somewhat distinct from other Mormon leaders in that he described God as a unity of male and female elements, much like the Shakers' Father-Mother God.

"What," says one, "do you mean we should understand that Deity consists of man and woman?" Most certainly I do. If I believe anything that God has ever said about himself, and anything pertaining to the creation and organization of man upon the earth, I must believe that Deity consists of man and woman . . . there can be no God except he is composed of the man and woman united, and there is not in all the eternities that exist, nor ever will be, a God in any other way. . . . There never was a God, and there never will be in all eternities, except they are made of these two component parts; a man and a woman; the male and the female.¹⁵

To Erastus Snow, God was not a male personage, with a Heavenly Mother being a second divine personage; both of them together constituted God.

This development of theology by means of inference and the commonsense extension of ordinary earth-life experience continued on into the twentieth century. In fact, it is the primary approach taken by most of those who have made mention of a Mother in Heaven. For example, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in *Mormon Doctrine*, wrote that "An exalted and glorified Man of Holiness (Moses 6:57) could not be a Father unless a Woman of like glory, perfection, and holiness was associated with him as a Mother. The begetting of children makes a man a father and a woman a mother whether we are dealing with man in his mortal or immortal state."¹⁶

One reason little theology was developed about a Heavenly Mother is the slim scriptural basis for the doctrine. But President Joseph Fielding Smith noted that "the fact that there is no reference to a mother in heaven either in the Bible, Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants, is not sufficient proof that no such thing as a mother did exist there."¹⁷ One possible

reason for this gap in the scriptures is offered by a twentieth-century seminary teacher: "Considering the way man has profaned the name of God, the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, is it any wonder that the name of our Mother in Heaven has been withheld, not to mention the fact that the mention of Her is practically nil in scripture?"¹⁸

ENNOBLING OF WOMEN

Turn-of-century Mormons used Mother-in-Heaven to promote women's rights.

IN looking now at statements by Church leaders in the twentieth century, I will focus briefly on three time periods. (The examples presented here are not exhaustive, and I suspect that similar ideas on the subject turn up at other times throughout the century.) The three periods are the first decade of the century, the 1920s and 1930s, and finally the more recent period of the 1960s and 1970s. I take note of some themes apparent in these time periods—themes that may be illustrative of developments in the larger society as well.

For example, right after the turn of the century, one noticeable thread running through several comments about the Mother in Heaven was the association of that doctrine with the movement for women's rights, a major issue in the last years of the nineteenth century, especially in Utah. Apostle James E. Talmage, in discussing the status and mission of women,

spoke of the early granting of the franchise to women in Utah and the LDS church's claim that woman is man's equal. In this context, he then went on to say,

The Church is bold enough to go so far as to declare that man has an Eternal Mother in the Heavens as well as an Eternal Father, and in the same sense "we look upon woman as a being, essential in every particular to the carrying out of God's purposes in respect to mankind."¹⁹

An article in the *Deseret News* noted that the truthfulness of the doctrine of a Mother in Heaven would eventually be accepted by the world—that "it is a truth from which, when fully realized, the perfect 'emancipation' and ennobling of woman will result."²⁰ To many, the concept of a Mother in Heaven was a fitting expression of a larger movement aimed at raising the status of women and expanding their rights and opportunities.

Another theme, evident elsewhere in American thought, as well as in Mormonism, was the yearning for a female divinity—the need for a nurturing presence in the universe. A Mother in Heaven exemplified and embodied the maternal qualities men had experienced as so warm and soul-filling in their own mothers (or which they perhaps had not experienced and so now desperately wanted), qualities generally absent in a male god that was a reflection of the stern, closed-in image of Victorian manhood. A nationally published article, excerpted in the *Deseret News*, said that the world was coming

to accept the idea of a Mother in Heaven. It spoke of the tendency for human beings to crave, especially in times of grief and anguish, the tenderness, gentleness, and sympathy of a mother-figure, which must in some way "be resident in the Divine Being."²¹ And an article in the *Millennial Star*, noted how not only small children but also adults need and want a mother figure as a divine personage. "The heart of man craves this faith and has from time immemorial demanded the deification of woman."²²

But also in that first decade of the twentieth century, in 1907, the LDS church's teaching of the Mother in Heaven doctrine was criticized and challenged by the Salt Lake Ministerial Association as being unchristian.²³ Mormon historian and member of the First Council of Seventy B. H. Roberts responded by claiming that the ministers were inconsistent. They object to the idea of



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